

# The Guardian

## Not so quiet on the home front

**Inviting the public to pop round on Sunday can take you by surprise, warns Geraldine Bedell**

Last Sunday, I had a thousand people round for the afternoon. This was not what I had intended; I had expected more like, I don't know, 60. That had admittedly started to look unlikely when 60 people turned up on Saturday, when they weren't even invited.

We had agreed to be part of London Open House, an excellent event (if you don't mind a thousand people in your house) that involves buildings of presumed architectural interest opening free of charge to the public for one weekend in September. Or in our case, as it said very clearly in the brochure (those 60 people), between 1pm and 5pm on Sunday. On Saturday I walked into my kitchen at lunchtime to find a man with a plastic bag sitting at my kitchen table, having apparently got in through the - I now realised, open - back gate. 'I'm terribly sorry,' I said, 'it's not till tomorrow. You could come back then.'

'It's OK,' he said, looking disparagingly at my architect-designed concrete walls, 'I've seen enough already.'

By noon the next day the queue was halfway up our lane. We opened early, but even so, it was soon obvious that my stipulated six-at-a-time limit wasn't going to work. We took to letting in 10 and then 15 and finally 30 or 40 and making them listen to a little speech that was transparently designed to keep them in a holding pattern before releasing them into the (not very large) house.

Sometimes our architect, Ferhan Azman, of Azman Owens, gave the speech, but she had a sore throat even before we started, so my husband or I also gave it, when it was not merely an obvious delaying tactic but architecturally unsound. (Many of the visitors were architects or architectural students and probably should have been giving the speech to us.)

The visitors had interesting, diverse, and sometimes eccentric agendas.

'What is the construction of the roof?' asked one woman.

'Er... flat.'

'Yes, but what is the construction?'

How many people, not actually builders, know how their roof was constructed? Another person was exclusively, but intensively, interested in one light fitting. I switched it on for him, but this was not really enough; he wanted to have a searching conversation about voltage.

In the end, late in the afternoon, I had to tell a woman not to let anyone join the queue behind her. Half an hour later I returned to see how she was doing. 'Sorry,' she said. 'I tried but they wouldn't listen.' So I shouted up the lane that we'd only go on until we reached this woman or till 6 o'clock, whichever was the later. I had a bit of trouble with this concept, not having had anything to eat or drink all day (it seems wrong to make yourself a cup of tea in front of people who have been queueing for two hours) but people seemed to get the message; quite a few drifted away.

By then we'd more or less given up even on the speech, preferring 40 people in the bedroom to a couple of hundred outside the front door, and we managed to get everyone in who waited. We finally got everyone out at nearly 7pm, only a couple of hours late. I wasn't entirely sure that some of the people who left then hadn't been there since the beginning, sunning themselves in the garden. Well, it was a nice day.

Nothing was stolen. People mostly said very nice things, and if they said less nice things, they managed to do so out of earshot. An enormous number of them thanked us for opening up the house. I felt humbled, and not a little bewildered, that anyone should queue to visit my house, doubtful that it could have been worth it, but proud, and delighted that there are people out there who are as interested as I am in poured concrete. And even if they didn't like it, it was a chance to look inside someone's house - which is, for some reason, rather an interesting thing to do.

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