



this picture From the front, Edward and Felicity's house is barely the width of a garage right. At the rear, the building extends the full width of its triangular plot

# HIDDEN

THE HOME OF EDWARD GIBBS AND FELICITY CANING IS IN DISGUISE. IT MAY LOOK COMPACT, BUT IT'S ACTUALLY A SUBURBAN TARDIS

# DEPTHS

WORDS JILL MACNAIR  
PHOTOGRAPHY JEFFERSON SMITH

# HOME

## Grand guide

### Building in your garden

**who** Edward Gibbs and Felicity Caning, and their three children

**where** Finsbury Park, north London

**what** A zinc-clad home built on a narrow plot at the end of a Victorian terrace

**how long** The land was bought in July 2005, the project was completed in September 2006

**budget** £600,000

**high point** 'The prefabrication method. Going from nothing to the structure of a house in less than a week is very exciting'

**low point** 'Money being promised and then not arriving because someone at the bank had gone on holiday'

**tip** 'Having a good relationship with your architect is crucial'



Jutting out at the end of a mundane Victorian terrace in north London, what looks like a couple of striking zinc-clad boxes stacked on top of each other turns out to be the three-bedroom family home of Edward Gibbs and Felicity Caning, and their three children Sarah (19), Jack (16) and Hugh (12). Designed by eco architect Justin Bere, Focus House occupies the skinny, wedge-shaped site of a former car park, a plot that was big enough for a grand total of five cars. The new 250sqm building is a mind-boggling example of how to manipulate an awkward piece of land, especially as 'it isn't the rectangular shape you get at the end of most terraces,' says graphic designer and illustrator Edward.

Standing outside looking straight at the narrow front facade, you're fairly certain that the building must lead into the Victorian house next door if it contains all the rooms it claims to. Either that or it must be one heck of a poky space. Neither turns out to be true.

After a relatively compact entrance area, the house opens up like a telescope into a gorgeous light-filled living area-cum-kitchen-cum-dining room with a wall of sliding glass doors at the rear and a long roof light set to one side. This latter feature follows the length of a custom-made resin composite desk, one of three places for Edward (who works from home) to use. 'You become very aware of the sun's movements throughout the day,' he says. 'It rises at the back of the house and the windows and roof light are designed to catch the light.'

The building is still technically a little on the tight side for a family of five (brothers Hugh and Jack share a bedroom). Bere squeezed as much space as he could from the plot by pushing the structure as far into the back garden – the wider end of it – as possible. 'I used the extensions on the back of the neighbouring houses as a boundary line,' he says. In contrast, the front of the building has been set back slightly from the terrace to show respect for the existing architecture.

While light is one of the main contributing factors to the home's deceptively spacious feel, it's the plan of the rooms that allows the whole thing to work. And despite its obvious constraints, the bizarre plot has been one of the main driving forces behind this. 'I like

**right** The couple's open-plan space has been split into defined work and living areas using sleek and simple furniture, complemented by a palette of muted greys, browns and white, which helps bounce light around **below** When open, the large sliding doors give the impression of one continuous space



## WHAT IS PASSIVHAUS?

PassivHaus is the world's leading standard in energy-efficient construction, and was the model adopted for this house. There are currently 6,000 homes in Europe that qualify for PassivHaus status – their overall heating is less than 15kW per sqm per year, and the total energy use is less than 120kW per sqm per year. The building must also be airtight, have outstanding levels of thermal insulation, and make use of renewable power sources – windows have to be high-performance triple-glazed. It must also incorporate an efficient Mechanical Ventilation Heat Recovery (MVHR) unit – try Wolf Passive Homes (0870 803 0459; wolf-passivehomes.com), or for further details, visit [passivhaus.org.uk](http://passivhaus.org.uk).

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'THE LARGE WINDOWS AT THE BACK HAVE BEEN DESIGNED TO CATCH ALL THE LIGHT'

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'THE HOUSE ISN'T THE REGULAR SHAPE YOU GET AT THE END OF MOST TERRACES'

odd-shaped sites because they push you into producing the most interesting buildings,' says Bere.

For Edward meanwhile, the site was the starting point of a completely unexpected project. Amazingly, he began with the more modest idea of buying and renovating a flat. 'It was meant to be a development that wouldn't effect us – we'd rent it out or sell it on,' says Edward. The first step away from this happened when his agent showed him the Victorian house next door and, more importantly, the odd plot attached to it, which had failed to interest any developer.

Excited by what he saw, Edward bit the bullet, upped his budget and bought the Victorian house along with its quirky plot. The revised plan was to do up the house, subdivide the land, and gain planning permission for a two-bedroom house on the plot – the most he thought he could squeeze onto it – so he could sell it.

In his search for an architect, it hadn't crossed Edward's mind that he might end up finding an eco architect like Bere. 'RIBA gave me five names of north London practices who undertake residential projects. The first person on the list was away and Bere Architects were next,' he says. 'We had instant rapport so I never called the others.'

Bere surprised and impressed Edward with his ideas about making more of the site (ie fitting a three-bedroom house onto it), but his drive for sustainable design was the final clincher in enticing Edward to adopt the project as their family home. They achieved planning permission without fuss in August 2005, with Edward's budget jumping from his original £200,000 to a cool £600,000.

Bere has created space with a stacked plan starting with the large communal living room, which found its logical home at the wider back of the house. This left the narrow front of the building to house the utility areas and the stairs, which lead to the two first-floor bedrooms positioned over the living area.

Building up an extra storey, Bere also eeked out enough room for a third bedroom – in effect a private floor for Edward and Felicity. It's compact, but lovely, with the bed positioned in front of beautiful oak cabinetry and overlooking a large window so the couple can enjoy

**left** Edward has used pieces of statement furniture such as the red Swan chair to inject a splash of colour. Under the roof light sits a long, custom-made resin composite desk  
**below** Felicity and Edward with Jack and Sarah, two of their three children



## DIGGING DEEP

■ Funding your project would be easy if your pockets were as deep as your foundations, but in reality, finances need to be sorted out early on. If you are lucky enough not to have a mortgage on the existing property, you will only need to obtain funds to build the new property in the garden. After you have split the title to divide the build land from the main residence, get a qualified surveyor in to value the land, as most lending institutions release funds based on this.

■ If you do have a mortgage, your solicitor will have to request that the title is split. Again, the land will need to be valued, both for the part remaining with the existing home, and the land that is for the new project. Remember that as a guide, there will be a reduction of approximately 20 per cent on the value of the existing house plus reduced garden, although this depends on the location, size of garden and percentage split. However, a plot of land with just the minimum of outline planning permission will have an increased value.

■ One trap that many garden-builders fall into is to sell the existing house to release capital and avoid taking out a mortgage. However, this throws up the problem of where you live for the duration of the build. Unless you plan to stay with relatives, the rental costs you will inevitably incur are often more costly than the interest-only payment on the funds you draw down each month. Also, you may have to sell your existing home under value, as the purchasers will be living next to a building site for a period of time. Self-build financial expert Mary Riley advises waiting until the project is completed. 'Once your new home is built and you have sold your existing house, the equity released will either completely clear the development funds or reduce the mortgage to an affordable level.'

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**this picture** The hot water system for the entire house is run by solar panels **right** A small study has been designed to fit snugly into the space above the entrance – the only room at the front of the house **below** On the upper floors, built-in storage units double up as walls

uninterrupted views of the sky. Just half a level down from here is a small study with another huge window. It's the only room at the front of the house, and a second potential workspace. 'It's perched out over the entrance so it feels like a tree house,' says Bere.

The whole interior follows a muted palette of greys, browns and whites, which helps light bounce around. This is punctuated by splashes of colour via statement furniture, such as the red Arne Jacobsen Swan chair. Built-in oak storage throughout the upper floors doubles up as walls and there's a multi-functional element to many of the rooms. For instance, a second building in the garden, which is officially designated as bike storage, is so pleasant that Edward uses it as office number three! The bikes simply live at the side of the house until the family go on holiday and they need to be locked up.

To follow his eco agenda, Bere has stuck as closely (budget permitting) to the German PassivHaus model (see box, p108), an airtight system that uses exceptional levels of insulation to create carbon-zero homes. He also incorporated solar panels to heat water for the house. 'Being green is easy, you feel good about it,' says Edward.

After toying with an expensive concrete structure, he decided to use KLH construction (prefab building components, made from 200mm-thick sheets of solid cross laminated timber), which is a far greener alternative as trees suck up carbon dioxide, thus reducing the construction's carbon footprint. The kit-form structure went up in less than a week, shaving valuable months off the construction period.

Although Edward has an air of debonair acceptance about the family's lifestyle change, they have had to make big compromises – from moving out of their large, family home (a good exercise in downsizing), to the continual struggle with a spiralling budget. The family moved in during September 2006 and although the building is now over a year old, Edward feels he shares 'so much history with it having been involved all the way.' It's hard to believe he was ever going to let it go. ★

## SUPPLIERS

### Architect

#### Bere Architects

(020 7837 9333; bere.co.uk)

### Solid timber construction

#### KLH UK

(020 7833 8113; klhuk.com)

### Zinc cladding

#### PMF Roofcraft

(020 8505 6898;  
pmfroofcraft.co.uk)

### Landscape architects

#### Buckley Design Associates

(020 7226 3697;  
buckleydesignassociates.com)

### Kitchen and joinery

#### Contrax

(01865 891 595;  
contraxfurniture.com)

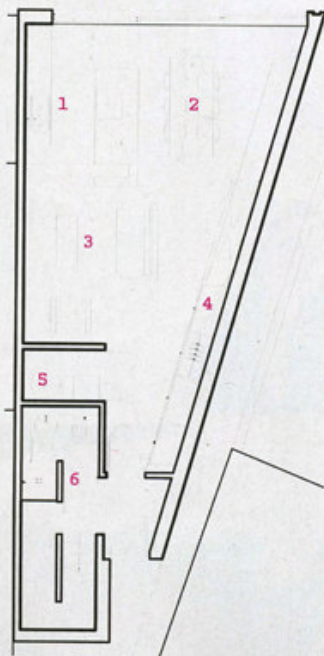
### Bathrooms

#### Norman Foster for Duravit, from CP Hart

(020 7902 1000; cphart.co.uk)

### ground floor plan

- 1 kitchen
- 2 dining area
- 3 living space
- 4 desk
- 5 utility room
- 6 bathroom





'BEING GREEN IS EASY, AND YOU FEEL REALLY GOOD ABOUT IT'