

With urban space at a premium, building a dream home in a big city can mean getting creative with awkward sites. But such tricky plots are giving rise to ingenious feats of design, says Dominic Bradbury.

Tucked away on stray backland plots and lost corners in desirable urban enclaves sit some of the most striking and original houses that you will never see. While the desire to build a tailored and bespoke home is increasing, the sites for translating these dream homes into reality have become increasingly rare. That's especially true of prime residential areas in London, where developers and eagle-eyed buyers have already cherry-picked most of the traditional and straightforward building plots. For those still determined to build a personal city retreat without being forced into the suburbs, this means tracking down one of those hidden-away sites and then coming up with ideas for a pioneering house that will get round all the inevitable restrictions on space, height and light.

Architects and visionary clients have been busy proving that it is not only possible to build on these backstreet gems but that they can also produce a haven that is desirable, seductive and perfectly suited to modern urban living. One of the finest examples is the extraordinary home (pictured on final page) that artist Anish Kapoor and his wife, Susanne, have created for themselves and their two children in Chelsea, within the very heartland of desirable London real estate. Here Kapoor found a plot hidden away behind an Edwardian apartment building, a site formerly occupied by workrooms, which gave him the chance to create a fresh family home, designed by architect Tony Fretton.

The Kapoor house is entered via a subdued entrance area on the ground floor of the period building before opening out into the newly built home that replaces the old workrooms. It's a real surprise to see how the building unfolds with such a generous approach to space and light, despite the constrained nature of the house, which is tucked within this long, narrow scrap of ground sandwiched between its neighbours. The heart of the house is a large, open-plan living room positioned between two courtyards, which allow in plenty of natural light, as well as providing outdoor space for the Kapoors. Maximising light and dealing with restrictions on the height of the new house – as

hidden assets



Main picture: Gunnar Orefelt's five-bedroom home in Kensal Rise. Right: Orefelt's creation lies behind a Victorian terrace.





Main picture: Jake Edgley's "Secret House" in Islington lies beyond a deceptively modest street entrance (below).

well as managing a whole array of party-wall agreements with the neighbours – created a design challenge that both Fretton and the Kapoors were more than willing to confront.

"There is a lot of trickery involved in the design to help introduce light," says Fretton, whose practice was recently shortlisted for the Stirling Prize for his Fuglsang Kunstmuseum project in Denmark. "It was really impossible with that site to have a clear idea of what was needed from the outset, so we prepared a number of different options for the Kapoors. It wasn't easy, but it does help to have a client like Anish, who can deal with complex spatial problems. But then all private houses demand a certain level of ambition from the client."

For the final design of the house, Fretton avoided the temptation for a large basement floor that would have been difficult to light, opting instead for two modest basements at either end of the house. The first floor was also limited to two bedrooms for the children, plus a large family room and study, so as to allow for the courtyards and roof lights that illuminate and



enrich the main living spaces on the ground floor below. The master bedroom was positioned at the very rear of the site, again on the ground floor, looking out into the courtyard garden.

"This is the second time Susanne and I have built a house," Kapoor has said, "and I'd like to do it again. It's the most thrilling thing. We honed in on the fact that it was a difficult site and wanted to

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make something that had a quiet rigour. The lack of a façade is part of the challenge of the house but also part of its excitement. We made a decision when we first saw the site that something like a 20-metre-long living room might be possible and that's something we decided not to give up on. We make it work and it works beautifully."

The lack of a visible façade – which for many people helps define a house in the first place – is one of the unique aspects of these hidden backland homes. Obscured from view on these slim sites between existing buildings, there is often no real opportunity for a striking public face to the house. These are buildings that tend to look inwards, sometimes arranged around courtyards or light wells. The power and design of the interior spaces becomes all-important, with little or no outward "wow" factor, while the

concealed nature of the sites offers a sense of calm and privacy. These are escapist spaces that cut themselves off, inevitably, from the commotion of the city.

In Cambridge, architects Jeremy Ashworth and Emma Parkes were fortunate to find a small site for a house in the centre of the city. Their plot was a stray patch of ground that had been used for parking, behind high brick walls on a cul-de-sac, with access to the green space of Midsummer Common, as well as the River Cam, just at the end of the street. Knowing that their young children would have the benefit of the common so close by, Ashworth and Parkes were happy to grab the opportunity to take on the site and design a home that made use of every available square inch of space.

"We were very lucky to get the site because there are so few building plots in central Cambridge," says Ashworth. "They are very rare. But the site was a challenge and it became all about borrowing space and light where we could to make the rooms seem much bigger than they really are. We were not



allowed to build higher than the eaves of the Victorian terrace house next door, which was quite limiting, so we took the main floor level down a little. We had to dig down and underpin all the existing walls around the site, but the extra height has made a huge difference.

"Access was another big issue. One afternoon I got a call at work. All the timber had arrived for the cladding, but there was no one on site. I had to rush over and offload all the timber. The lorry could only park at the top of the road, so I had to carry it all down to the site."

The entrance to the house is behind the brick walls that line the street, where a gateway leads to a small entry courtyard, which helps bring light into the house as well as providing a threshold. Ashworth's design creates an open-plan, fluid layout for the ground floor, while maximising sunlight with lightwells and a skylight over the stairs. A mini study is tucked away in a tiny alcove at the top of the stairway, while storage is maximised by inventive solutions such as cupboards

hidden under the floors. The house also includes a number of eco-friendly elements, including a meadow-grass roof.

Beyond issues of access, space, height and light, Ashworth also had to deal with building up against existing boundary walls shared with his neighbours. These are the kinds of restrictions and limitations that now come as standard with these lost sites, which many bigger developers interested in fast-turnaround projects don't find so appealing. But the fact is that any available city-centre space – from garden plots siphoned off from existing homes to former warehouses to slices of backstreet scrubland – is now becoming like gold dust as both developers and those wanting to build their own homes hunt down any available sites. Ironically, as the impetus to design and create our own homes increases – encouraged by rising awareness of

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contemporary architecture – the plots become harder and harder to find.

"London, especially, is tragic in the sense that there is lots of money available to do things but not enough land to build houses on," says Tony Fretton. "It's shocking how little space there is in London for people with the desire to build their own homes, and there are always restrictions. There's never enough space with London sites to do what you should do or want to do."

Architect Jake Edgley spent six months looking for a site to build a house, partly as a way of launching his own practice. He was on the verge of giving up when he managed to find a site in Islington (pictured

Above: Luke Tozer's award-winning family home in Notting Hill. Above right: the property's eight-foot-wide frontage.



on previous page), concealed behind rows of houses and shops, that was being sold off by a larger developer who didn't want the land. As with many of these lost urban spaces, the site was occupied by workshops that were no longer in use or suited to such a residential area. These derelict buildings were set within a landlocked courtyard, surrounded by other houses and buildings, and accessible only via a narrow alleyway with a door to the street that was not big enough for diggers or lorries to pass down.

"It was a leap of faith," says Edgley. "Luckily, I didn't really know what I was getting into, otherwise I might not have done it at all. The reality is that if the sites weren't difficult then somebody would have built something on them already. But being hidden away makes them great and very private when you do get to build on them. And I was given quite a lot of freedom in the design itself by the planners because no one can see these houses."

Edgley designed two enticing and matching new homes within the courtyard, which is surrounded by four-metre-high brick walls. Each house was created around its own private internal courtyard, with floor-to-ceiling glazing to the interiors to maximise light, complemented by rooflights elsewhere in the two-storey buildings. But for Edgley, a major challenge was dealing with the concerns of neighbours and managing 12 different party-wall agreements.

"It might be easy for me to say as an architect, but building the house itself is actually the easy bit and finding somewhere to put it is the challenge. These kinds of sites do need a lot of personal attention, and a very diplomatic way of working. Party-wall agreements are not necessarily an issue, and most of the neighbours were great. But these projects do rely on reaching amicable agreements with your neighbours. There were one or two tussles along the way and times when it looked touch-and-go."

Eventually, Edgley completed the two houses, with plenty of light bounced around the two-bedroom buildings by light surfaces and pale, painted walls, while the exteriors to the courtyard are clad in untreated timber for a more organic texture. Edgley sold one of the houses and made just enough on the



Main picture: Anish Kapoor's Chelsea home, tucked behind an Edwardian façade (below).

sale to keep the other – “The Secret House” – as a home for himself, his wife Katherine Armfelt, a film producer, and their young daughter, Sadie. Now, as his family grows, he is already keeping his eyes open for another site.

“If I could find one I would snap it up,” says Edgley. “I have many clients who would like to build a house, and often ask where they can find these kinds of sites. If you want to build in London, then these kinds of sites are the reality, with all the restrictions that come with them. There are some around, but it’s not easy to find someone who wants to sell, and you can’t just see them from the street, of course. You won’t just walk past one day and see a for-sale sign.”

Architect Gunnar Orefelt has been fortunate enough to find backland sites to create his own home twice over, first in Notting Hill and now in Kensal Rise (pictured on opening pages), where he has built a stunning five-bedroom house, with an adjoining studio, on the site of a former light-industrial unit that used to make shower enclosures. Orefelt bought the site, tucked away behind rows of Victorian houses in this residential area, along with a friend, for whom he designed a separate house right alongside his own. Here, the plot is enclosed by the rear walls of neighbouring houses but is large enough to accommodate a garden,



while private enough to allow sheets of glazing at the front of the house, as well as a large roof terrace.

“These types of site are ideal if you want to start building from scratch,” says Orefelt. “We just came across this one by chance and the whole development was very opportunistic. The challenge was really to make light penetrate as far as possible into what is a very deep house.”

Luke Tozer, director of Pitman Tozer architects, faced different challenges when designing an award-winning family home (pictured on previous page) for himself, his wife Charlotte and their two children in Notting Hill. Here,

“If these sites weren’t difficult, somebody would have built on them already.”

Tozer came across another unusual site for a home: a tiny scrap of infill land just eight feet wide, sandwiched between two large Georgian houses, but which opened out towards the rear. An existing ramshackle home was replaced by a highly imaginative eco-house, with the slimmest of façades to the street, but which expands by degrees as the three-storey building reaches back to a courtyard, where retractable glass walls allow free flow between exterior and interior.

“Perhaps only an architect would have been crazy enough to buy this site, and building the house certainly involved some sleepless nights and early mornings,” says Tozer.

Tozer also threaded a philosophy of sustainability throughout the house, including elements such as a ground-source heat pump to provide underfloor heating, as well as rainwater harvesting tanks buried under the courtyard. But much of the inventiveness lies in the plan of the house itself.

“I love how light and airy the house is, and how little space is wasted for

circulation,” says Charlotte Tozer, who works in the City. “It’s very compact and easy to use. It’s also well suited to two small children who have the run of the ground floor during the day, while all the built-in storage allows toys and stuff to be easily tidied away.”

These hidden homes, then, rise well above the many constraints and conditions that come as standard within these gold-dust plots of stray land. For some, they now represent one of the best hopes of building an original home at the heart of the city. And without a visible façade or a strong context from neighbouring buildings, these hideaway houses can offer a greater design freedom than you might first expect.

“When you are buying a site like this, it is usually self-evident what kind of a house will come out of it,” says Fretton. “With a constrained backland site, an inward-looking quality is inevitable. But it is intriguing to work within the depths of a site like this.” ♦

THE STORY UNFOLDS

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