

# Going Underground

A semi-subterranean house designed by two architects for their own use is a case study for urban densification

**Words**

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**Photos**

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**Architect**  
DSDHA



DSDHA was founded in 1998 by Deborah Saunt and David Hills (above). Major projects include Christ's College and Pond Meadow School in Guildford, housing in the London 2012 Olympic Village, studios for ceramicist Edmund de Waal and jeweller Alex Monroe, and ongoing improvements to the public realm in London's West End.

True to its name, Covert House by DSDHA is entirely hidden from street view, nestled at the end of a narrow passageway in the middle of a terrace-lined residential block in Clapham, south London. Nevertheless, the three-bedroom home is far from subtle: a mirrored porch frames and reflects the garden, theatrically announcing the entrance. Inspired by hidden community gardens at Bonnington Square in Vauxhall, DSDHA's garden house is also intended as a case study on the potential for unlocking backland sites to foster a fascinating new residential typology.

The project began when DSDHA partners Deborah Saunt and David Hills purchased a large garden in 2007 with a vision to build their home there. Two applications and an appeal later, they won permission in 2010. Now complete, the house sits assertively in its plot, encircled by lawn, 12 newly-planted native trees and continuous trellises for climbing plants. Topped with a sedum roof, it draws deeply on its picturesque context.

The design sets up a powerful tension between the exterior — appearing as a low-rise, lightweight garden pavilion clad in white render and mirror — and the interior, revealed as a two-storey sculpted monolithic concrete mass, embedded in the earth.

On the ground floor (slightly raised above garden level), the kitchen, dining and living room areas, organised in open plan, are generously flooded with light and connected to the outside through skylights above and full-height sliding glass doors opening onto a south-facing terrace.

The overwhelming presence of the fair-faced concrete in the walls and the expansive ribbed ceiling in the communal spaces creates a sense of monumentality and timelessness. Apart from insisting on full-height shuttering, DSDHA left the concrete pour to chance, transforming the walls into ready-made tapestries of textures, colours and flows. Perimeter lighting is concealed in shadow gaps behind joinery or embedded in the beams like cracks in a cave.



**Below**

Cutaway axonometric views; site plan. The 135 square metre house is set partially into the ground but makes deliberate use of openness and light to connect the inside and outside and the upper and lower levels.

**Below right**

Chamfered external window reveals on the upper level angle outwards from the recessed window plane to maximise light penetration to rooms and to remove the sense of enclosure from within as the reveals are hidden from view. A mirror finish to the reveals is intended to "blur the boundaries between nature and architecture as the edges of the building become kaleidoscopic refractions of the garden, which is seen simultaneously with the interior in unpredictable relationships".

Contrasting 'above' and 'below', the lower level is sunken into the ground and hardly visible from the exterior. A surprise to discover, this floor is divided into smaller private spaces, including three bedrooms and two bathrooms, accessed off an informal living room area, efficiently avoiding the need for corridors.

Two courtyards bring light below: a clever stepped section on the south facade serves as a lightwell to the bedrooms and contains an inbuilt planter and a linear pond forming a series of protective layers. Another courtyard on the north side brings light into the downstairs living room.

The act of ascending and descending is articulated through an exquisite collection of figurative white concrete staircases, whose unique finish is achieved by a combination of marble powder and marble aggregate in the mix. Connecting the upper entrance hall and the lower living room, the internal staircase has an elegant Georgian-like curved plan and soffit, which is paired with a delicate white metal balustrade. This is in dialogue the external front entrance staircase, which is on a slight angle in plan and, separated from the house and the ground by slots, reads as a floating transition to another world.

**Below**

Lower-ground and ground floor plans.

**Below right**

Views extend through the house to the garden, 'borrowing' landscape.

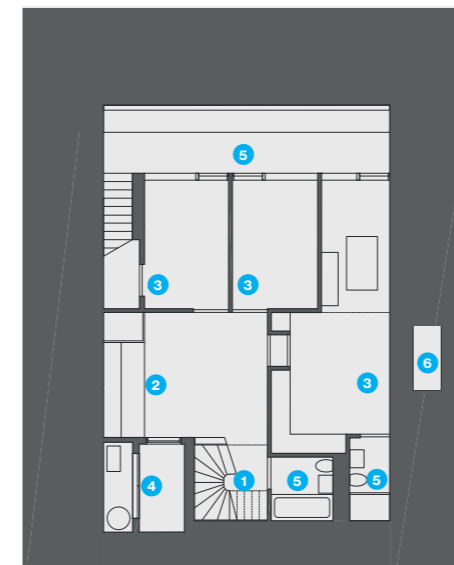
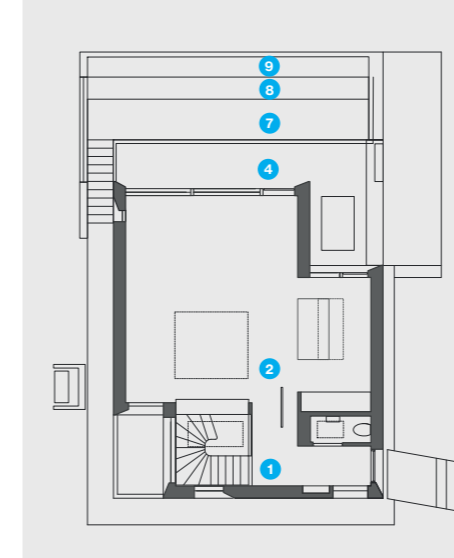
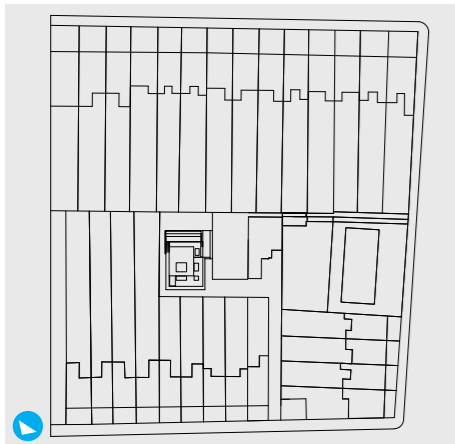
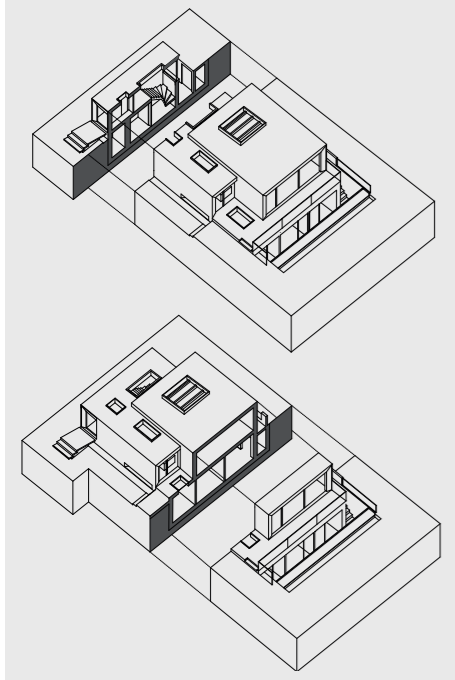
**Key**

- 1 Hall
- 2 Living space
- 3 Bedroom
- 4 Terrace
- 5 Bath
- 6 Rainwater tank
- 7 Lightwell
- 8 Planter
- 9 Pool

The driving concept of the design is the curation of light and views, where carved openings in the facade are treated like pictures on a gallery wall. The distinctive detail of chamfered window and door reveals dissolves the bulk of the highly insulated walls, breaking down the overall rectilinear massing and maximising views. The perspectival openings vary dramatically in size, from a tiny window catching morning light in the corner of the living room to two large picture windows at right angles to each other, flooding the double-height stair with northern light.

The interior/exterior, above/below, light/dark, surface/depth dichotomies are further articulated in the material treatment of the chamfered reveals. The exterior reveals at ground level and are lined with mirror, camouflaging the house in nature, recalling the optical effects of artist Dan Graham's pavilions. Below ground, by contrast, the reveals are all internal, cast into the fair-faced concrete walls. This material and geometric reversal of the frame has the effect of directing views upwards towards the sky and reinforcing the sense of being carved into the ground.

The game of dematerialising thick walls continues inside. For example a glowing ribbed glass vitrine containing kitchenware connects the upper and lower communal spaces, while the door to the master bedroom downstairs is playfully concealed within a thick wall of storage cupboards.



**Below**

A white concrete stair within a double-height space connects the upper and lower levels. Windows at the lower level are set on the outer plane of the walls, and the interior concrete surround is chamfered to meet the window plane, revealing the 'carved' nature of the concrete and maximising daylight penetration.

**Below right**

A lightwell and rooflight illuminate a lower level bedroom.

Dark grey concrete is complemented by an array of soft linings, such as the continuous smooth white resin floor laid on a rubber underlay, colourful felt walls in the bedrooms, the upper toilet walls lined with sycamore boards salvaged from the original site, and Carrara marble in the wet areas to reinforce the geological metaphor.

DSDHA worked with Max Fordham on the environmental strategy to achieve Code 4 which, with triple-glazing, a heat pump and rainwater harvesting, ensures that the house will contribute positively to both the social and environmental sustainability of the garden site.

Covert House is a powerful testing ground for both material experimentation and the tricky politics of infill sites. DSDHA has demonstrated that the constraints of leftover sites can create surprising architectural opportunities. It is possible to imagine how a series of such houses in one urban block could see private backyards transformed into beautiful communal gardens. As London searches for creative solutions to ease its housing crisis, from custom-builds to community land trusts, we would do well to take a lead from DSDHA's prototype. ↗



**Project team**

**Architect**  
DSDHA  
**Design team**  
Deborah Saunt, David Hills, Matt Lambert, Emma Canning  
**Structural engineer**  
Price + Myers  
**Services engineer**  
Max Fordham  
**Contractor**  
Whiterock Engineering  
**Enabling architect (construction)**  
Knox Bhavan  
**Client**  
Deborah Saunt and David Hills

**Selected suppliers & subcontractors**

**Metalwork**  
Creative Metalwork  
**Joinery**  
Egg  
**Kitchen**  
Boffi  
**Render system**  
Sto  
**Roofing/waterproofing**  
Icopal  
**Resin flooring**  
Puur  
**External mirror**  
Clarkes Safety Mirrors  
**Rooflights**  
Roofglaze  
**Marble bathrooms**  
Stone Productions  
**Blinds**  
Silent Gliss