



(Photos: Helene Biner.)

The ground-floor living spaces are light filled and open plan and fitted with bespoke cabinetry.

The Covert House

CLAPHAM, LONDON

DSDHA has completed a new family home, known as The Covert House, which lies hidden from view in the heart of a conservation area in Clapham Old Town, London. Deborah Saunt of DSDHA reports.

Set in a pastoral landscape of mature trees and gardens, this concrete house acts a case study for testing several hypotheses. These span from interrogating the idea of the ‘domestic’ at the beginning of the 21st century, through to how sustainability might be integrated into high-quality design without compromise. In addition, at a strategic urban scale it asks how a world city such as London might provide new housing within its fiercely defended low-density backlands, close to the historic centre.

Set in a conservation area, The Covert House is overlooked by terraced housing with height restrictions dictated by the local planning authority. The project was

also constrained by a modest budget based on the value of the owner’s previous small house.

Key features

The building is an exposed, in-situ concrete structure with ribbed ceiling and king pile-retaining structure to basement. Its design provides a contemporary open-plan living space, tall floor-to-ceiling heights to maximise volume and a dramatic cast-in-situ white concrete staircase. In addition, it uses externally insulated render and green roof, resin flooring and triple-glazed windows.

The project demanded notable sustainability measures including: concrete structure and partial



Ground-floor open-plan kitchen, dining and living area.



A lightwell and roof light illuminate a lower-level bedroom.



Ground-floor living space.

White concrete stair connecting the ground and lower level.

basement excavation for thermal mass and stability; fly ash content in concrete; timber-framed triple-glazed windows and highly insulated walls/roof; air source heat pump with underfloor heating and whole-house ventilation system; and rainwater harvesting for WC flushing and garden irrigation.

A formal building contract was used to complete the watertight structure, before the project was self-managed by architects.

Design

As a modest family home, the house is designed with a few simple rules – to use the most sustainable design principles possible, while deploying a limited material palette to create a sense of domesticity within a concrete armature that does not disturb its sensitive setting. Materials are either concrete cast on-site, left raw and unfinished, or of precise and highly articulated ‘whiteness’, be it in the form of natural light, controlled and carefully calibrated to bring animation and delight deep into the plan, or represented though the use of white as a finish for all the remaining surfaces beyond the concrete. The resultant design is precise and sculpted, materially rich yet calm as a place in which to live.

Set partially into the ground to limit its height and provide thermal mass, the lower floor has extra-tall ceilings and full-height windows to generous light wells and an elegant white concrete stair that effortlessly mediates the spatial experience between levels within a double-height space. To maximise the sense of space, the lower-floor rooms are all accessed from a second living space, avoiding the need for separate circulation space or corridors.

Within its resolutely sculpted form, the building carefully uses openness and light to transition between inside and outside as well as to connect the upper and lower floors. The light wells are hardly visible when viewed from the garden or the upper floors. Views go through the house and out into the garden.

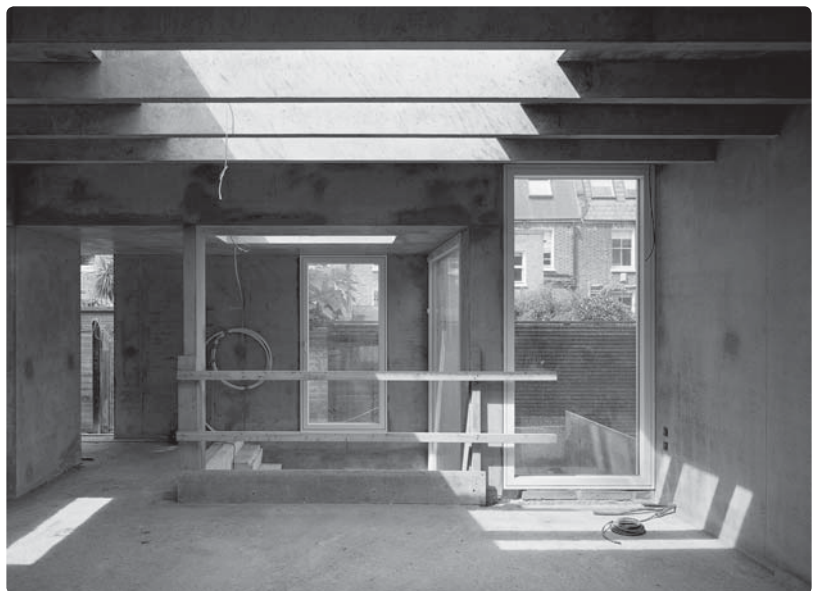
Windows to surface

The relationship of windows to surface is further used to demonstrate this transition. Chamfered external window reveals on the upper level angle outwards from the recessed window plane, to maximise light flowing into the rooms and to remove the sense of enclosure from within as the reveals are concealed from view. A mirror finish to these reveals blurs the boundary between nature and the architecture. Internally, light bounces from surprising angles and carries on even further when it hits an interior mirrored surface.

By contrast, windows at the lower level are set on the outer plane and the interior concrete surround to the windows is chamfered back to meet the window plane. This reveals the carved nature of the concrete, while maximising the amount of light into the building.

This transition of interior to exterior continues in the plane of the roof. At first the principal living space seems perfectly solid then natural light appears unexpectedly from a skylight through the weight of the beamed soffit.

Elsewhere, vertical transitions are mediated by the use of white concrete – the hovering entrance steps, the white terraces themselves and the steps down to a lower patio. ●



Construction shot ground-floor living space.

The Covert House, Clapham, London

Client	Deborah Saunt and David Hills, directors DSDHA
Architect	DSDHA
Contractor	Whiterock Engineering
Structural engineer	Price & Myers
Services engineer	Max Fordham
Enabling architect (construction phase)	Knox Bhavan