



# Hidden treasure

On a small plot between rows of terraced houses, two architects have created a partially subterranean yet light-filled family home. By **Rachel Leedham**. Photographs by **Rachael Smith**







Years ago, when Deborah Saunt was completing her architectural training, her mentor Joanna van Heyningen gave her an important piece of advice. ‘She told me that if I ever wanted to build my own house in London, I would have to go out and buy a property with a large garden, resell the house, and keep part of the plot to build on,’ Saunt recalls. ‘Jo had done exactly that herself.’

These words stuck with Saunt, and in 2007 she and her husband, David Hills – a fellow architect with whom she founded the practice DSDHA – set about identifying properties with generous plots in their local area of Clapham, south-west London. ‘I wrote to five homeowners, and I will never forget the day one of them called me back,’ she says.

The couple had found a Victorian farmhouse with an overgrown piece of land squeezed between the back gardens of two rows of terraced houses. Once they had sold the farmhouse to friends, Saunt and Hills were left with a site measuring approximately 40x65ft – and guarded by fierce conservation-area restrictions. ‘It took two applications and an appeal to achieve permission. It was a wearying three years,’ Saunt says.

The blueprint for Covert House – aptly named as it is hidden from the street – was in many ways dictated by the strict stipulations of the local authority: the building could not exceed a single storey in height, and it had to be rendered to match the neighbouring house. Restrictions around the border of the plot meant that the structure could

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#### The dining area

The glass cupboards, made by Creative Metalwork ([creative-metalwork.com](http://creative-metalwork.com)), allow light to pass between the living area and the stairwell. The teak wall unit and dining chairs, both by Kai Kristiansen, were found at Inside Originals ([insideoriginals.com](http://insideoriginals.com)). The dining table is by DSDHA.

**The garden** An inbuilt planter provides a leafy vista from the lower level, and features a pond behind it. The house was built on the former land of the farmhouse next door.





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be no larger than a garden pavilion, so in order to create a home for four (the couple have two children, Stella, 15, and Isaac, 11), part of the house had to be sunk beneath the ground.

The resulting 1,615sq ft home has an inverted layout, with the slightly raised ground floor comprising a small hallway and an open-plan living space. More California than Clapham, the room is flooded with light from skylights and glazed sliding doors leading to a south-facing terrace. Down an elegant white concrete staircase is the partially subterranean lower floor, where three bedrooms and a bathroom lead off from a family space.

The structure is made of cast concrete, which informs the palette of concrete-grey and white that runs through the house. 'We wanted to use as few elements as possible,' Saunt explains, adding, 'The design was underscored by sustainability, so we asked ourselves some essential questions, such as, "Is it necessary to plaster or paint a wall?"' The couple have embraced the imperfections of the material. Saunt recounts an incident in which the concrete began to dry out between pours because the next batch was held up in traffic. 'The team was furiously vibrating it to keep it liquid and we told them it was fine – we wanted it to say, "Made in Clapham."'

Saunt and Hills have gone to great lengths to mitigate any sense of being underground on the lower level, incorporating two courtyards

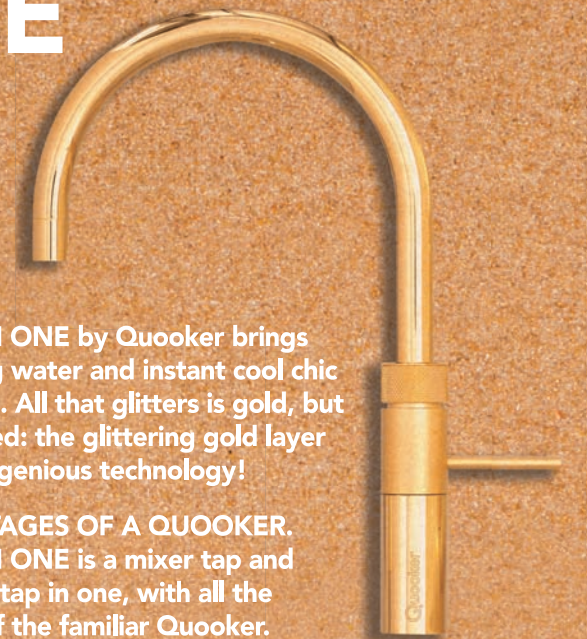
#### The master bedroom

The concrete structure, created by White Rock Engineering (020-8813 5005), contributes to the excellent thermal properties of the house, which requires very little heating. The FT30 chair by Cees Braakman is from Forest (forestlondon.com). The bedside cabinet is from D&A Binder (dandabinder.co.uk).

#### The study area

At one end of the bedroom is a study area, which opens on to a south-facing courtyard. The desk is from D&A Binder.

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that serve as light wells. The south-facing courtyard has an inbuilt planter, which ensures that greenery is always within sight. 'We were very conscious of the idea of connecting the house with nature,' Saunt says. 'What we couldn't have imagined is the amount of peace and birdsong we would have.'

As befits a house with modernist credentials, much of the furniture dates from the mid-20th century and forms a collection the couple has amassed over 20 years. 'Rather incongruously, our previous Victorian house was full of these pieces, although one friend didn't even recognise the shelving unit when we moved it here,' Saunt says.

The secret to the clutter-free feel of the interior is clever storage, which includes reeded glass cupboards in the dining area that hide essential kitchenware yet have the effect of a beautiful vitrine. Downstairs, a bank of cupboards conceals doors to the master bedroom and the family bathroom. 'Too many architects exist in a purely abstract world, while we believe you can have extraordinary beauty without losing everyday practicality,' says Saunt, whose practice has designed studios for the jeweller Alex Monroe and the ceramicist Edmund de Waal, and undertaken bigger projects such as the redesign of a swathe of the West End.

As well as being a family home, Covert House is a manifesto for DSDHA, and Saunt is prepared to go further than that. 'We should be unlocking more backland sites to address the housing crisis,' she says. 'This is our clarion call to government – they need to let people build low, unobtrusive houses in back gardens around the country.' [dsdha.co.uk](http://dsdha.co.uk)

'Too many architects exist in a purely abstract world. You can have extraordinary beauty and practicality'

#### The family space

An inner courtyard helps bring light into the lower level. The sofa and ottoman are from BoConcept ([boconcept.com](http://boconcept.com)). The Eames chair is still produced by Herman Miller ([hermanmiller.com](http://hermanmiller.com)).



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