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Zinc outside the box

Most people don't see an odd-shaped garden and think, 'I'll build a house on that'. But one graphic designer did, with spectacular results. **Nicole Swengley** reports

AMID the Victorian terrace homes in one Islington street sits a modern house, gloriously clad in zinc. The owner of this unusual property, which, surprisingly, does not look out of place, is graphic designer Edward Gibbs, who moved there with his wife, Felicity Canning, an NHS manager, and their children, Sarah, 18, Jack, 16, and Hugh, 12, from a four-bedroom house in Stoke Newington.

But it is only due to Gibbs's vision and persistence that the house is there at all. "When the Islington house came on the market in May 2004, I immediately saw the potential for building a completely new house in its triangular-shaped garden," he says.

Gibbs's offer of £500,000 was accepted for the house and he called the Royal Institute of British Architects for a list of architects. "Buying only made sense if we could get planning permission and an architect on board," he says.

Architect Justin Bere responded enthusiastically and "straight away there was a rapport between us", Gibbs recalls.

What followed was a leap of faith. Gibbs remortgaged the Stoke Newington house, borrowing £75,000 to refurbish the new one, and took out a new mortgage and unsecured loans to finance the new-build.

Well thought-out: a custom-made, oak storage unit is used as the wall to the master bedroom

house for £550,000 in July 2005. "It was quite a gamble," he says. "I budgeted for £250,000 for the new-build but it finally cost £600,000 because we went for quality."

Fortunately, Bere's company enjoys a good reputation with Islington's planners, who were impressed with his sympathetic, imaginative interpretation of a modern terrace house. And, luckily, Bere knew one of the neighbours, who contacted the seven properties that backed on to the new-build. Everyone had a chance to discuss their concerns. They were relieved to hear that the building's vertical zinc sides would reflect light rather than block it, and that the rear's stepped profile followed the line of neighbouring extensions.

The original plan to use recycled concrete proved too expensive so Bere suggested cladding seven-inch-thick timber panels with up to 50cm of foam-glass insulation, then wrapping them in zinc.

Why zinc? "It's long-lasting, adaptable and watertight," explains Bere. "It's also very thin so the insulation can be very thick. We would have lost 10cm of insulation if we'd built in brick." The timber panels, which came from Austria, were quickly installed. "The house went up in five days," Gibbs exclaims. Internal walls were plastered and painted white to avoid a log-cabin feel while a translucent stain was used on oak floors and ceilings. Floor-to-ceiling, sliding glass windows are used structurally as the rear ground-floor wall. These open onto a deck, with a built-in Australian BeefEater barbecue and a pebbled garden with a gas-fired hot tub, delivered in kit form from Alaska.

Smart: in the open-plan kitchen/living area, the breakfast bar, which is a Corian plinth, has a hob set into it for space-saving

Bringing the family together: Ead Gibbs and his wife, Felicity Canning, with their children, Sarah, 18, Jack, 16, and Hugh, 12

Different touch: a skin of zinc was used because it is "long-lasting, adaptable and watertight" and adds "character" to the house

Enjoyment in being close: the compact living area forces the family to have more interaction with one another

Comfort first: rosewood storage units flank the living area and provide division from the kitchen

The main challenge was squeezing everything into a smallish, wedge-shaped site. "Had the structure been one metre further forward we wouldn't have fitted in the staircase, front door, insulated wall and side passage," says Bere. The site also dictated internal space, with bathrooms and the staircase at the narrower, front end and bedrooms and living space at the back.

Gibbs designed the open-plan kitchen using a cantilevered Corian plinth, with inset hob, as a breakfast bar. Space-efficient storage units around the stainless-steel worktops and sink were custom-made and house an LCD television. He made the amoeba-shaped, white MDF dining table ("It works brilliantly because people sit at different angles") and the rosewood storage unit flanking the sitting area in which an iconic red Egg chair adds a splash of colour. "There's not much space so I wanted something eye-catching," says Gibbs.

A long, lean Corian-topped storage unit doubles as a workstation/homework area along one wall and hi-fi equipment is hidden in further storage units below a big plasma screen. "We use headphones to avoid interference with the kitchen TV or anyone chatting," says Gibbs.

"The living space is compact but we have found that the house brings us together. There's more family interaction, instead of everyone going off to separate rooms."

Below the stairs there is a sizeable shower room and cupboard where the family's racing bikes are stored. Upstairs, a short corridor leads to the children's two bedrooms (one with a bunk-bed), furnished with white desks and white, wall-hung, kitchen cabinets from Ikea.

A full-height oak door shuts off the bathroom and stairs, leading to a mezzanine study and main bedroom, turning it into a private suite. Here, a custom-made, oak storage unit is used structurally as the master bedroom's internal wall. It has a sliding door leading to a walk-in wardrobe behind the bed, while smaller sliding doors conceal beds/bedding lights.

Gibbs embraced most of Bere's environmentally friendly ideas, although costs were minimised by installing double-glazing rather than triple-glazing. A heat-recovery ventilation system is ducted below the floor alongside underfloor heating. It warms incoming fresh air using heat retained from outgoing air. "It's healthy for the environment as well as for people," says Bere. "It runs on a low-energy motor, saves on heating bills and reduces the dust-mite count."

An exterior air thermal panel heats the water while a rainwater-harvesting system cuts chlorine and benzenes from bathing and drinking water.

The family moved in last autumn, nine months after building started. Now they could not imagine living anywhere else. "The house is so friendly and welcoming," says Gibbs. "It's modern without being austere because the shape and materials give character."

Outdoor warmth: the landscaped garden includes some clever designer touches

Pictures by Rocca Duke

Eating alfresco: the rear ground-floor structural wall is made up of sliding windows that connect the kitchen and deck area

HOW TO GET THE LOOK

Architect
bere:architects: (020 7837 5333; www.bere.co.uk)

Furniture
- Bespoke pieces from Contrax Furniture (01865 891595; www.contraxfurniture.com)
- Living room sofa is from BO Concepts at Selfridges, Oxford Street, W1 (0870 837 7377)
- Egg chair was inspired by Arne Jacobsen's original, this one cost £765 from Egamma (0870 164 4201; www.egamma.co.uk)
- Low-back adjustable padded bar stools, £59 each, from Dwell, 20-32 Pentonville Road, N1 (0870 060 0184)

Flooring
Hutchison Flooring (01243 841175)

Lighting
John Cullen Lighting (020 7371 5400; www.johncullenlighting.co.uk)

Landscape design
Declan Buckley Design (020 7226 3697; www.buckleydesignassociates.com)

Decking
Litchfield Landscapes (020 8668 8030)