

GREEN HOUSE EFFECT

Edward Gibbs used clever design to bring to life his vision for an energy-efficient home. Three awards later, his house is a beacon of eco style. By Jenny Tucker. Photographs by Peter Cook.



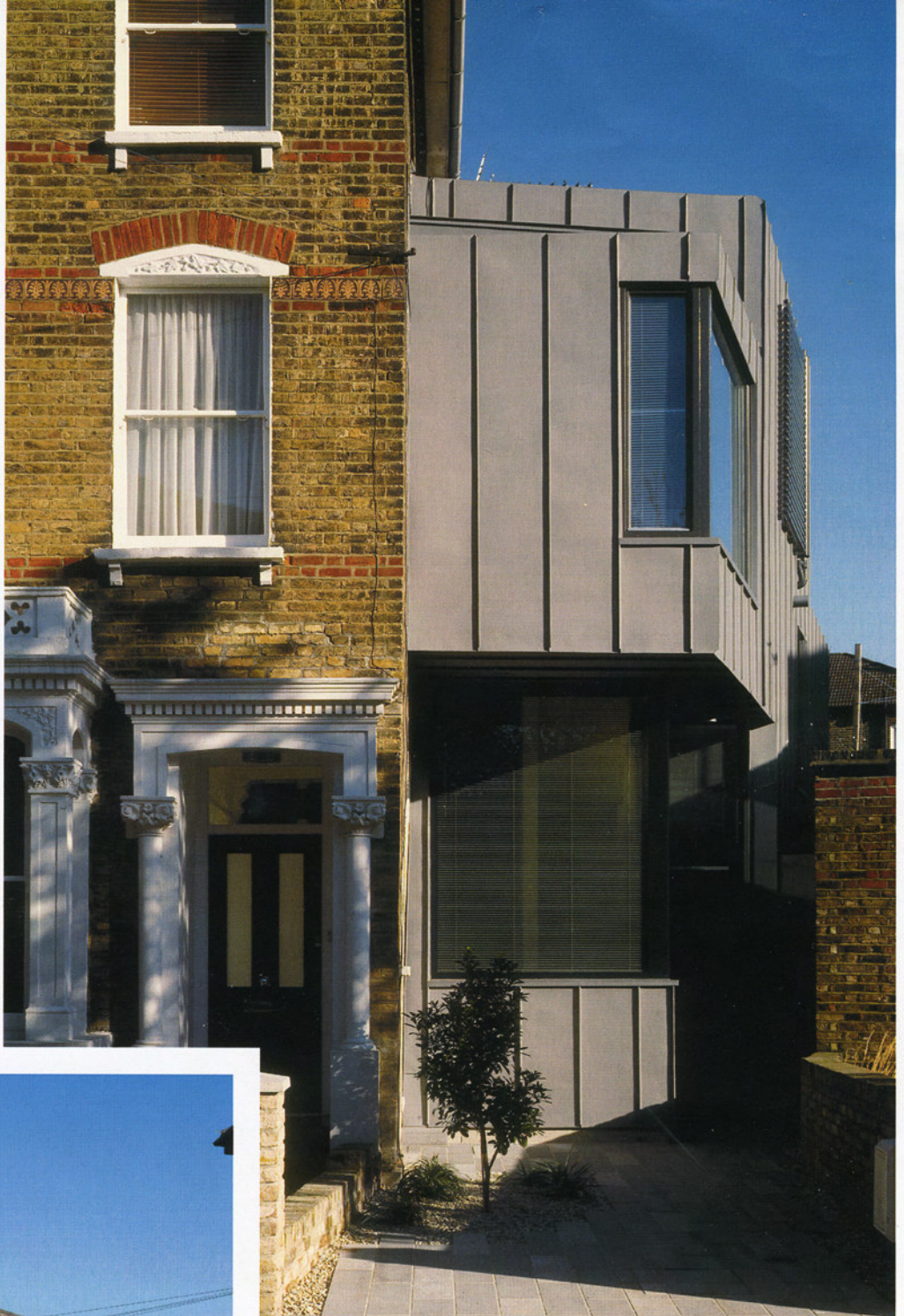
LESS IS MORE
Coming from a house with a basement and an attic, the Gibbs family had to adapt to having less space

IN A NORTH LONDON STREET DOMINATED BY VICTORIAN TERRACES SITS A THIN SLICE OF ARCHITECTURAL DEVIATION.

You can't miss it. Stroll along the pavement and, bang, it stops you in your tracks. As the duplicated 1900s beige brick homes come to an abrupt halt, Focus House appears, a modern abbreviation of design that looks like it has been levered into place with a crowbar, which isn't too far from the truth.

When graphic designer Edward Gibbs – along with his wife and three teenage children – wanted to build a new home, he knew that finding a piece of land would be nigh on impossible. But when an estate agent showed him a four-bedroom Victorian house with parking for five cars, Gibbs saw the potential in the 'bit on the side'.

It was already in his mind to build something eco that was low maintenance and low energy, but he felt stymied by most builders' lack of knowledge in the area. 'Plus, anything environmentally friendly isn't cheap,' he says. 'You have to be committed to see it through. Prices are high and so, often, you have to compromise with how far you go. It's about ►



OLD VS NEW

The 'bit on the side' is built using environmentally friendly materials and is wedged into a modest plot of land at the end of a row of Victorian houses

◀ time the government gave us all an incentive to be a bit greener.'

It was sheer luck that he found a sympathetic and experienced architect. 'I compiled a list of firms using the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). The first number I rang was engaged; the second was bere:architects. I spoke to Justin Bere and we had such a good conversation about the project that I never bothered to ring anyone else.'

While Bere was sorting out planning permission, Gibbs was embroiled in a financial juggling act. He was attempting to sell both a Victorian house he'd spent months renovating to sell on and the family home. 'At one time, I was £1 million in debt, which was a bit hair-raising,' he laughs. 'But when we finally sold everything and moved into a rented place for a while, I had the cash flow to concentrate on the new build.'

The starting point for this new eco home was a wedge-shaped piece of land – wider at the back for a small garden – that looked barely big enough to swing a proverbial cat, let alone construct a place to live for five people. Bere recommended a slender but tall structure – ranging from 2.8 metres wide at the entrance to 7 metres at the back – constructed from a sustainable timber frame rather than concrete and steel. Timber has low embodied-energy levels and what levels it does have are offset by the carbon dioxide contained within the timber during its lifetime, which basically means it has a very low carbon footprint.

A big priority for Gibbs was a reduction in his energy costs. This was achieved by wrapping the exterior in Foamglas, a black insulating material with incredible thermal qualities. A final covering of zinc provided a durable skin that needs little maintenance.

'After living in old houses, I love the convenience of this one,' says Gibbs. 'The walls are so well ▶



SPACE SAVERS

To help create the illusion of space, Edward decorated the house's interior in a neutral grey-and-white colour scheme and built in a lot of storage space



ECO INTERIORS

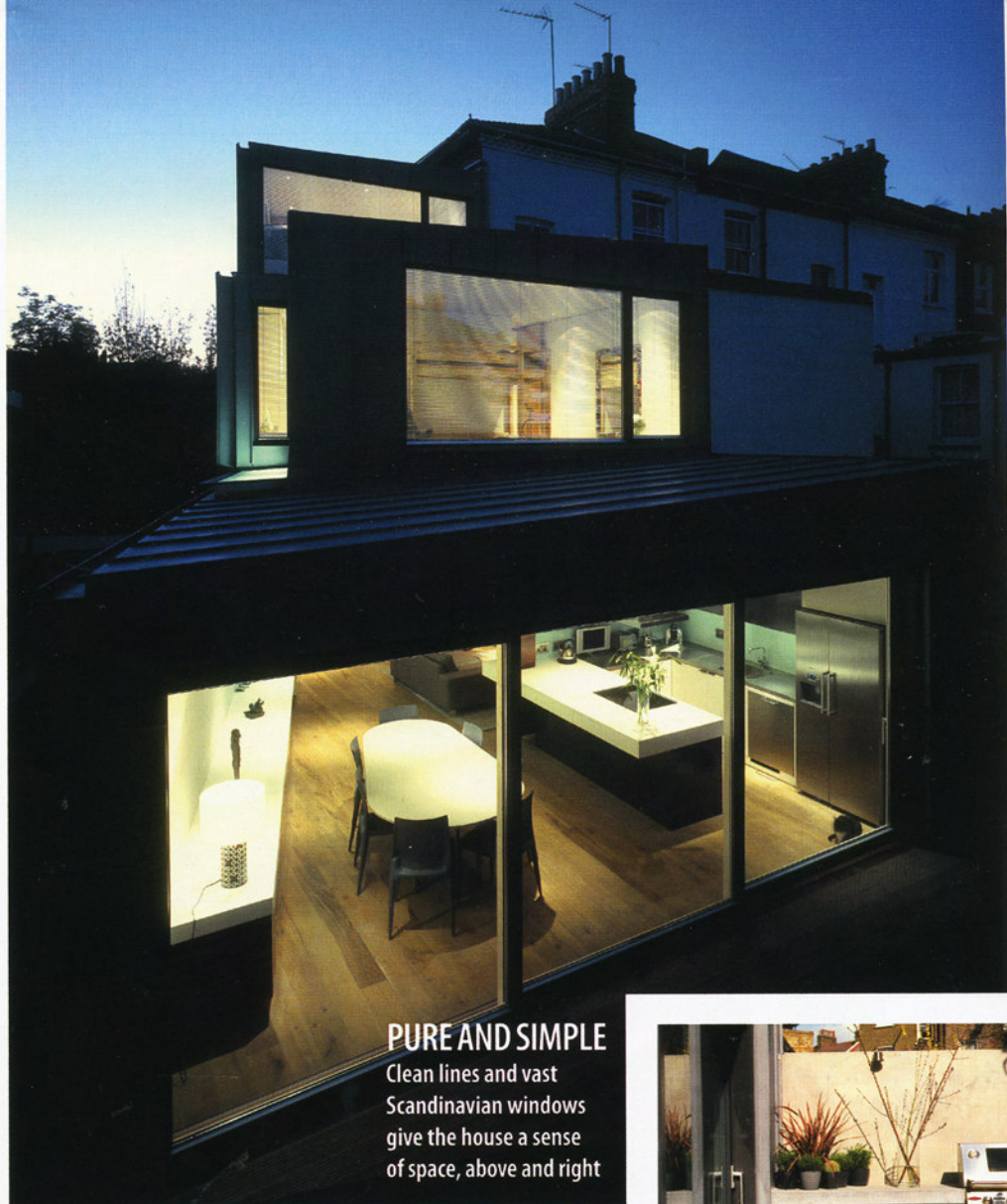
◀ insulated and the doors and windows are sealed so there are no draughts. Our electricity bills have been cut drastically.'

A heat recovery ventilation system and solar installation for hot water also contribute to low energy requirements.

But perhaps one of the main modifications for the family was a reduction in their belongings. Although this three-storey design is a perfect example of minimalist seduction, you couldn't describe the house as spacious, yet it never appears cramped. Obviously, certain illusory trickery has been used. For instance, the vast windows that allow light to flood every surface, cupboards for storage at every turn, partitions to divide rooms rather than floor-to-ceiling walls and a uniform grey-and-white colour scheme.

'We've downsized like you wouldn't believe,' laughs Gibbs. 'Before we moved in here, we had a huge charity shop clear out, then, once we got settled, we had to do it all over again. Being frugal with your possessions is another way of being eco friendly. We've stripped our trappings to the bare minimum and we're surviving.'

Ultimately, the result is a home



PURE AND SIMPLE

Clean lines and vast Scandinavian windows give the house a sense of space, above and right



HIT THE DECK

The garden has 'no grass,' says Edward. 'I didn't want all that mowing'

that feels liberating rather than stark. 'I wanted to simplify life,' says Gibbs. 'The only thing I need to spend my time on now is maintaining the garden.'

Again, it's a small affair with paved slabs, pebbles and wooden decking, a kumquat tree slap bang in the middle, a few potted olive trees, a barbecue area, a low-slung shed/guest room and a hot tub. 'We know the tub isn't eco friendly, but our carbon offset is so good elsewhere, it was the one treat we gave ourselves,' Gibbs admits. 'There's nothing quite so amazing as a sky full of stars and half an hour in the tub.'

It was a daring leap into the unknown for Gibbs to build his eco house. Financially a minefield,



practically a feat of impossible logistics and ecologically a labour of conscience, the challenge eventually paid off. In 2007, Focus House was named RIBA London Awards Winner, Grand Designs Awards Best Eco Home and British Homes Awards Small House of the Year. 'When we started, it was more of a project,' recalls Gibbs. 'Now it's finished, I want to live here for a long time. After all, if you can build a house that's eco friendly and also a wonderful piece of architecture, that's a real achievement.' ■