

# IS THE NEW FACE OF THE MODERN HOME?

Grand designs can be architectural wonders, but they are not always the easiest homes to live in. Now a new generation of housebuilders is starting to favour substance over style. **Oliver Bennett** reports

**P**lain and angular yet (mostly) approachable and hospitable, these houses were all built in the past six years in the UK, and are the brainchildren of a new generation of architects. They're not hero-houses, statements or "icons": more pragmatic, appropriate responses to location, planning law, cost and materials. And they could provide our volume builders with well-needed inspiration.

These homes feature in *The New Modern House*, an anthology that curates an international group of architect-designed houses from around the world, citing them as indicative of what the authors call the New Functionalism. This sobriquet might represent the evergreen search for a genre, but as Ellie Stathaki - the co-author with Jonathan Bell - argues, it merely illustrates that these varied homes share an

ethos. "They are simple and straightforward, with lack of excessive ornamentation and honest use of materials," says Stathaki. "Some look at functionalism from a material perspective, some from ecological, some in terms of layout. But they all share the fact: that functionality was part of the brief."

One-off architect-designed houses have long been with us, and they offer a specialist tier in the property market place, and possibly offer us a glimpse of the future British home. Do the authors think these houses could percolate through into the mass housing market? "These houses aim for economical solutions, which is what many of us want," says Stathaki.

"Perhaps it's not coincidental that they are appearing now, when the property market is in crisis. People are looking for personalised solutions that are effective and realistic and those new functional houses can provide just that." Whether the lessons of New

Functionalism will be applied by British house-builders, who tend to claim that the public prefers heritage-housing stock, is moot. But it's interesting that while many of the houses featured - there are six from the UK - are in a pared-down form, they manage to avoid an alienating severity.

"This is about an approach," says Stathaki. "What we're saying is that you don't need to have a hardcore modernist house in order to obtain functionality. These houses can be more user-friendly, 'soft' and adaptable." In fact, she adds, "Their pragmatism, modesty and clarity of approach makes them very British. It's a quiet, honest functionalism."

*'The New Modern House' by Jonathan Bell and Ellie Stathaki is published by Lawrence King (£30). To order a copy for the special price of £27 (free P&P) call Independent Books Direct on 08430 600 030, or visit [www.independentbooksdirect.co.uk](http://www.independentbooksdirect.co.uk)*



**GREENWOOD ROAD, LONDON**  
LYNCH ARCHITECTS

This wooden house, by Lynch Architects, was built in Hackney: an area known for ample brick villas and 18th-19th century terraces. In these circumstances this house seems markedly different: dressed in wood on the upper two stories and occupying a different shape of plot. In fact, the idea is that it not only echoes the local houses, but also strives to complete the coherence of the streetscape.

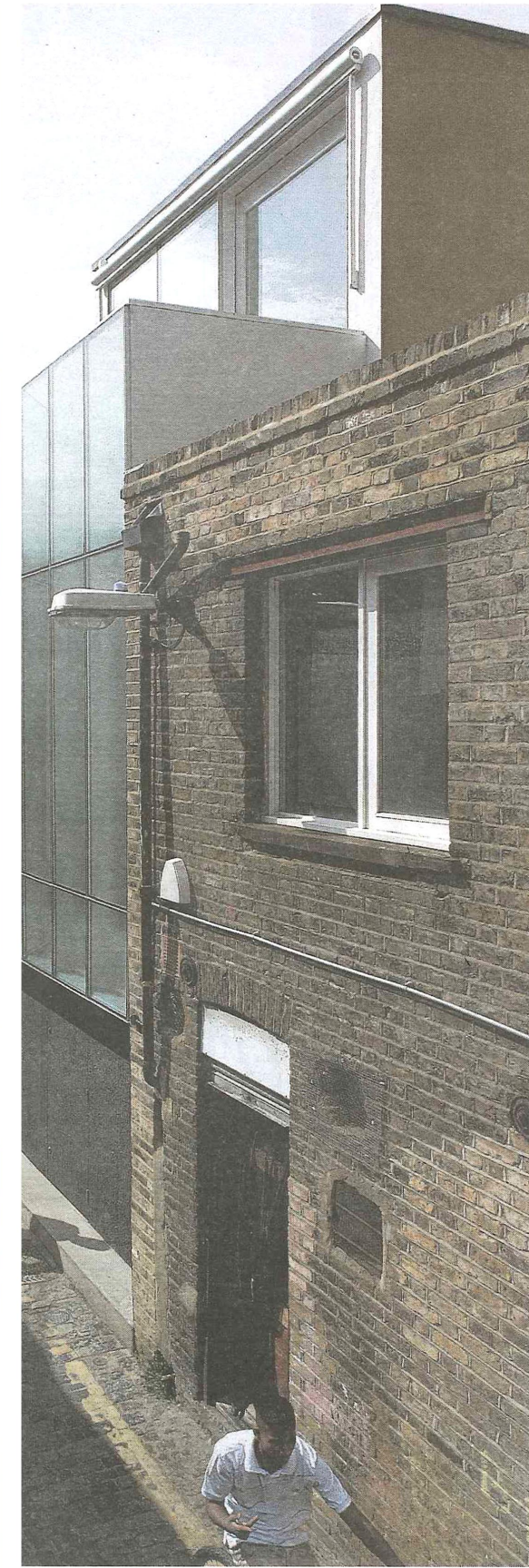
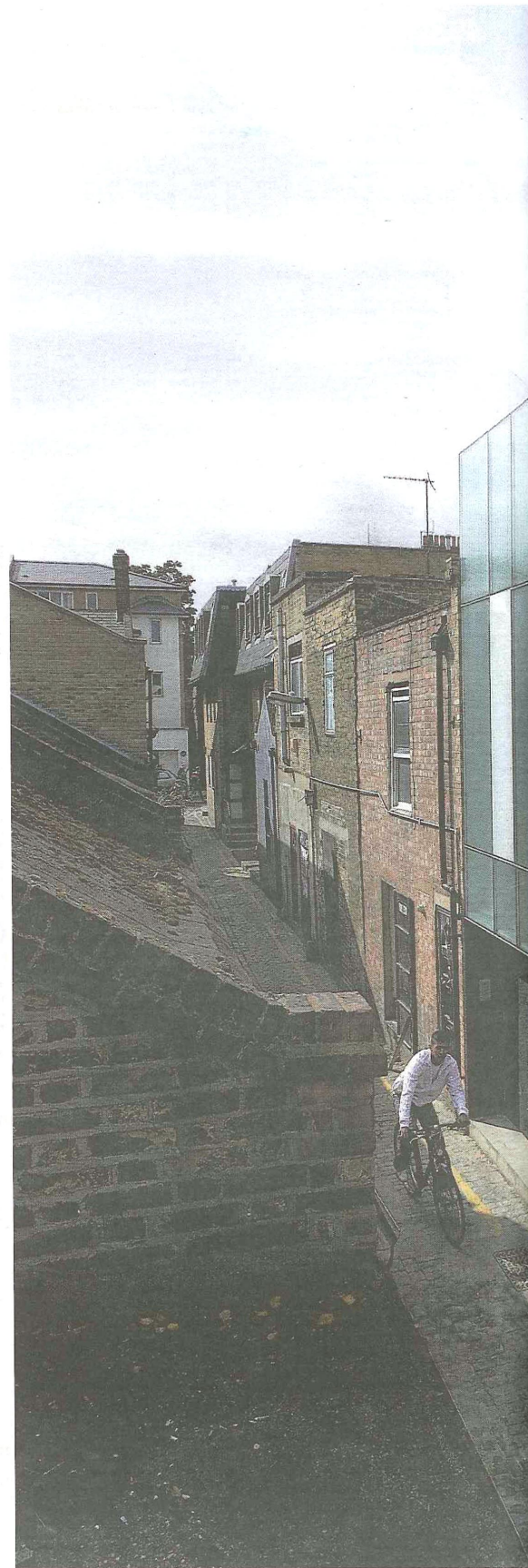
"Georgian terraces were often built to a pattern by developers and they often don't turn corners well," says Patrick Lynch. "This street [Greenwood Road] is very long, and its terraces terminated abruptly with flat

gables." With a plot that used to be a garden, Lynch Architects designed the house to "terminate the terrace in a dignified manner". It is part of its success that, although semi-detached to the stucco porch of its near neighbour, there is no visual jarring.

As with several other buildings in the New Modern House, Greenwood Road is wooden (albeit with a brick lower floor), and has an exposed oak frame, which gives it a pleasing visual softness. "Green oak was used, which we enjoyed as the house is on Greenwood Road," says Lynch. "It's built just as a Medieval house would have been, with wooden frame and wooden pegs."

But it's not so different to its neighbours, he adds. "In fact, Georgian houses are timber buildings clad in bricks."

Indeed, while timber might have seemed yesterday's technology to the pre-war Modernists, it has become a tough and appropriate material for many contemporary architects - one that has the advantage of ageing well. "Some are saying that engineered timber is the reinforced concrete of the 21st century," says Lynch. "It's true that all house builders are making buildings from timber. Some of this may be fashion, but timber is more flexible than load-bearing brick."



**TWOFOLD HOUSE, LONDON**  
CASSION CASTLE ARCHITECTS

This house, on a semi-industrial alleyway in Bethnal Green, London, is an exemplar in how to take a tight, inauspicious site and grow it into a spacious house.

It wasn't an easy build, said the architect, Cassion Castle, which is also the contractor. "There was a lot of shifting stuff around, so it would fit," says Castle. "Luckily, we were allowed to use a garage over the road."

The clients, two artists, had a big design input into the house and had originally wanted to refurbish the earlier industrial building, which they had already turned into a gleaming, uninterrupted white space - their preferred decorative mode. "We argued against

it," says Castle. "It was better to start again, and in the event that was the cheaper option. There are often savings to be made by starting anew."

Now the house is very contextual, with the garages opposite being used by market traders on nearby Bethnal Green Road for storage, while the house itself faces inward; a demand of the clients was for a sanctuary from the world.

Castle has gained a reputation as an architect-builder that can find difficult sites and create homes from them. It is a process that is helped by sites such as these, in less-prized architectural circumstances. "The planners aren't so particular," Castle says.



**PROVIDENCE CHAPEL, WILTSHIRE**  
JONATHAN TUCKEY DESIGN

This family house in Wiltshire was created from two parts: A Grade II-listed Baptist chapel and a new house connected via a hallway at the back, mirroring its shape.

With the chapel, which occupies raised ground in an isolated Wiltshire village and was operating until 2004, Tuckey had to deal with the demands of changing the building's use. Tuckey says: "There are issues about changing use from chapels to homes and in this case the listing was another factor. However, it's sometimes easier to upgrade a listed house as English Heritage now accepts the idea of a minimal glass box on the back, whereas if it's unlisted the planning authority might make you build it in Bath stone."

The model for the new house was a "Tin Tabernacle," the type of simple

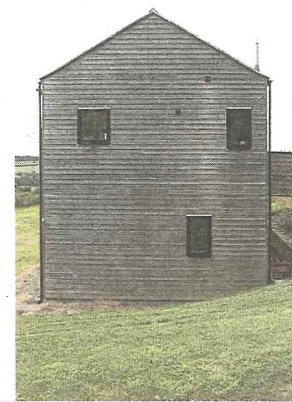
house of worship clad in iron and erected cheaply in the 19th century. Indeed, Tuckey looked into using corrugated iron but went for the black wood, giving the house a sharp silhouette.

Tuckey is one of the UK's leading advocates for change of use. "I'm passionate about it and we have a long tradition of it in this country, whether it's mews houses becoming fashionable homes in the 1960s, or old school buildings being converted," he says.

"We don't like ripping things down in this country, so it's something we have to do." Reuse creates a collage of the past and is a more interesting and sustainable endeavour than building town estates - the major problem being that "the ridiculous tax regime discourages it as you pay VAT on restoration".

**BUTTERWELL FARMHOUSE, CORNWALL**  
CHARLES BARCLAY ARCHITECTS

Unusually, this residence is a farmhouse - not a form of housing in which one expects to find architectural innovation. But thanks to an enlightened client and a landscape-friendly design inspired by the kit-built farmsteads in the American mid-west, this house found the perfect landing place on a south-facing slope near Looe in Cornwall. "The client is a dairy farmer who wanted a practical and inexpensive house," the architect Charles Barclay says. "This was a rational approach that allowed us to build cheaply." With prefabricated timber parts and insulation, to cope with its isolated location, the house - built in 2004 - is a pragmatic and handsome response to a site, one that gives the sense of frontier but otherwise avoids temptations of cosy tradition.



THE SECRET HISTORY OF...

## The Tam Tam



**T**o some, the Tam Tam is famous for being one of the cheapest items in Habitat's seating department (the stool - in store since 2002 - costs just £12).

To others, this petite, moulded plastic perch - with a removable top to allow storage inside its hourglass body - is a classic piece of late-Sixties design; famous for echoing Brigitte Bardot's similarly iconic curves when the actress was photographed sitting on an orange one at her St Tropez home in 1970.

Tam Tam's beginnings, however, were less glamorous. The stool was created in 1968 by a Frenchman, Henry Massonnet, who ran an industrial manufacturing company called STAMP, in Nurioux, a small village in eastern France. Massonnet's factory specialised in moulded plastic and his flagship productions included a coolbox for fishermen.

"He was not at all à la mode," says Lionel Raimond, who works for Branex, the Parisian company which now holds the Tam Tam's manufacturing licence. "He made the tabouret just for him, to go fishing - because it was easy to carry and you can store things in it."

Massonnet began producing the Tam Tam commercially, selling it to fishermen with modest success. And then there was the Bardot photo-shoot. Suddenly STAMP was shifting 600,000 of the stools annually and in five years 12 million had been sold.

Despite its unexpected popularity, the Tam Tam nearly became a Seventies relic when the 1973 oil crisis hit the plastics industry hard. Having escaped that threat, the stool then suffered an even bigger one: fashion. "In the early 1980s," says Raimond, "that whole kitsch look became unpopular, a bit dead," and, due to lack of demand, production of the Tam Tam ceased. Until, that is, the owner of a Parisian discount food outlet called Branex instigated an unlikely revival.

Sacha Cohen (not of Borat and Ali G fame) collected Seventies furniture, although he kept his hobby separate from his grocery business. But in 2002, he bought a Tam Tam at an auction, asked about its manufacturing licence - and a new era began.

Today, the Tam Tam (and its modern descendant, the iTam Tam, a stool-cum-docking station) is still made in Massonnet's factory using the original mould. It is also a design classic. Yet Massonnet, who died in 2005, never got big-headed about his achievement; the design, he said, was ridiculously simple and "you didn't have to be a genius to think of it".

BY KATE BURT