

Mine the gap: How skinny homes are a space saviour

With demand for housing in London at a high, unpromising plots are being maximised to build surprisingly liveable homes.

Ruth Bloomfield looks at some of the ingenious ways that architects are capitalising on sandwiched pockets of land

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For centuries, London's houses have been built tall and skinny, to squeeze the maximum amount of space out of the smallest possible footprint in an increasingly crowded city. But the Huguenot silk weavers' houses of Spitalfields, or the Georgian townhouses in Limehouse's aptly named Narrow Street seem positively palatial when compared to their extreme contemporary equivalents.

Because all over London even the most unpromising, pinched little plots of land are being used to build surprisingly liveable houses.

"There is such a demand for housing in London that it makes sense that we capitalise on every single sliver of land," said architect Tristan Wigfall, who has designed a series of these infill homes. "If the design is imaginative you can build very high quality spaces on very small sites."

And although building on narrow city centre sites can be tricky — and therefore expensive — mini-houses can command hefty prices. A two-bedroom, eight foot-wide house in Barnes went on the market last month priced at £775,000 with Sceon+Berne estate agents. Last summer Winkworth listed an even skinnier option, a six foot-wide house on Goldhawk Road, Shepherd's Bush, with two bedrooms and a £950,000 price tag.

Jeremy Taylor is something of an expert on skinny living. If he stands in his kitchen with outstretched arms he can almost reach from both sides. His home in Tufnell Park was once a coach house attached to the Victorian villa next door. At less than 10ft wide it looks like a doll's house sandwiched between its imposing neighbours. Inside it is remarkably light and spacious-feeling.

The coach house had been converted — "badly" — into a self-contained home in the Nineties and Taylor, 39, who works for an asset manager, bought it in 2012. In 2017 he hired architect Jeremy Foster, director of J Foster Architects, to rethink and enlarge the 538 sq ft house. The radical revamp involved extending the kitchen, dropping sections of its floor and raising a ceiling to



create a third level, and fully refurbishing the house.

It now measures 743 sq ft, has two bedrooms, a small study, and large glass doors leading out to the garden.

At £300,000 this project wasn't cheap, but it has not only made Taylor's skinny house bigger, but also much more liveable — and he was able to move days before last year's first lockdown.

"With a house like this you have to make use of every single gap," said Taylor. "We have lots of built-in furniture... and when you are buying furniture, you have to buy small pieces. We also used Vitsoe storage systems, which bolt to the walls and have underfloor heating on the ground floor because radiators take up room."

In Clapton, a narrow plot at the end of a terrace of period houses near Chatsworth Road has been put to use to create one of London's most eye-catching narrow houses. The site was a real challenge, with a street frontage of only 11.5ft and hemmed in by buildings on either side and behind.

Cordula Weisser, director of ZCD Architects, was hired to design a family



Radical revamp: Jeremy Taylor in his Tufnell Park home, a former Victorian coach house that has been converted into a three-storey house

Eye-catching: this family home, left, built by ZCD Architects in Clapton, has a street frontage of only 11.5ft

Tight spot: a 10ft-wide house was built by Alma-nac architects on a wedge-shaped piece of land in Nunhead, right

Width of a Tube carriage: the two-storey Slot House, below, by Sandy Rendel Architects, covers the site of a former cycle club in Peckham

about these spaces," she said. "They are brilliant because you can create really good houses. Architects always love a problem and you can do a lot with a small site. It gives you a chance to be inventive. It could be the only option you have if you want to live in central London and own your own house."

Hackney council has embraced the concept of infill housebuilding and last year launched the "self-build challenge", which will offer local people priced out of the housing market the chance to build their own homes on spare corners of land the council owns, but which are too small for social housing.

It plans to start with a pilot site near Well Street Common, and the self-builders can either pay for the site and work using a mortgage or go for a shared ownership partnership with the council. If it proves popular more sites will be offered and other councils are likely to follow Hackney's example.

Sandy Rendel moved to Peckham with his wife, Sally, 18 years ago, where they bought and converted a former cycle club into a family house for themselves and their two children, aged six and 12.

The club house is at the end of a terrace and the couple, both architects, had long eyed the nine foot-wide gap between the buildings.

It was owned by a local property developer but in 2014, after he had given up on plans to build on it, they stepped in and paid £120,000 for the site.

At the front they designed a self-contained 1.5-bedroom house with its own courtyard garden.

Work started in 2016 and took almost four years to complete — the couple did as much of the work they could themselves, assisted by friends, family, and various builders. So as not to overload the neighbouring homes the house was built using a lightweight steel frame, which was craned into position, and clad in pewter glazed tiles.

"We didn't have the money to do it all at once, but it could have been done in about eight months if we had," said Rendel, director of Sandy Rendel Architects. The two-storey, 689 sq ft house cost £224,000 to build, and is currently rented out — the family intend to keep it as a long-term investment.

Rendel believes that this kind of micro-sized home can meet a real demand from people who don't need a large family house but want their own front door and outside space.

"It is a way to get a foot on to the property ladder at a time when there is enough buoyancy in the market to make



it viable but not enough profit in these small sites for traditional property developers to be interested," he said. "The quality is at least comparable, if not better, than you will find in a minimum-space standard flat."

Given its modest size — the house is around the same width as a Tube carriage — Rendel worked hard to make the interior felt spacious. Large windows let in plenty of light, the space is open plan and the upper level is a mezzanine giving an area of generous-feeling double-height living space.

Last year another tiny house, this time in Nunhead, was also completed, replacing a garage beside the neighbouring house. Its front facade measures a relatively generous 10 feet, but the site is wedge shaped and at the back it slims down to just over six feet.

"It has got the same sort of area as a one-bedroom flat," explained its architect, Tristan Wigfall, director of Alma-nac architects. "But because it is on three floors it feels a lot bigger."

Large windows and skylights add to the sense of scale, and Wigfall installed an open pine staircase which runs through the centre of the house to keep things as uncluttered as possible.

The project cost £260,000 — the average price of a Nunhead flat is £438,000, according to Rightmove — and its owners, who live next door, are renting it out. "It is an investment, and they might at some point downsize into it," said Wigfall.

He thinks making the most of every scrap of land could make a significant impact on London's housing crisis, particularly if councils start to identify and activate plots with potential.

"I do think that there needs to be a degree of control to ensure the quality of the space though," said Wigfall. "We don't want rabbit-hutch housing."

