

PERSONAL INSIGHT

Dreaming of a family home, architect Luke Tozer chanced upon a site in Notting Hill which was in places just eight-foot wide, and saw possibilities that no one else had imagined.

A narrow victory

Luke and Charlotte Tozer set themselves quite a challenge when they built a house on a slim-fit site in London's Notting Hill, which at its narrowest, was just eight feet wide. Architect Luke not only wanted a family house with a lot of flexibility, but one that had a minimal carbon footprint. That meant a raft of common sense ideas to keep the house sustainable, plus a few extra measures, such as a heat pump to harness energy for heating and hot water from underground, as well as a rainwater harvesting system.

"We have always wanted to build a house for ourselves but I couldn't quite work out if this site was my dream or a nightmare," says Luke, a partner at Pitman Tozer Architects. "Only an architect would have been crazy enough to buy it."

The Tozers had been living in a two-bedroom flat near Baker Street but by the time Charlotte was pregnant with their first child Mark, they needed more space. They were looking for a bigger house, when they saw an infill site in Notting Hill sandwiched between two listed, 1860s houses. It was occupied by a semi-derelict, poorly built Fifties cottage, which stretched through the gap and expanded at the rear, nestling among

the back gardens of neighbouring buildings. "It would have put most people off," says Luke, who founded his practice six years ago. "Developers were deterred by the constraints and we thought long and hard, looked at various schemes and talked to planners before buying."

As well as making models of the house and explaining their plans, Luke and Charlotte entered into a complex agreement with one neighbour, trading improvements to the latter's listed building for improved access rights to their own site.

At every stage the slim nature of the site meant creative thinking in terms of access, from building a hut on wheels for the contractor, to finding a drilling rig slim enough to get through to the rear of the plot to drill the 50-metre deep boreholes integral to the heat exchange system.

Ultimately, the Tozers won through. Having bought the site in September 2005, they finally moved in during August 2007 and were a fraction within their £490,000 build budget.

The finished house makes the most of every square inch of space, yet manages to avoid any feeling of claustrophobia. The narrowest section, facing the street, is essentially an entrance area on the ground floor

CHANCE

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Building a new life
Luke and wife Charlotte with their two children

topped by a stack of three single bedrooms. To the rear, their home begins to unfold dramatically, with a semi-open-plan kitchen, dining area and sitting room with banks of retractable glazing opening out onto a courtyard. During the summer, this whole expanse of glass opens up to create a greater impression of space, with inside and out on one level for seamless transition.

There are also flexible spaces such as a mezzanine study overlooking the seating area, plus a rear conservatory room on the second floor which doubles as a playroom and office. Storage and utility areas are packed into the centre of the house, where there is the least natural light, although a roof light over the central staircase brings in some sunlight even here. "I love how light and airy the house is and how little space is wasted for circulation," says Charlotte, who gave birth to her second child, Alexander, eight months ago.

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LUKE TOZER'S BEST TIPS

Design passively

1 "Spend time, money and energy on the design process so the house really works. The layout should mean time spent during the day is within the part that benefits from sunlight."

Insulate

2 Luke's house has twice as effective a U-value - a measure of how building element conducts heat - than Government recommendations. "The most effective way of saving money is by spending on insulation."

Natural light

3 "There should be a careful use of natural light, with artificial light being used as little as possible."

Passive ventilation

4 Design to allow cross and through ventilation for natural cooling. "The passive ventilation for the house is provided by the opening roof-light at the top of the staircase and the two opening windows in the living room roof. In summer, with open windows, a through-draught keeps it cool."

Sustainable technology

5 Lastly, focus on sustainability. "After you've secured the basics, only then you can start looking at heat pumps, rainwater harvesting and other things."