

## WINNER: THE BEST NEW HOME IN BRITAIN

# A GAP BIG ENOUGH FOR A FAMILY



The secret revealed: the house widens to cover a former garden

As if by magic, a family has built a spacious home in the tiny gap between two stucco houses, earning a coveted architecture medal in the process. **Philippa Stockley** discovers the Gap House's big secrets



Skylights ensure natural light dances around the house all day

**W**ALKING along the smart stucco streets of Bayswater, the gaps between the pairs of big white houses appear rather gloomy. About eight feet wide, there might be just enough room for a claustrophobic patio. Then, suddenly, where the next gap should be, are steps leading down to a front door; and, above that, three windows, half-louved in pine, on three doll's-house-wide floors. Welcome to the Gap House, which has just won the prestigious Manser medal for the best new home built in Britain.

This is a clever house by clever young architectural practice Pitman Tozer, wringing, as it does, 2,000sq ft of well thought through, sunny, family living space out of a previously pretty useless hole. What's more, it took only 22 months from buying the plot to moving in, which is speedy in anyone's book, and the build cost came in at £504,000 – only £6,000 over a tight budget.

Gap House belongs to Luke and Charlotte Tozer and their two lively boys: Mark, who's four, and Alex, two.

The couple, who are both 39, met in 2000, when they went on holiday with mutual friends. "Luke lived in the Trellick Tower," Charlotte says, "and I lived round here, and loved it. We moved into a flat in Marylebone, up four flights of stairs. Then Mark arrived, so we started looking."

"We were looking for a 'fixer-upper,'" says Luke, "not a 'knock-down-and-start-again-er!'."

But when he saw the Winkworth advert for the sale of a nasty Fifties infill cottage with quite a bit more space at the back (that had once been part of one neighbour's garden), he and Charlotte went and looked. As an architect he could see its potential as a house. But he could also see all sorts of difficulties – particularly with locals and planners.

Charlotte loved it from the word go, so Luke went to have informal talks with the planners straight away. He says: "Doing something like this can be a hell



Charlotte Tozer and her architect husband Luke have won the prestigious Manser medal for the home they built and share with their two boys, Mark, four, and Alex, two (pictured)

of a risk. You'd be criminally insane if you didn't go and have chats with the planners first."

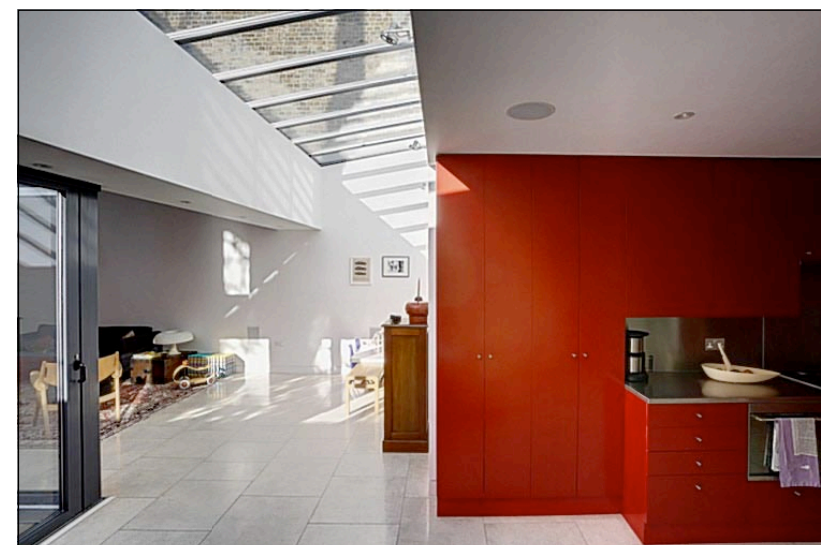
Despite some local opposition, after lots of drawings and models, the couple's plans for a sympathetic, energy-efficient house that optimises space at the back, eventually went through – and Luke ended up doing some work for a neighbour, as well.

Visitors agree that the design works. Entering through the narrow front door, you pass down a hall and – suddenly – where the garden once was, the house flares out into a wide, L-shaped open-plan kitchen/diner and living space. This big area embraces a warm-orange walled courtyard garden. The two connect by means of broad folding glass doors running on a track, that can be pushed right back in summer, to make one big stone-floored space. Softly gleaming Moleanos

Blue limestone, costing £45 a sq m, visually connects the two areas.

The living space, with its glossy, steel and cherry-coloured Pitman-Tozer designed kitchen – "It's spray-painted MDF," Charlotte explains – soars up to double-height over a glass-balustraded mezzanine study at one end. The double-height space, punctured by windows, is triangular – which is a bit like being inside a very avant-garde Swiss cheese. Sun constantly moves around the off-white walls of the lovely and versatile 24ft-wide room, which really is the centre of the home.

But there's more. Deep under the kitchen table is one of three 150-ft bore holes that connect with a heat pump in the "engine room" (a very large cupboard in the hall). Natural ground heat warms the family's water up to 55 degrees Celsius – high enough for a good hot shower.



A brightly coloured MDF spray-painted kitchen sits at one end of the open living space



Enter the Gap House via steps down to a door below three "doll's-house-wide" floors

Rainwater is collected underground in a large tank and pumped to a header tank, flushing the toilets for nothing, and all the windows are double-glazed, argon filled units. "We built to a much higher specification than building regulations," Luke says, adding: "When you are starting with a new building you get all these opportunities, that only come once."

He's maximised them: the larch staircase that rises through all four floors is set back slightly from the walls so that air flows up and round it, working like a chimney in summer to draw hot air up, and out through a roof-light.

Each floor has a bathroom (this was firmly on Charlotte's wishlist), and there are four bedrooms shoehorned in, including a generous master-bedroom with en suite; while the boys have their own playroom up near the top with a glass roof and wonderful views over

neighbouring mature gardens full of glowing autumn colours.

As well as this, there's a utility room, and built-in storage everywhere you can think of.

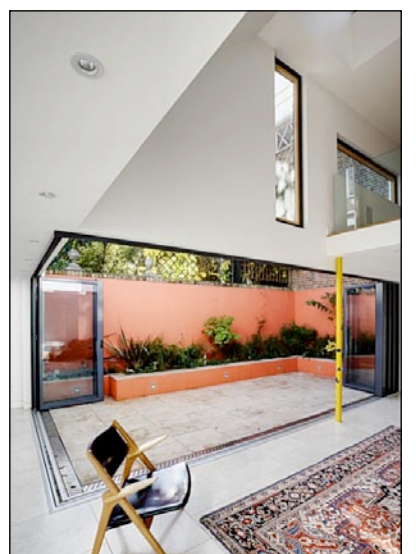
This house is modest, but also proud of its achievements. There isn't an inch of wasted space, or a gloomy corner, and by working out the design so thoroughly, it feels even bigger than it really is, while the real sense of the garden and living space being one makes it both stylistically desirable, and really comfortable.

"What I love," adds Luke, "is going through what feels like a secret door, into this beautiful space. To me, it's like being Mr Benn."

Photographs by: **John Griffin**

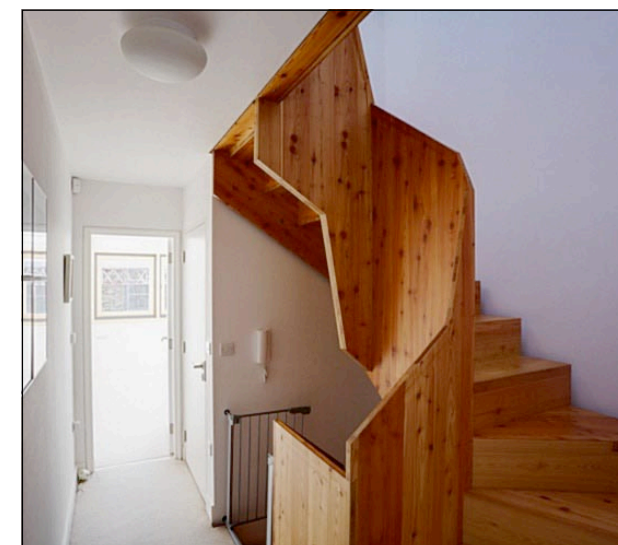
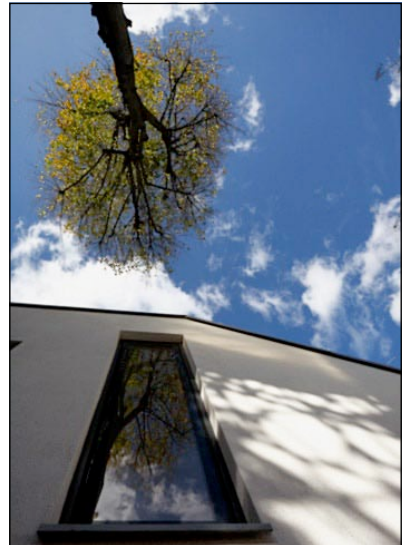
## GET THE LOOK

Folding doors open on warm days to link the house with the stylish outside space where the floor is covered in Moleanos Blue limestone



- **Architect/kitchen design:** Pitman Tozer (020 7524 7534; www.pitmantozzer.com)
- **Builder:** Nathan Brown of Brownstone (07984 033214)
- **Limestone flags:** Moleanos Blue, about £45 a sq m, from Gerald Culliford (www.geraldculford.co.uk)
- **Off-white paint used internally throughout:** Viennese Truffle, from Dulux. Garden walls in Dulux Weathershield (the couple tried 10 colours and finally mixed some together to get what they wanted).
- **Folding/sliding doors:** Alco Beldan, specialist in all sorts of moveable walls (www.alcobeldan.com).
- **Heat pump:** from Geothermal International (www.geothermalint.co.uk). The boreholes cost about £9,000 to dig and the pump also cost £9,000.
- **Colourful rubber bathroom floors:** these come in 80 colours and cost from £50 a sq m from Dalsouple (www.dalsouple.com).
- **Staircase:** made to a Pitman-Tozer design from larch ply that was grown by Austrian monks. It cost about £30,000 from Tin Tab (www.tintab.com).
- **Courtyard garden:** landscaped by Jeanie Simmons of Nurture Nature (www.nurture-nature.co.uk).

Far from claustrophobic, the view from small the courtyard is a little bit of heaven



The £30,000 staircase is built with larch grown by Ausrian monks