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# LIVING

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## PROPERTY

Architects in London and beyond are rising to the challenge of delivering affordable housing with a witty reimagining of urban living spaces, says **Caroline McGhie**

It is a bright spring day in Dalston. The Victorian houses in the east London streets puff out their chests, fattened on old ways and rising prices. Council estates loom between them like monuments to the ideals of the last century. Then you turn into St Jude Street, stop at the sight of one crazy little house – and have a light-bulb moment. It is the spark of the new.

The exterior is very polite, an arrangement of rectangles exquisitely decorated in fine pale herringbone brickwork, a bit like you would see on an early Tudor chimney. The house looks to be in two sections, one with a gable end that exactly echoes the roof of the church at the top of the street, the other hiding behind a high wall and with a cinema-screen window. It strikes you immediately as a clever fusion of ancient and modern.

Zoe Chan, 29, designed it as her own home. She now shares it with Merlin Eayrs, who is her work partner too, the other half of Chan & Eayrs. "It is a shoes-off house," she says quickly. Here we go. Architects always get you down to your socks before you can pause for breath. But in Herringbone House you are still pondering the funny shape before your feet land on the warm limed-oak floor. The house is shaped like a piece of cheese with lovely cobbled courtyards in the wedge and the tip.

Zoe was still at university when she found this little scrap of land, small and unloved as a discarded dustbin top. "It was a derelict garage where there had been a fire and squatters," she says. She read architecture at Cambridge, then took a year out and went on to further study at the Architectural Association School of Architecture. She was just 25 when she bought it.

It was 2010 and the country was shivering in the recession, but Dalston was coming up on the coat-tails of Shoreditch. "It was rough but trendy," says Merlin. "I was so excited about it," says Zoe. "I sold a flat in west London to buy little sites that interested me in east London and south of the river. At the time, a lot of developers needed to sell land they had bought when the market was booming." She learnt from watching friends in junior positions in big architectural firms having their ideas stifled. "I wanted creative freedom," she says.

Designing Herringbone House was awkward because it had to fit within two long side walls without windows in them. To allow light in, she topped and tailed it with the courtyards and dropped a large roof light into the middle. The floor-to-ceiling windows of the open-plan living area fold away so that the courtyards meld with the inside, each one planted with statuesque silver birches. David Hockney would love it. Their joint work studio, with another foldaway glass wall, is where they make the models for their projects and work



## A new shape for the city

ideas through before shooting off to supervise their building team.

Other lovely features in the house include oversize doors and a white staircase that floats like gossamer to the top floor, where there are three bedrooms, each with floor-to-ceiling windows framing surrounding houses from previous centuries. It isn't just a house, of course. It is a model for what they hope to do elsewhere. They are now selling it for £1.795 million through the Modern House (020 7704 3504; themodernhouse.net) in order to build another in Dalston. There are other sites to develop too.

One is in Ridley Road, where two summers ago they created a temporary restaurant as kind of an installation. It promoted a food-for-food economy which meant you could exchange produce from the market for meals. Food was prepared on a table that rose into an upper dining room.

They are like street artists reimagining the city. "We were both frustrated at the quality of new housing," says Merlin. "The developer's template applied to everything." What do they have in their portfolio? A site in East Dulwich that had got snagged up in complicated planning issues; a listed warehouse in Woolwich; and a project in New Cross, where they are making smart flats with factory windows, wood floors and cosy woodburners. "We love tradition, craft and ornament, and like to put new techniques with old," he says.

"When you think of other products like clothes or cars, design is crucial," says Zoe. "With houses people don't have a lot of choice. A lot of architecture is commissioned by very rich individuals. There is older housing stock which is beautiful but homogenous, or developer housing. Developers don't value or quantify things like



**Open and shut: Zoe Chan and Merlin Eayrs, top; the Herringbone House**

light and the experience of space. New developments are led not by designers but by budgets." Zoe and Merlin want to put design first and then make it affordable.

Others have been thinking about the city house too. Carl Turner designed the Slip House in a gap in a Brixton terrace. It was arranged like three boxes of milky, translucent

glass teetering on top of each other. Admired for its green credentials, it won the RIBA Manser medal in 2013. Carl used "energy piles" as foundations which contributed to a heating system based on a solar-assisted ground-source heat pump. There was rainwater harvesting, a wildflower roof and a work studio on the ground floor, all on a budget of £600,000. The house sold last year through the Modern House for £1.35 million.

In Orchard Street, Islington, Sarah Wigglesworth designed a straw bale house and "quilted office" in a witty experiment in sustainable living. She used straw bales, recycled metal cages and cement bags (to absorb the noise from the railway running alongside) and made a dining room that doubles as a venue for work conferences. *World Architecture* magazine hailed it as "a deep, dense and determined essay on architecture today".