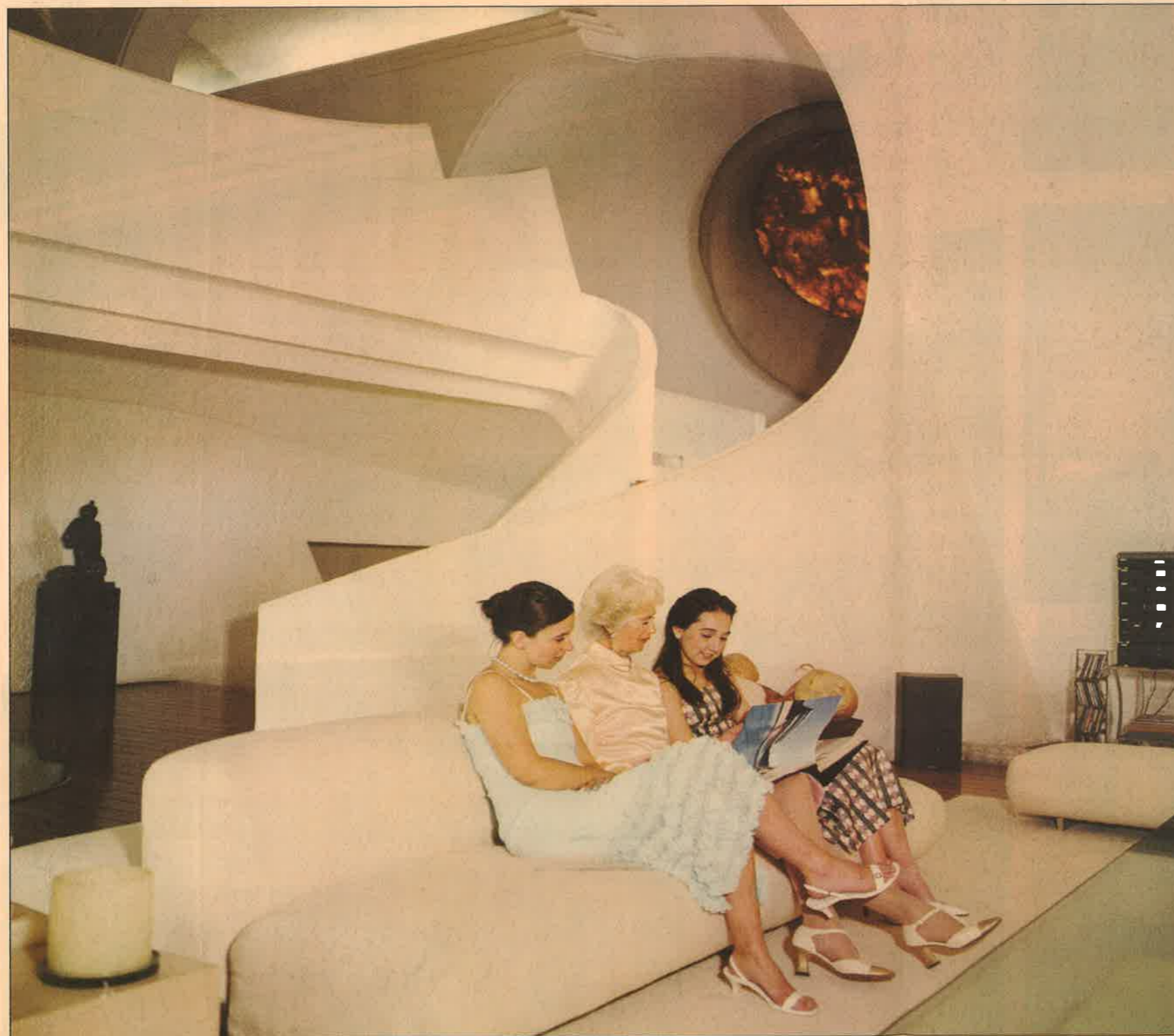


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SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 10 / SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 11 2005



Building homes for every age

From cradle to grave, residences reflect changing lifestyles. Our survey of property for each generation begins with **Nicole Swengley** on flexible interiors and **Hattie Hartman** on adaptable architecture

Some people move house when they marry, again when they have a baby, again when their family grows and again when the children finally move out. But endless relocations are expensive and time-consuming, even if they are just down the street. And, for those with access to a talented interior designer or a thoughtful architect, staying put is a real possibility.

Interior angles

London-based interiors specialist Charles Rutherford has been working on one five-storey Victorian house in London for 18 years. The owner asked him to change the layout and design when she married, when she had babies and, most recently, to meet the needs of pre-teenage children.

"It's essential to segregate areas especially in relation to noise," he explains. "If a house is going to last the course it needs fundamental planning."

The property originally had a very small, ground-floor drawing room. A

new one was built across the width of the back of the house when his clients married. And Rutherford recoloured all the rooms so the couple would feel they were starting life together in a new environment.

When the first child was born, Rutherford installed a dedicated laundry room in the basement, freeing up space for an extra bedroom upstairs. His latest change was to move the bedrooms of the three children to the top floor, where there are also two bathrooms, and to convert one of the original children's bedrooms into an adult's study.

"Giving children a dedicated floor is important," he says. "I also take the view that children can have quite sophisticated tastes so I like to choose exciting colours but avoid babyish patterns. This helps to avoid frequent redecoration as children's tastes change very quickly between the ages of eight and 12."

Audrey Carden of London's Carden Cunietti says she creates flexible spaces

Getty

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for clients by adding and subtracting furnishings, instead of completely redecorating every few years. For kids' rooms, "neutral tiles and floor-coverings can be offset with one bright pink wall or a colourful blind – things that are easy to change", she says. "We recently installed a pink rubber floor in a child's bathroom which was otherwise limestone throughout." Carden also believes in creating maximum hallway and bedroom storage from the outset. "Whether it's for baby buggies or teenagers' bicycles, you're always going to need more storage than just a coat cupboard," she says. "It's also worth building in lots of storage in children's rooms right from birth."

Once the children leave home, interior designers are often commissioned to transform their rooms into spaces for the adults. "Playrooms become chill-out zones and then studies or home offices," says interior designer Joanna Wood.

Wood also argues for big family rooms with kitchens attached for all ages and types of family. "Otherwise the children go off to their own rooms, close the door and you never see them," she says.

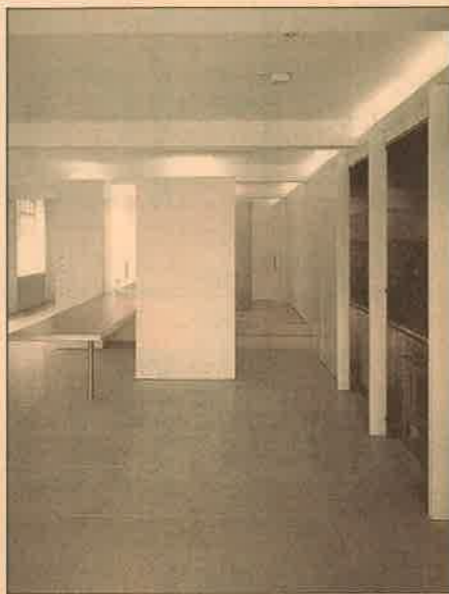
Chelsea-based interior designer Caroline Paterson takes a different tack, emphasising the importance of creating separate zones for parents and children.

"Victorian houses are ideal for this as they have more than one entrance," says Paterson. "I've installed [in clients' basements] a big living room with a plasma screen and desk, a small kitchenette, shower and loo in each property. There are no bedrooms as the parents prefer their children to sleep upstairs. A similar approach

You always need more storage. It's worth building in lots in children's rooms right from birth'

could be taken with an attic or loft conversion."

Paterson, who works with



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could be taken as an attic or loft conversion."

Paterson, who works with an interior architect, notes that these play-dens can also be turned into self-contained apartments for twentysomething stay-at-homes by dividing the living space and adding a bedroom. Or "it could become a nanny's quarters, if there are young children from a second marriage, or a helper's flat," she says. "Given the UK's age demographics I think we'll see increasing numbers of live-in helpers. It's better and less expensive than moving into an old people's home."

Paterson also suggests other tricks that increase a property's flexibility: "Avoid sisal floor-coverings, which can get slippery, in areas used by youngsters or the elderly. Instead use rubber floor-coverings, some of which come in wonderful colours with different grip shapes. In households with youngsters, a stripy stair-carpet won't show the dirt and a gloss or varnish on staircase walls is better than emulsion. The walls look smartly lacquered and hand-marks just wipe off." She also points out that zoned heating, which can be turned off in any unused areas, is very economical.

Remodelling a property when one set of children has left home, only to be replaced by youngsters in a second marriage, is a challenge that Karen Howes of interior specialists Taylor Howes, has mastered. "A client of mine has two children, age six and 11, and two others in their late twenties who stay with him at his two-bedroom apartment in Belgravia when the youngsters are at his country house with his second wife," she says. "The guest bedroom is decorated neutrally to suit both sets of children. We've used funky-looking driftwood lamps and a wonderful wildlife painting. We also designed a specially-built lacquered unit with leather handles in which the younger children keep their PlayStation, toys and books. You just whack the door shut and all their paraphernalia is hidden away."

Howes is keen on creating dual-purpose rooms for growing families. "We're often asked to design clever storage for rooms that double as studies when children are away at boarding school," she says.

Interior designer Helen Green has even been asked to turn children's bedrooms into art rooms or recording studios once they have left home.

"My philosophy is to keep the home as flexible as possi-

Main pic and below: Proctor and Matthews' townhouse development in Harlow, Essex. Above, from top: transformable Soho apartment by Guard Tillman Thomas; social housing in east London by Ash Sakula; Clague's Georgian villa development near Maidstone



ble right from the start," she says. "If you invest in good interior design advice and get the layout, wiring and lighting right at the outset, then gently upgrade every decade, you won't need a heavy investment at every stage of family life."

Bricks and mortar

Commissioning an architect to design a one-off home is perhaps the easiest way to ensure it will meet both immediate and long-term needs. Clients can describe what they want and how they expect their lifestyles to evolve; the architect has the luxury and time to find the right layout, ensuring a variety of patterns of use and incorporating new solutions before they are popularised. The sliding walls that Le Corbusier installed at Maison Loucher are a case in point.

Older buildings can, of course, be made to work. Georgian terrace houses, for example, are a favourite of Barbara Weiss of Barbara Weiss Architects. "I never cease to be amazed at the endless permutations that enable you to squeeze out a different plan," she explains.

However, new-build structures are where architects get the opportunity to show just how adaptable to change their designs can be.

Jeremy Till, a professor at the University of Sheffield, which is hosting a conference on flexible housing this month, sees two approaches: hard and soft approaches. Soft use, he explains, implies

neutral, open spaces that can be used in different ways. Hard refers to tightly designed spaces that often rely on sliding partitions and folding furniture to enable multiple use. Flexibility can be achieved both ways, though the hand of the architect may be less apparent in the former "indeterminate" design.

Whether hard or soft, flexible residential architecture has been gaining ground in recent years, appearing in development projects as well as one-off properties. At Greenwich Millennium Village, intended as a showcase for innovative sustainable living, architects Proctor and Matthews located kitchens and bathrooms in the middle of the floorplan, permitting varied use of space around the perimeter. Clever use of sliding walls, which disappear into pockets, enables the apartments to be instantly transformed into one-, two or three-bedroom units. What's more, the panels are acoustically insulated for maximum privacy.

In Harlow, Essex, Proctor and Matthews has designed flexible townhouses for developers Will and Jonathan Moen, who are building a community of contemporary, architect-designed homes on former family farmland. Each home has a separate entrance to the ground floor, so it can be used independently as a work space, or a flat for an older child, a nanny or as an elderly parent.

Also in Harlow for the

Moen brothers, PCKO Architects has developed a four-storey townhouse with a courtyard garden backing on to a two-storey mews on the same plot, which houses a garage at the ground floor and an open floor above for flexible use. The firm has also developed the concept of a "living wall," a dedicated service zone running from the front to the back of a unit and hiding cables, piping, services and storage.

Robert Sakula of Ash Sakula Architects argues that flexibility is best achieved with a "strong neutral framework of space. You have to decide where the kitchen and the bathrooms

Spacious bathrooms enable clients to 'bathe a child, talk to their partner, have a fantastic shower'

are going to be, [but] aside from that you create beautiful spaces of different kinds and all of them large enough or clever enough to be used in lots of different ways."

At one project in east London, for the Peabody Trust, a housing association, Ash Sakula has reversed traditional spatial priorities. "All the spaces that in most houses are big, like living rooms and bedrooms, are small, and all the spaces

that are usually small, like the kitchen, hallway and the bathroom, we made as large as we could." Kitchens need to be big, says Sakula, because, unlike a living room or formal dining room, they can be used by all generations for cooking, eating, entertaining and hanging out; spacious bathrooms enable clients of all ages to "bathe a child, talk to their partner, have a nice time, a relaxing bath or a fantastic shower".

At the top end of the London market, the Transformable Apartment in Soho by Guard Tillman Thomas illustrates the extent to which thoughtful design can result in beautiful but flexible living space. By pivoting two walls, the 90 sq metre residence can be changed from an open workspace with no telltale residential signs to a two-bedroom flat with complete sleeping privacy. A 15 metre storage wall incorporates the kitchen, television and stereo and clothes cupboards. Sliding walls can be adjusted to expose one of three work areas: cooking, washing up or a coffee/drinks bar. A stainless steel table, which can be used for dining or working, encloses a luxurious bathtub.

Clague Architects have reinterpreted the traditional Georgian villa at their Kings Hill project near Maidstone, designing three-storey homes with six bedrooms located on different levels to enable a variety of uses. The main living floor at ground level, where the kitchen and

dining room are located, also includes a room intended as a den or study for adults or an extra bedroom for children or elderly relatives. The living room is on the first floor along with the master bedroom and a study or nursery. The top floor includes three bedrooms, one with an en-suite bathroom for a nanny.

David Birkbeck, executive director of Design for Homes, the consultancy group, confirms that more developers are embracing flexible housing. Changing demographics and family make-ups have prompted solutions that can accommodate divorced parents with partial custody so that an extra bedroom can double as something else when the children are not around. Birkbeck notes that it is space, not technology or a particular design, that make a home work for all types of resident. "My defining measure of flexibility is space," he says, "the more space you have, the more flexible it is."

Still, Sakula warns, homes can only be made to change in so many ways. "People want solidity. They want a sense of 'four walls are my castle', so there are never going to be any totally easy options with housing. There is never going to be a time when a house becomes a simple press-button solution. It's a messy expensive business."

Flexible Housing, University of Sheffield, September 22. Tel: +44 (0)114-222 0338; www.flexiblehousing.org

KEEPING IT EASY

- Design for Homes, tel: +44 (0)8704-163378; www.designforhomes.com
- Proctor and Matthews, tel: +44 (0)20-7378 6695; www.proctorandmatthews.com
- Ash Sakula, tel: +44 (0)7873 9735; www.ashsak.com
- PCKO, tel: +44 (0)20 8861 1444; www.pcko.co.uk
- Guard Tillman Thomas, tel: +44 (0)20-7380 1199; www.markguard.com
- Barbara Weiss, tel: +44 (0)20-7609 1867; www.barbaraweissarchitects.com
- Clague, tel: +44 (0)1227-752050; www.clague.co.uk
- Carden Cunietti, tel: +44 (0)20-7229 8630; www.carden-cunietti.com
- Caroline Paterson Interiors, tel: +44 (0)20-7584 6890
- Charles Rutherford, tel: +44 (0)20-7627 0182; www.charlesrutherford.net
- Helen Green, tel: +44 (0)20-7352 3344; www.helengreendesign.com
- Joanna Wood, tel: +44 (0)20-7730 0693; www.joannatradng.co.uk
- Kelly Hoppen, tel: +44 (0)20-7471 3350; www.kellyhoppen.com
- Taylor Howes, tel: +44 (0)20-7439 9017; www.thdesigns.co.uk