

# Raising the stakes

When the Springetts decided to move, they didn't have far to go – just to the end of the garden. **Dominic Lutyens** on a new home with a view. Photographs **Jefferson Smith**

If they'd ever had a premonition that a super-modern steel and glass house would one day pop into view in their back garden – and that they'd live in it – Ros and Rod Springett would, you'd think, have had a minor heart attack. After all, for years they were living in an elegant early-Victorian home in Primrose Hill, London, complete with view of an ancient chestnut tree. Not a place where you'd expect a box-shaped new-build to be welcome. But then the Springetts aren't fogeys. Until recently, Rod was a graphic designer, while Ros once worked in fashion. 'If you're creative, you never stop being creative,' she says, alluding to the fact that she now makes ceramics.

She could also be referring to the Springetts' decision to move from their Victorian home (which they sold) to the futuristic mews house they now live in – designed by their son Matthew, of architectural practice Springett Mackay, who has been short-listed for this year's Young Architect of the Year award. And when it emerges that the

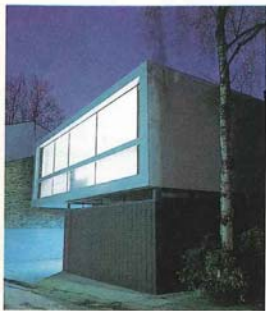
Springetts have a house in County Cork incorporating a 15th-century tower and a modern glass extension, their desire to live in an ultra-contemporary home doesn't seem so off the wall.

But what was the catalyst? 'The chestnut tree had to be cut down in 1999,' says Rod. 'The local authority discovered it had a rotten core. And Matthew and his brother were leaving home. The house was too big for us, and Matthew had the idea for a new house.'

With its cantilevered first floor jutting 4.5m over its street-level carport, the house, seen from the mews, appears to levitate. Despite the building's uncompromisingly modern style, getting planning permission was a cinch. 'The planners simply stipulated that the house shouldn't be taller than the surrounding buildings and that it should have a garden,' explains Matthew.

One neighbour raised an objection about the scheme, arguing it would cause a loss of light, but the council overturned it, asking only that the roof facing the neighbour's house be chamfered slightly to let in more light. The Springetts, on the other hand, trusted Matthew implicitly: 'He knows our taste, so we rarely visited the site to check on things.'

Building began in October 2002 and took nine months. 'It went smoothly because the builders, Harris Calnan, were eager to get more experience with new-builds,' says Kirsteen Mackay, Matthew's business partner, who concentrated on the design side (and who, before that, collaborated with architects Marks Barfield on the London Eye).





Upstairs, downstairs: Rod and Ros Springett, pictured (far left) with architect son Matthew and his business partner Kirsteen Mackay. Their modernist build sits among the stucco and traditional brick terraces of Primrose Hill

The house has a steel frame which rests on a smaller 'podium' base (hence the cantilevered effect). Its construction was overseen by structural engineers Techniker (which has worked with cutting-edge architects Future Systems).

The conventional arrangement of living areas on the ground floor and bedrooms upstairs has been flipped on its head. The site was originally sloping, and the space now occupied by two minimalist ground-floor bedrooms was created by digging up part of the garden. The bedroom ceilings are marginally higher than the level of the garden at the back, which can be seen through a window in each room just above head height. The front door – at the end of the carport and recessed from the street – leads into the heart of the house and the staircase, so you're drawn up to the first floor.

The open-plan living room and kitchen is staggeringly spacious. Light pours in from a skylight and windows on three sides, one of which looks straight down the street. Lack of privacy isn't an issue – the adjacent houses are at right angles, so their windows are at an oblique angle to it. And there's a waist-high ribbon of opaque glass running round the room.

The upstairs space is big, and the 3.8m-long marble dining table and mammoth sofa are suitably monumental. Still, this is no frigid design shrine. 'My parents have always collected crockery, hence all the glass-fronted storage units. Seeing them filled up has brought the place alive,' says Matthew. Quirky pieces include Clarice Cliff plates, bookends decorated with zebras and a lamp in the shape of a monkey holding an umbrella. Elsewhere, there's a chair by Jasper Morrison, which he showed at his RCA degree show.

Ros's abiding memory is of the pleasantly surreal spectacle the house's construction presented to passers-by. 'The neighbours found it intriguing,' she says. 'Children would appear and check up on the house's progress, saying things like: "We'd love to live here."' **OM**

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