

Asleep at the wheel

The best of the London Design Festival

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Perfect plan

How two young architects built and paid for their dream home: page 28

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All our own work: architects Jessica and Robert Barker at their home in Forest Hill

WORTH THE WAIT

Two young architects searched for years for the right London plot to build their own stunning home and two to sell. By **Philippa Stockley**

CRUNCH down the long, pebbled drive lined by 20 young espaliered fruit trees towards architects Jessica and Robert Barker's new home, and it sounds like being on a beach – but this is Forest Hill, off a peaceful street of Victorian cottages. Forest Hill is gentrifying at last, but knowing that doesn't prepare you for the bold brick pillars bearing young climbing clematis, jasmine, grape and hop vines that greet you.

The long drive opens out to a group of three houses set round a sunny, triangular central yard. The yard is criss-crossed by 30cm-wide bands of grass, while the houses, clad in yellow brick interspersed with big, folding aluminium windows, are also criss-crossed, by bands of strong wire mesh up which plants rocket. Between the houses, tall pillars hold up flat entablatures to give a Roman feel.

But if Robert, 40, and Jessica, 35, hadn't persevered for years to find a corner of London to build on, they would never have come across the neglected plot hidden down a long path reached by a rusty gate, and Forest Mews would not be here. In 2008, they were living in Highbury and Islington, looking for somewhere to build. "We mainly looked at auction sites, and registered with a couple of agents." They had lost hope, when an agent showed them a site in Forest Hill, Lewisham, a

part of town they didn't know. "It wasn't for us, but we thought maybe we'd just buy a house here, and put an extension on the back," says Jessica. Since they had come all that way, they walked around a bit. Prices were reasonable – yet they didn't buy, and went back to work at their separate companies.

In autumn 2010, the Forest Hill agent sent them another advert. What they found at the end of the overgrown drive was a decaying one-bedroom Victorian building with rising damp, a "load of Victorian garages held up on Acrow props", an ancient gas mains mounted on an external wall... and the still-unknown promise of 32 party wall agreements. Robert's eyes gleam. "We loved it. It had so much potential."

They got the plot for less than the £500,000 asking price. From that second, they were busy designing. They had been thinking about it so long that ideas tumbled out. The site itself determined the basic design. "The inspiration came from ivy clambering over dead trees, which made beautiful patterns," says Jessica. "We asked each other, can we turn that into buildings?" They did. They also wanted lots of light, privacy, and views.

In February 2011 they got planning permission in just four weeks. But with all those party wall agreements, endless tenders, and the fact that both were work-



"Stone carpet": smart modern flooring flows outside from the living area, which is made light and bright by floor-to-ceiling glass

ing, building couldn't start until August 2012. "We got married three days before our first site meeting," says Jessica. "Immediately after we married, the builders demolished everything we owned."

Then, the 18-month build was complicated by a winter so cold and wet that antifreeze had to be added to the mortar. But once the foundations were done, things went faster.

Each three-bedroom, two-bathroom house is different, but on a common theme. Each is horseshoe-shaped, enclosing its own little courtyard, and pin-sharp-modern, with white walls, a "stone carpet" floor downstairs that flows outside, and poured resin upstairs. Crisp details are everywhere, from Häfele door handles to bright, lacquer-like back-painted glass in bathrooms. In Jessica and Robert's own house, they splashed out on a "happy red" triangular

bathroom with red Krion walls – similar to Corian – and designed a triangular bathtub. The soft grey kitchen was specially made in MDF and its whole back wall mirrored, bouncing light from the floor-to-ceiling living room windows.

The couple's contractor and joiner clearly rose to the challenge, lining cupboards with cedar wood, making pocket doors align perfectly across acute angles – even making tricky circular loo-roll pockets in the red Krion.

The couple moved in on Valentine's Day. "We do this all the time for other people," says Jessica, "but we didn't appreciate the emotional involvement of doing your own building. We fell in love with the houses, and don't want to give them up. It makes me understand our clients so much more." Robert adds: "It's the most exciting thing we've done together so far, and it's very addictive."





The clue's in the décor: the bright and funky utility room



"Happy red": Krion bathroom walls with pockets for loo rolls



Photographs:
Adrian Lourie

WHAT THE PROJECT COST
Plot in 2010: less than £500,000
Cost of entire build: just under £1 million (excluding architects' fees).
Value now: not known, as the couple plan to rent, not sell, the other two homes.

JESSICA AND ROBERT BARKER'S LITTLE BLACK BOOK

- **Architects:** Jessica and Robert Barker at forestmews.co.uk
- **Contractor and joiner:** johnperkinsprojects.co.uk
- **Wire panels for plants** made by dyersmetalmesh.co.uk
- **Plants** mainly supplied by Shannonsgardencentre.co.uk
- **Red Krion** made by porcelanosa.com
- **Undermount stainless steel kitchen sink** by franke.com
- **Resin-bound stone flooring** downstairs and outside by resin-solutions.co.uk
- **Yellow Dutch bricks** by weineberger.co.uk
- **Triple-glazed aluminium windows** by Olsen at olsenuk.com
- **Chair One** by Konstantin Grcic, in living room, from magisdesign.com
- **Spun chairs** in courtyard by magisdesign.com
- **Forest Mews** featured in the Open House London weekend.

Roman feel: grape and hop vines scramble up outside pillars



Minimalist modern: Jessica's bright, practical home studio