



CRANBROOK, KENT

Who are you? Giusy Buckingham, an artist, her husband, Philip, a risk management consultant, and their daughter, Federica, 10.

Where have you moved from/to? We sold a five-bedroom house in Putney, southwest London, to buy our converted four-bedroom east house outside Cranbrook.

Why did you do it? We wanted a light, roomy house with good access to open countryside, within commuting distance of Philip's work in the City. And we were jealous of friends who had got rid of their mortgages and still had fabulous houses. We also wanted Federica to experience an English country prep school. We made a few changes at the house, which is unlisted, including moving the kitchen from one of the oasts into the huge sitting room, and creating a playground.



What do you love? The local farm shops have an on-site bakery, fishmonger and butcher, and I have started my own veg patch – something my London friends laugh at me for. Tunbridge Wells is only a half-hour drive away, and when I need my city fix, I am on the train and heading to the National Galley, which takes me less than an hour.

What do you get up to? I walk every day in the forest or on the beach nearby. I have met a lot of interesting, like-minded people, although I was a bit nervous at first, as I am Italian, and it is terribly English in these parts. I plan to set up an international language-exchange business.

What's not to like? I am in my car a lot – it takes 20 minutes to get everywhere. And the mud is incredible.

Top tip? We used a search agency, Property Turner, which found our house for us before it hit the open market.

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Wiki Dauchan



Council houses have been a godsend for countless Britons, but for the aspirational middle classes, the idea of living in one is horrifying. They conjure up nightmarish visions of post-war bleakness: rising damp, concrete cancer, cheap windows and mouldy bathrooms.

Yet as property prices spiral in the capital, many desperate buyers are contemplating the unthinkable: snapping up a former council house and boldly going where their friends have never gone before. After all, the price can be barely half that of a nearby period equivalent. Many estates are now mixed between public and private ownership, which breaks the ghetto mentality and raises the tone (controversial though this may be). And with a little imagination, a bit of cash and the help of a good architect, ex-local-authority houses can – whisper it – be lovely places to live.

The most striking example of the trend, and the prototype for a council house made cool, is a three-bedroom ex-local-authority semi in Barnes, southwest London. It feels bright, fresh and Zen – probably what the utopian modernist planners envisioned for public housing before it all went horribly wrong. Admittedly, the Castelnau estate feels more garden suburb than Gorbals, but in leafy, genteel Barnes, this pocket of 1920s family homes was once considered the wrong side of the tracks.

When Alex Lau, 40, spotted the house advertised in an estate agent's window for only £380,000 back in 2004, he couldn't understand why it was so cheap, especially as its south-facing corner plot was an enormous 5,650 sq ft. "Then I found out it was on a council estate," he says. He was living in a flat in West Hampstead, but he and his wife, Cindy, also 40, wanted to start a family. (They now have an eight-year-old daughter, Norah). So Lau, a product

designer for an ergonomic furniture company, couldn't afford to be snobbish. To be frank, there was lots to be snippy about. The exterior was pockmarked with cheap single-glazed windows – Lau says the interiors were dark in winter because it was so cold they had to keep the curtains shut. The facade was a hodgepodge of mismatched red bricks, owing to two separate extensions in the 1980s, and the internal layout was "atrocious", according to the project architect, Matt Keeler, director of KSKA. To get to the master bedroom on the first floor, for instance, you had to walk through what is now Norah's bedroom. And the internal fittings were "awful", he says. Nonetheless, the Laus moved in. Then, after Norah was born, they contemplated trading up. Quickly dissuaded by soaring property prices, Lau drew up plans to extend and renovate, but these were quashed by a local planning officer. In desperation, he turned to Keeler, whose work he had seen at Open House London. He expertly navigated the byzantine planning bureaucracy and got the ball rolling in late 2012.

Today, after receiving a £400,000 overhaul, and with an extra 800 sq ft of living space, the previously dark and depressing house feels clean and serene. What was once awkward, dowdy and dated is spacious, stylish and modern, with reclaimed woods softening the minimalism. House and garden flow seamlessly together in a sprawling open plan that is wide, rather than long.

Sliding glass doors open onto gardens at each side. There is no back garden, as another house protrudes from the rear; you'd never guess from the front that this was a semi. From the 28ft kitchen at the east end of the house (which used to be the living and dining rooms), you can look through the new living room at the west end, into the pebbled courtyard and across to Lau's detached office/design studio (formerly the garage).

That living room was created where the tiny kitchen used to be. It was extended by 13ft, with a floor-to-ceiling glazed link indicating where old house meets new. All the windows are now triple-glazed. Another trick to gain light, but not too much heat, was the addition of two "peckboos" bay windows: boxy protruberances with glazing only down the sides, they create a diffused light and make dreamy window seats.

One of these is in the front hall, which was extended by 6ft to fit a grander staircase – a cantilevered open tread made with oak railway ties. Upstairs, they narrowed Norah's bedroom to create a corridor to the master bedroom, but made the new wall a sliding screen, so she can open it during the day to make her room larger. In the master bedroom, the low sloping ceilings were opened up with a rear dormer. For the third bedroom, occupied for half the year by Norah's granny from the couple's native Hong Kong, they put in a lift from the ground floor.

Downstairs, behind the gleaming Corian kitchen, they filled in the side return to make a utility room. Its doorway is another sliding screen, this one in bamboo, with an anti-graffiti coating so Norah can scribble on it using liquid chalk marker – an alternative to a blackboard, which they felt would be too dark for the bright, white room.

The house is full of these inventive quirks, courtesy of Lau's background in design. He crafted an unorthodox



Priced out of period properties, this family bought an ex-local-authority house in southwest London. After a revamp, the move has paid off handsomely – it's been valued at £1.8m. Cor blimey, says Hugh Graham

Keeping their council

GET THE LOOK

- Kitchen design and supply was by DesignSpaceLondon; £29,890 (designspaceclondon.com)
- The grey porcelain floor tiles on the ground floor are Lounge matt dark grey, 60cm square; £29 per sq metre (wallsandfloors.co.uk)
- White kitchen worktops by Corian; from £276 a linear metre (prestigeworksurfaces.co.uk)
- Lift, from £11,950 (stiltz.co.uk)
- The staircase was made from planed oak railway sleepers; about £32.50 a tread (uk-timber.co.uk)
- Ikea Pax wardrobes in hall and bedrooms; from £170 (ikea.com/uk)
- Outdoor oven by Weltevree; £885 (bigfire.co.uk)

SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL

See how a semi on an Essex estate became a theme park. On tablet and at thesundaytimes.co.uk/video

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bamboo kitchen table that breaks apart into two trapezoids – Norah can do her homework in the kitchen without the need to clear the table before every meal, but at big parties, the two tables can be merged. In Norah's bedroom, he built a cushioned hidey-hole/snug into her Ikea cupboards. Outside, he designed a pergola linking house and studio, hidden from the street by a trio of bamboo screens, which pivot open if the Laus want to open up the courtyard to the front lawn; they usually keep the courtyard private, eating pizzas cooked on their outdoor woodburner.

"Often, with extensions, people use the new bit all the time, but the other bit is neglected," Lau says. "You end up with a dark sitting room that you never use. Here, every room has a special feature. It's holistic, so you don't only use the kitchen. We can all be doing different things, but feel connected."

As for the exterior, the formerly drab facade is now striking. The mismatched brick on the east end was hidden with white render. To avoid a lopsided look, they covered the west end in render, too, bookending the original red-brick portion in the middle. Siberian larch

BEFORE



AFTER



cladding was used for all the new sections: the front porch, the bays, the living-room extension and the studio. The larch sections add a crisp modernity and a "unifying thread", Keeler says – and planners like new to be distinguished from old.

Indeed, the planning manoeuvres he performed are as impressive as the finished product. "You can be the world's greatest designer, but if you don't know the rules and how to make them work for you, you're sunk," he says. "Most of what we did here is permitted development – the extensions to the living room and utility room, the front porch – but we topped it up with planning for the larch cladding, the bay windows, the dormers and the 16 sq ft garage extension."

Despite the initial difficulties, Keeler says planners are generally keen to see ex-council houses smartened up. Another advantage of these properties is their sheer spaciousness. "From the 1920s on, council houses had generous footprints and gardens, and space is at a premium in London. And all homes are adaptable."

Several neighbours are now sprucing up their properties, which is a wise investment. Before the renovation, the house was valued at £750,000; an estate agent told the couple it would be worth £1.3m afterwards. In fact, it was recently valued at £1.8m. So are they going to cash in? "My financial adviser told me to sell it and start again, but I said no," Lau says. "This is my base, the place where I experiment with things. I'm a furniture designer. Now I have space to try things out."

He is a groundbreaker on several fronts, then – designing quirky furniture, making a council house cool and doing a Grand Design to actually live in, rather than flog. That's progress.

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