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## What lies behind

**Architecture** | A back garden

extension need not be another big white box. Go for Greek, gothic or Expressionist corkscrew. By *Edwin Heathcote*

Every generation mutilates houses. In the 1970s, we knocked through rooms. In the 1980s, we added Victorian-style conservatories — so hot or so cold they were almost never used. Then side passages disappeared under sheets of glass; houses extruded upwards with loft conversions; basements were dug out and one-time sculleries became behemoth dining rooms, hidden behind banks of bi-folding doors where once there had been gardens.

But in the past decade, the ground-floor extension became the home's Brazilian butt lift — an inflated, faux-sexy rear end. Houses that, from the front, are quirky, historic and distinctive now meld into a morass of marble island units, glazed roofs and Velux windows at the back. These complex constructions strain to turn a jerry-built Victorian developer's terrace into a Californian Modernist box — albeit overlooked by the brick backs and black-painted downpipes of the houses opposite.

Extensions need not be entirely homogenous. There are other ways.

**The ground-floor extension became the home's Brazilian butt lift — an inflated, faux-sexy rear end**

Take, for instance, the rear of an elegant Regency terrace off London's City Road. This extension was inspired by the Choragic Monument of Thrasyllos, a small memorial structure on the Acropolis to a figure we might call a Greek theatre producer from the 3rd century BC.

If that sounds a little pretentious (and, of course, it is), you might want to know that the statue of Dionysus that once sat atop it is now a couple of miles down the road in the British Museum. The monument itself inspired master architects from Sir John Soane to Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

One of the clients for the extension is a connoisseur and collector of architectural drawings, and the proud owner of one by Schinkel himself. So not that preposterous. "I've always been fascinated by the art of architectural drawings," says David, the client, who did not want to give his full name. "And one of the ideas behind the extension was to have a



(Above) James Beazer of Urban Mesh architects built this extension for his own London home, a twisted brickwork folly 'with hints of Gaudí and the gothic'; (left) a south London extension by Sean Griffiths, of Modern Architect, references Brutalism and Pop art — © Juliet Murphy, @ Edmund Sumner

map room, a place to store the drawings I've been collecting for 30 years."

David and his partner Christopher were not, they tell me, looking for a classical architectural practice but they found one anyway in the form of Timothy Smith & Jonathan Taylor. "A glass box just wouldn't have worked," Christopher tells me, "not just for the collections of drawings, but with the house."

Showing me around the extension, which is nearly completed, Taylor says: "I find glass roofs a bit deadly, they give a very flat kind of light." He points upwards, to a complex but delicate roof over the new breakfast room in the extension. "It was inspired by Schinkel, by the draped form of his roof in the tent room in the Charlottenhof Palace in Potsdam [1826-29]."

The roof drapes gently down towards the sides and at its centre is a circular opening which, because of the billowing form, takes on the shape of a heart when

seen from the side. With a view of the fast-moving clouds above, it looks like a classical sky-room by artist James Turrell. It may seem anachronistic, with its references from Greece and Germany, but those were the forms in vogue when this house was built in the Georgian era.

"There was also a lot to cram in," says Taylor. "A bathroom, the map room, a kitchen extension and vaults and we were inspired by the way Soane stuffed things in."

Soane comes up in almost every discussion about London architecture, the magician of limited domestic space and intense architectural expression. This house was built around the same time that Soane was at his best, so the comparisons work well here. There is a coherence to the design, a set of distinct ideas that have been meticulously worked through.

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# What lies behind

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Not too far away is another flat-fronted house from the same era, with another compelling extension. Architect James Beazer of Urban Mesh designed this one for himself. "I would probably have struggled to convince a client to do it," he tells me, standing in his garden and looking at a compellingly strange and beautiful pile of twisted, torqued brickwork that seems to be winding itself into an Expressionist corkscrew.

This is very different from Smith & Taylor's period piece and I ask him how he got it past the planners. He winces. "It wasn't easy," he says, slightly sheepishly. "But to be honest, the next people who move in will probably flatten it and replace it with a huge glass extension."

It would be a damn shame. Beazer's brick folly is a thing of passion, a personal essay on form and the qualities of brick, with hints of Gaudí and the gothic.

"I love the work of the German Expressionists," he says referring to the architects of the early 1920s who built incredible cliffs of brick often with organic, Baltic and medieval flavours. "The playfulness of their use of brick. I think we've become uncomfortable with decoration today. Perhaps property has become too valuable. If it wasn't, we'd all feel more able to take risks."

Sean Griffiths, of Modern Architect (his practice, you see, is actually called Modern Architect) agrees. His design for a south London house is a small extension with big dreams.

"The client wanted a Brutalist extension," he tells me, deadpan. "Unfortunately, we couldn't afford Brutalism, it is

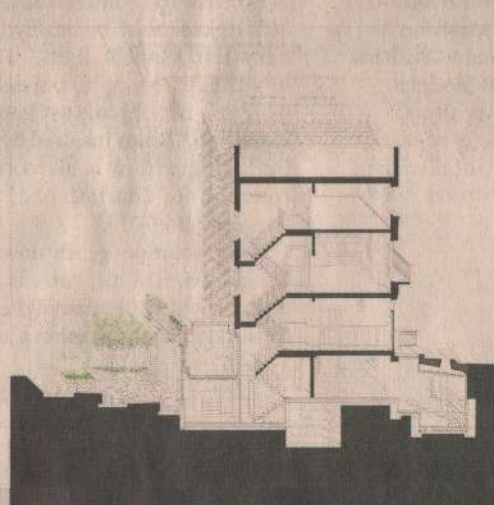
**'An addition changes the whole. The square metres added were minimal but the effect on the house is total'**

something that's out of the reach of middle-class Londoners today. So we pebble-dashed the columns." Griffiths' tongue is lodged well into his cheek here. Brutalism was the mid-century style of huge arts centres, car parks and housing estates — a monumental urban oeuvre not, perhaps, best suited to give a certain appeal.

What initially looks like a generic glass box reveals itself as a piece of Pop art, with those roughcast references to Brutalism and with big, geometric trompe l'oeil tile patterns and wall paintings.

"Ironically, you can often get more design in on a small project like this for a good client than on a big public building and you retain a greater degree of control," says Griffiths. "There ends up being less compromise and, because they are very small, you can afford to be very focused on all aspects and create an immediacy, architecture from close up."

"All architects seem to want to design art galleries. I actually find them quite boring, just loads of white rooms."



Occasionally an extension emerges that alters radically the nature of the whole house it appears to be emerging from. One of the most striking in recent years was Tsuruta Architects' enigmatically named House of Trace. This extension to a typical south London terrace began with the assumption that the

generic, ad-hoc nature of standard rear accretions were worthy of recording in a new architectural form.

This complex, surgical reinvention of the interior revealed the traces of past rebuilding and recorded them in its new form, with architecture becoming a kind of archaeological photography.

The old roofline was retained and revealed in its darker brick, looking like a shadow of itself, while the new extension combines steel and glass in an almost temporary, lightweight aesthetic — as if this latest manifestation were only part of a continuum, fragile in terms of time, acknowledging the inevitability of its doom.

Irish practice Clancy Moore's extension of a Dublin house, meanwhile, also affects the nature of the house itself. "It is an addition," architect Andrew Clancy tells me, "but in adding we are also changing the whole. The square metres added here were minimal," he says, "but the effect on the house is total."

Surely one of the most remarkable of what might seem a rather limited field,

(Clockwise from top) Tsuruta Architects' House of Trace; Dublin project by Clancy Moore; House of Trace exterior; drawing through a house in Hoxton, London, with rear extension by Smith & Taylor; Clancy Moore exterior

Tim Crocker, Fionn McCann



Clancy Moore's reworking of the house is the ultimate realisation of the idea of the way in which we have flipped the domestic interior from a street-facing, formal cage of small rooms into a garden-facing informal arrangement of open, fluid spaces and light. But it has been realised in a remarkable manner.

## How to commission an inventive design

Architect Biba Dow says the best extensions are the result of an open dialogue. Having a finite set of requirements and a rigid plan when you commission an architect is "closing the door to opportunity".

Think about why you've bought your house and how you occupy its spaces. Once you've decided what you want in terms of size — or an aspect such as light or a particular view that you want to emphasise, or a period feature you would like to be referenced — it is time to talk to an architect.

To find your dream designer, Dow recommends consulting specialist magazines, the RIBA Client Adviser service and competitions such as the Architects Journal's Small Projects award. And if that one is not taking on projects, ask them to recommend somebody.

Or there is the more traditional method: "If you see something you like, just knock on the door and ask who designed it."

Meet at your house and have a conversation about it. Try to visit their other projects. But most importantly: "See if you like them."

Do not shy away from awkward topics. "Have a frank conversation at the beginning about budget," says Dow, as this will inform all of the design decisions. "But you can make something original without spending more money."

Inventiveness doesn't cost more."

If you are not an architectural expert, so much the better. Dow creates booklets of inspiration to show clients, which include artworks as well as buildings.

Dow Jones Architects recently designed a house on the Isle of Wight whose main reference was the use of timber in a Swedish folkloric painting from the 19th century. "It's about trying to find the right character for a project."

Lucy Watson

A single bay was demolished at the rear but "its memory", Clancy says, "hung around like a guilty secret" and inspired the counter-intuitive geometry that breaks down the tightness of the plan and generates myriad complex angles, spaces and junctions.

"We begin with conversations with the client," Clancy says, "and everything comes into play. Something emerges from that process, often not what you might have expected. But it is the thing that answers the questions and then all those ideas find their way back into the building somehow in the end."

It is a far cry from the glass box. "Some architects think of an extension as putting a perfect object on the back," Clancy says. "But actually, if you really engage with the lives of the people who live there it becomes an incredibly exotic thing. There is nothing more fascinating than what goes on in a house."

Edwin Heathcote is the FT's architecture critic

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