

HOLDING COURT

Architects and designers have been reawakened to the charms of courtyards – and these urbanely updated oases are now flooding homes with light.

Dominic Bradbury reports





Lhere is something rather magical about secret courtyards and hidden gardens, especially within the private world of the home. For centuries, courtyard houses have been a staple of certain strands of architecture and design around the world, particularly across Asia and the Middle East. They are a common motif in the traditional residences of China and Japan and seen widely in Arabic architecture.

The riads of Morocco and Tunisia are arranged around their central gardens and look inwards, turning their backs upon the world outside. Such urban sanctuaries retain a powerful allure of their own.

Integrated courtyards and atriums were also a staple of classical Greek and Roman architecture and rose to prominence again during the Renaissance and the neoclassical era. Yet somewhere along the way these escapist spaces fell out of favour in the west and, with increasing pressure to maximise every square metre of living space, courtyard houses slipped into obscurity.

Now, however, western architects and designers are being seduced all over again by the many charms of integrated courtyards, weaving them into designs in both town and country. Not only do they offer a private oasis at the heart of the home, they also introduce light and air to the spaces that surround them and forge an intimate relationship between inside and out, through connections to planting within the courtyard and views of the sky.

On a highly practical level, courtyards also serve as sheltered and secure outdoor

rooms that double as summer living and dining spaces, playrooms and inviting areas for entertaining. On top of which, contemporary courtyard houses can offer solutions to many of the key problems that arise during the design and build of new urban homes, particularly with regard to privacy and light.

Roger and Lizzy Stewart, who work in the legal profession, embraced the idea of a courtyard house when they commissioned a new home in London's Battersea. The family had outgrown their previous house and needed five bedrooms and a generous amount of living space. The site they chose came with a number of planning restrictions that preserved the privacy of neighbouring homes. The solution was to tuck the new house – designed by architects De Matos Ryan and known as The Garden House (pictured on these pages; similar projects about £1m) – into its garden setting and arrange the building around a sunken courtyard. The open-plan living areas on the lower storey flow out onto this generous hidden space, complete with planting and an outdoor kitchen.

“We really like the idea that this is a secret house,” say the Stewarts. “The lower ground floor is like this wonderful apartment that no one else knows about, with its own garden and outside space. It feels very quiet and peaceful and in the summer it doubles the size of our downstairs space – we eat outside, read our newspapers out there and treat it as an additional living area.”

“I love how the courtyard seems to hold the city at arm's length,” says Angus Morrogh-Ryan, the director in charge of the Battersea project, who treated the

Left: The Garden House in London's Battersea by De Matos Ryan; similar projects about £1m. Above: the view from inside the house

courtyard as his starting point for the whole design process. “When you descend into the courtyard, the city seems to disappear both visually and acoustically. There is this sense of wellbeing and space.”

Architect Deborah Saunt, founding director of DSDHA, had been looking for a site to build a home with her husband and colleague David Hills and two children for many years. She too found herself with a challenging site (a former orchard in Clapham Old Town marooned between the back gardens of the nearby terraces) with height restrictions. The result was The Covert House (up to £1m for similar projects): a two-storey home woven into the land and bordered by new trees and plants.

Here the bedrooms and a media room are situated on a sunken a level, topped by a glass-fronted pavilion holding the main living spaces. Two modest but vital courtyards introduce natural light and transform areas that would otherwise feel subterranean into welcoming retreats. Saunt used mirror glass on the outer walls of the courtyards to increase the sense of space and light, as well as reflect the planting within these microgardens.

“The house is intended as a case study for unlocking backland sites,” says Saunt, “and the two courtyards play a very important role in its story. The intimacy of the courtyard by the bedrooms is a particular delight for us: an exterior room with this purposeful ambiguity that means it’s a hybrid or transitional space blurring the boundary between indoors and out and bringing this tranquil space into daily life. Leaving the door to the courtyard open on a summer day is a special pleasure. We hear the birds, but no traffic noise at all.”

London property developer Sean Quinn commissioned not just one courtyard house, but two. He found a site on the leafy Coombe Estate in Kingston, Surrey, occupied by a 1960s chalet-style building in a large garden. Quinn commissioned architect Terry Pawson to design two substantial new houses (one of them is pictured below; similar projects price on request) here, one for himself and his family and a second for the market, which has since been sold. Both have six bedrooms, but sit in a conservation area where only two storeys of living space would normally be allowed. Pawson devised an additional lower ground level and arranged each house around a large sunken courtyard, with swimming pool, lounge and gym opening out onto this secret space, planted with a mature silver birch.

“We knew that we were going to have to create a lower ground floor, but we wanted natural light to



Clockwise from left: one of the houses on the Coombe Estate in Kingston, Surrey, designed by Terry Pawson; similar projects price on request. A 1960s house in London’s Highgate updated by Luke Zuber; similar projects about £3,000 per sq m. Three-storey house in Greenbank Park, Singapore, by Hyla Architects; similar projects about £2,000 per sq m. The Jigsaw House in Bethesda, Maryland, by David Jameson; sold for \$2m

reach down into it and we really didn’t want it to feel like a basement space,” says Quinn. “The larger we made this courtyard in the planning stage, the more successful the design became. The fulcrum of our house is very much the courtyard.”

The courtyard also helps connect the different levels and spaces of the home, making it more social. The same is true of the reinvention of a 1960s house (pictured above; similar projects about £3,000 per sq m) in London’s Highgate that is now home to [advert](#) director Rob Sanders, his wife Jemima and their two daughters. The family were drawn to the single-storey home, in a quiet cul-de-sac, by the central courtyard. They commissioned architect Luke Zuber, director at Zuber Dobson Architects, to update the house, making the most of the connections between the courtyard and the surrounding rooms, as well as adding a modest lower level.

“The courtyard was the element that we fell in love with,” says Jemima Sanders. “We had been looking for a house for nearly two years, and as soon as we walked into the courtyard we knew that we had to have it. Luke recognised the brilliance of the design and managed to expand it while staying true to the original idea. When it’s warm, the courtyard really does become part of the living space: we eat, sleep, work on our laptops and lounge out there regularly. Even when the sliding glass doors between inside and out are shut, it still gives the house a great feeling of spaciousness. It’s interesting that on first visiting



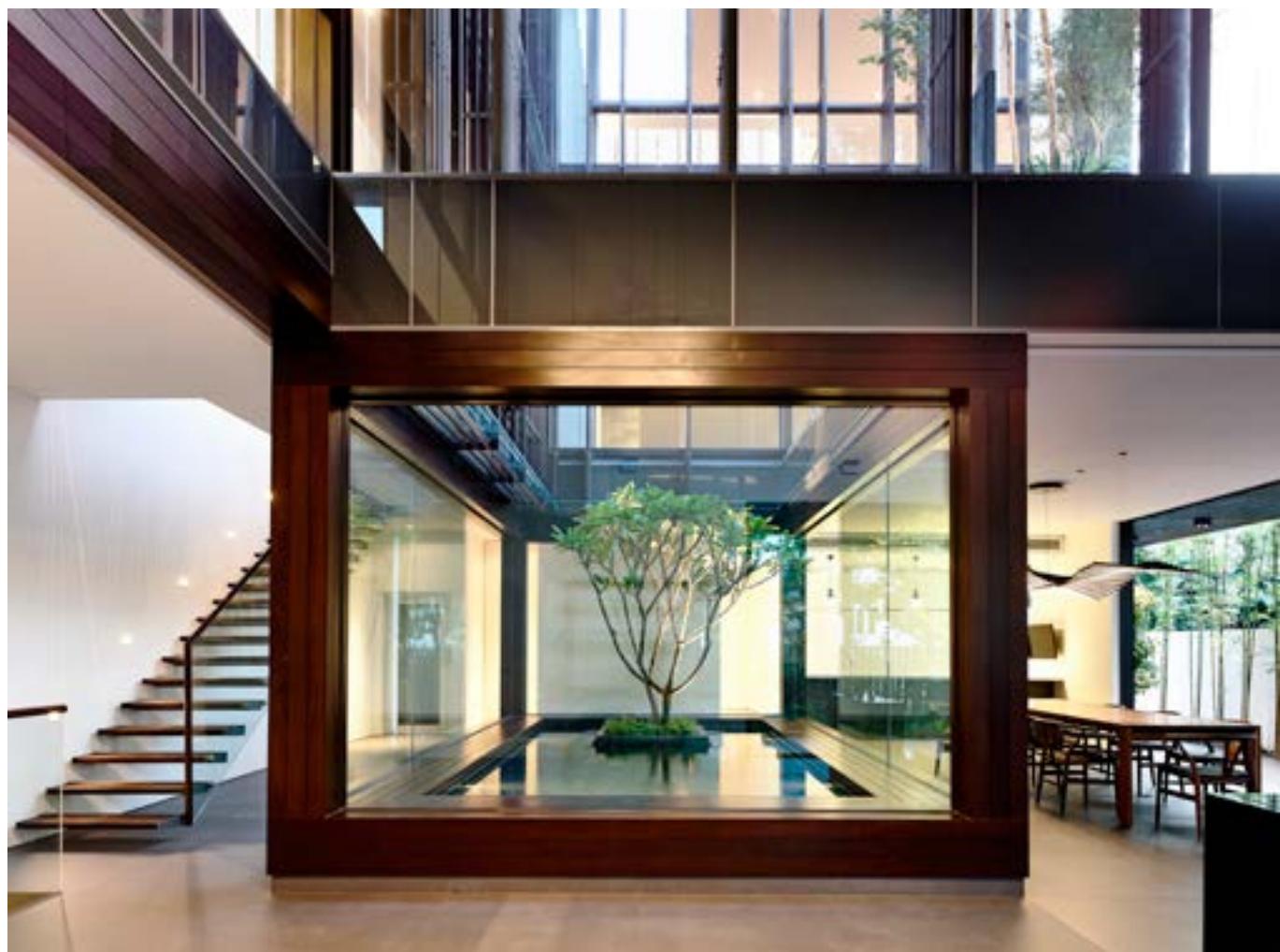
the house, people are always drawn out into the courtyard – it is irresistible.”

Within more complex and built-up urban settings, courtyards can also be used as a buffer zone between the city and the more intimate parts of the home. This was very much the case with a three-storey family home (pictured top right; similar projects about £2,000 per sq m) in Greenbank Park, Singapore, designed by Hyla Architects. The house sits on a tight city site, with a noisy expressway not far away. A central courtyard, planted with a verdant garden, is used not only to introduce nature, but to help “insulate” the bedrooms from the rumble of the urban traffic outside.

“It also allows the bedrooms to enjoy light and ventilation without looking onto neighbouring buildings,” says architect Han Loke Kwang. “On the ground floor, the courtyard has a water-feature pond with a frangipani tree, so it becomes a visual centrepiece for the whole house, and I like the way it relates to almost every room and space, especially the stairs and living areas.”

In the town of Bethesda, Maryland, architect David Jameson faced similar problems with his family home. Situated on a busy street corner, The Jigsaw House (pictured right; later sold for \$2m) – which was originally commissioned by a client, but then bought by the architect himself – is arranged around a central courtyard complete with planting, seating and an outdoor fireplace.

“It is an organic space that feels totally different at different times of day,” says Jameson. “You can feel the



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changing weather even when you are inside. It was about carving away at the interior and creating this outdoor room at the heart of it rather than focusing the house outward on the street beyond.”

Yet contemporary courtyard houses are not purely an urban phenomenon. Designer Wallace Cunningham created The Crescent House (pictured overleaf; similar projects price on request) by the coast at Encinitas in California, a home arranged around a courtyard and a crescent-shaped swimming pool. The courtyard offers a sheltered retreat away from the breezes that sweep along the shore and a semi-shaded setting for the pool itself. It also plays a pivotal role within the circulation of the building and the processional entrance to the main living spaces, which sit within an elevated bridge spanning the courtyard and looking out to the ocean.

“It works so beautifully,” says Cunningham. “The owners of the house are big entertainers, so if they have functions then they will use the courtyard and terrace as a reception room. It creates this sense of space that makes the house seem much bigger than it really is. I always try to use integrated courtyards where I can, as they do give you this enchanted space, rather like Persian gardens or Japanese courtyard houses. It’s about leaving one world and entering another, and the courtyard becomes this transitional space between them.”

Within compound houses too, where the house is divided into a number of component parts, courtyards can offer key moments of transition, as well as valuable outdoor rooms. Architect Thomas Bercy, principal of Bercy Chen Studio, designed Edgeland House (pictured overleaf; similar projects around \$550,000), a striking semi-rural home on the green edges of Austin, Texas, that is divided into two distinct sections – housing the main living spaces and the bedrooms – with a courtyard or “canyon” between them. For owners Chris Brown, a lawyer and writer, and his wife Agustina Rodriguez, a designer and architect, the canyon is a key moment that connects with the swimming pool and nature, while providing a space for entertaining and relaxing.

“We live in a warm climate, so we can enjoy ourselves outside for most of the year, mosquitoes permitting,” says Brown. “We use the canyon as an outdoor room and as our open-air hallway. It has the practical effect of

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compelling us to step outside throughout the course of the day, and I love the way it obliterates the illusory distinction between wild nature and human habitat. It is an essential aspect of what we wanted to achieve.”

Australian interior designer Andrea Moore, founder of Studio Moore, also reinterpreted the courtyard concept – in a rural home for her parents within an 11-acre property in South Gippsland, Victoria. A small heritage house, about 100 years old, was dramatically extended with a major new addition wrapped around a new courtyard (similar projects price on request). The original building contains the bedrooms, a winter lounge and study, with all the primary living spaces located inside the new extension.

“My parents wanted the best of both worlds – the old homestead meets the new addition,” says Moore. “The courtyard evolved for a number of reasons: cross ventilation, blurring the boundary of the interior and exterior, allowing the winter sun to penetrate the house and the flow of the spaces. It is primarily a connecting space and all the windows around the courtyard slide open, which allows the house to open up in many different configurations, depending on the weather and the time of day.”

For contemporary designers like Moore, the courtyard represents an alluring component for homes that seek to connect with nature and forge a close alliance between indoor and outdoor space. At the same time, interior designers are looking again at period courtyard homes and seeing fresh potential and allure. In Marrakech, French designer Romain Michel-Menière has transformed a period riad on the edge of the medina into



From top: The Crescent House in Encinitas, California, by Wallace Cunningham; similar projects price on request. Edgeland House in Austin, Texas, by Bercy Chen Studio; similar projects around \$550,000

a welcoming combination of old and new for hotelier Philomena Merckoll and her family (price of similar projects on request). The house is an extraordinary escape from the bustling city beyond, arranged around a hidden garden planted with orange trees.

“The indoor-outdoor **experience** is what defines living at Riad Mena,” says Merckoll. “To be in the tree-filled courtyard enjoying the sunshine during the day and the sky at night and having the fresh air in the middle of your home is blissful.” ♦

CENTRE OF ATTENTION

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