

# IN MY BACK YARD

An ingenious sunken courtyard has enabled De Matos Ryan to build a two-storey garden house without annoying the neighbours, writes Andy Pearson

**The Garden House successfully conjures up space where none existed before. At the bottom of a garden in Battersea, south-west London, architect De Matos Ryan has created a striking, minimalist two-storey annex that is all but hidden from view in a large, sunken courtyard.** The catalyst for the project was a newly married couple's need to bring two families together in one home, requiring additional space to accommodate seven children. The solution is so successful that from the surrounding gardens the 179m<sup>2</sup>



house appears no taller than the assortment of sheds it replaced.

The subterranean scheme is a clever architectural response to height restrictions imposed by the planners. Another requirement was that the building should not overlook the neighbouring homes. The architect has resolved this by creating a series of blank white facades at first floor

level, which conceal light wells that illuminate glazed screens in the walls of each upper-floor bedroom. In contrast to this solid upper level, the lower floor has expanses of full-height glazing, which open up the living spaces to the courtyard.

Concrete features heavily in this covert scheme. In addition to forming the building's structural

**ABOVE** The courtyard wall and floor finishes appear to continue into the house



**FAR LEFT** The courtyard is sunk far below garden level

**LEFT** A lightwell draws daylight into the upper-floor bedrooms

**PROJECT TEAM**

**Architect** De Matos Ryan

**Structural engineer** Price & Myers

**Contractor** Noga Building Services

**Quantity surveyor** Marstan BDB

**Garden designer** Worsley Designs

frame, it has been used to construct the walls and floor of the courtyard. Here its primary function is to keep both groundwater and the nearby River Thames at bay; the retaining walls are high enough to survive a one-in-100-year flood. "The courtyard is like a swimming pool in reverse," explains Angus Morrogh-Ryan, a director at De Matos Ryan.

The retaining walls were particularly challenging. A conventional solution of sheet piles hammered into the ground using a pile driver would have been too noisy for this site; a quieter

option was available but its cost was prohibitive. So the contractor developed a solution where an auger was used to create a series of holes into which H-shaped king posts were placed. The earth was then removed with a mechanical excavator, and timber sections were progressively slotted between the posts to retain the ground behind. "It was a crafted, labour-intensive solution that was rather beautifully done," says Morrogh-Ryan.

The timbers created a panel against which the concrete retaining walls

could be cast. These are tanked internally to make them watertight. An inner concrete lining was then cast using an exceptionally smooth plywood shutter to create the extremely high-quality finish demanded by the client. The concrete lining appears to continue through the glazing into the house, where it forms the back wall of the kitchen and the countertops.

A similar surface finish has been achieved on the courtyard floor. This too appears to continue inside to form the house's ground floor. In fact both floors are cast using similar pigments, but the internal floor also has underfloor heating embedded within it. The concrete theme continues with the bathroom vanity and bath tops, which are constructed from glass-fibre reinforced concrete.

There is also a concrete bench built into the courtyard wall, from where, on a sunny day, this discreet house and its concrete finishes can be quietly admired.