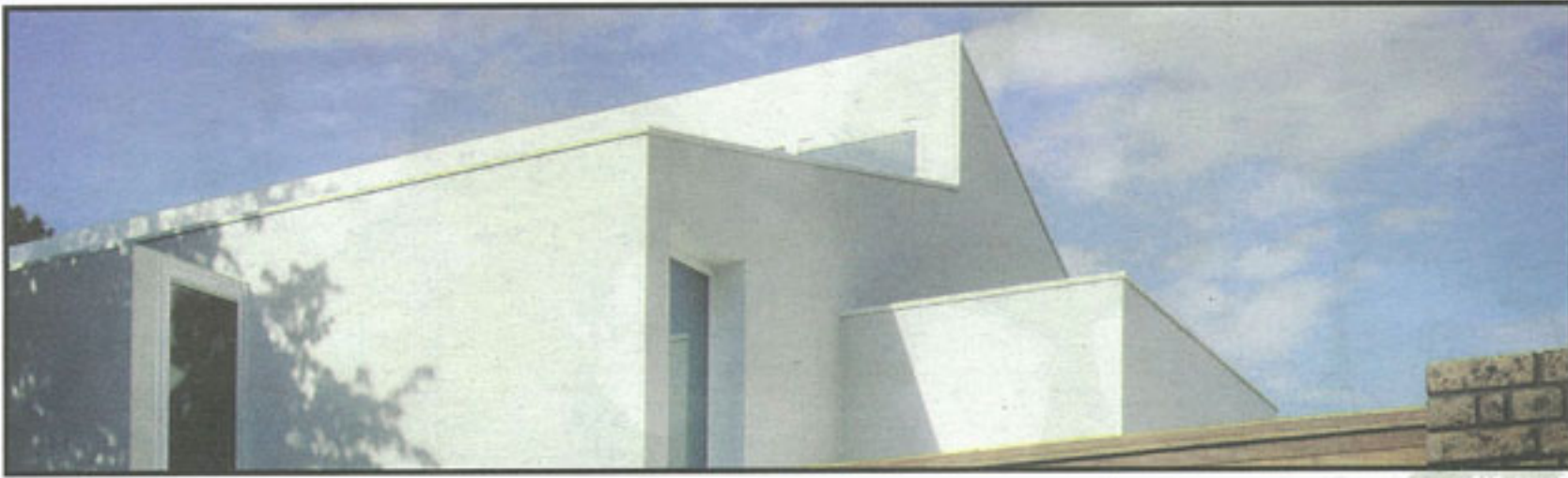


# Architecture



## White magic casts its spell

A new house in an exclusive area of London is for the seriously rich only. But its striking design is rooted in radical socialist virtues of the Thirties, and its open spaces are perfect for communal living, says **Jay Merrick**

There is, in north-west London, a £3.5m home, a glittering, white-tiled property that is a taut exercise in post-Bauhaus modernist architecture. In considering it, a nagging voice starts chipping away, a mean-spirited, wheedling complaint. Why write about bespoke architecture for the exceedingly wealthy? What has it to do with 99.9 per cent of the so-called built environment – and how can we possibly gain anything from considering it?

Ah, the villainous white stuff. Well, nothing changes. We're in the realms of severe modernism, the Thirties kind, the pure white, glassy variety, originally equipped with radical socialist credentials, which sought to bring health and efficiency to the masses.

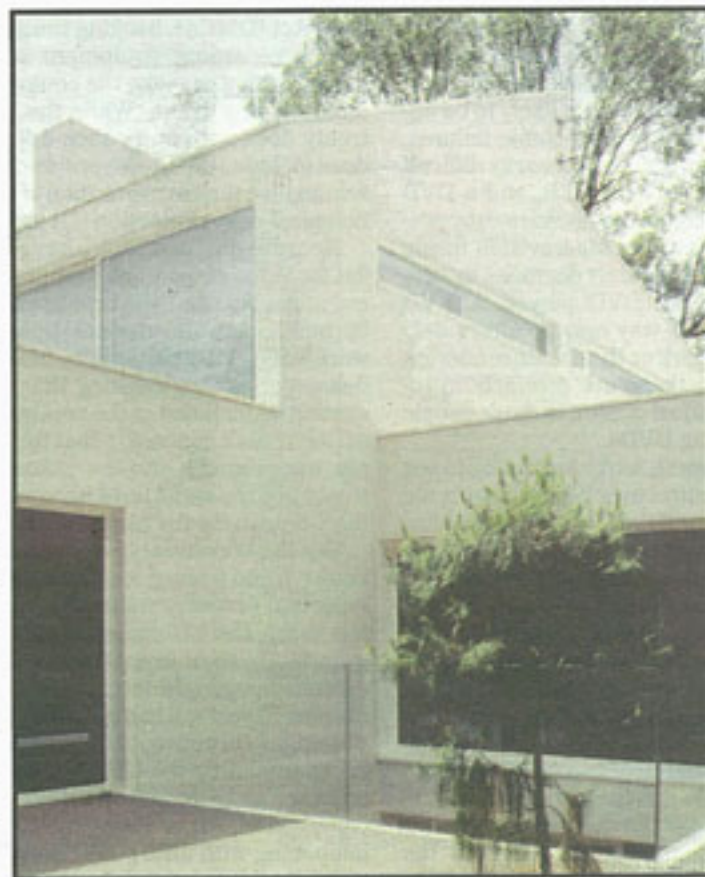
But this doctrinaire architecture also carried its own retro-virus. The pioneering architects who wanted to bring streamlined stucco and long sweeps of steel-framed glazing into mainstream architecture mostly ended up delivering buildings for wealthy clients – champagne socialists with the money to create an exclusive “democratic” housing experience, complete with dumb-waiters and centrally heated discussions about Russian constructivism.

There was always something *other* about this species of modernism, something ruthless that had little to do with Frank Lloyd Wright's luxurious but beautifully weighted architectural compressions and interpenetrating spaces; nor was it related to what passed for Edwardian modernity in neo-vernacular or utilitarian architecture. There was something both naked and officious about Bauhaus design, something that knew better.

It was the nakedness of those early modernist buildings – call it purity if you like – that was, for some, an affront. The

Bauhaus erased many architectural tenets, and rewrote them in severe monochrome. It was – and remains – highly exposed architecture: graphic, minimally detailed, often supremely elegant, but also potentially inhuman. Why did these svelte, streamlined homes and offices sometimes suggest utterly sterile medical experiment units?

It's in this glacial light that we must consider the White House, designed by Allford



Hall Monaghan Morris. And we might as well cut to the chase: they've produced something special – almost outlandishly so. In its search for a kind of perfection, the White House is a direct descendant of the bourgeois modernist houses of the Thirties. One thinks, for example, of *The Homewood*, designed by Patrick Gwynne in 1937, and recently re-opened by the National Trust.

The *Homewood* had everything. It was pre-Thunderbirds *Are Go* modernism, with Gwynne playing Brains, surrounded by crank-operated horizontally sliding windows, a pop-up home cinema screen, bespoke flip-over aluminium work surfaces and a dining-table whose central feature was a multi-coloured mood lighting console.

By those gizmodrome standards, the core virtue of the White House in St John's Wood is quite the opposite. In one sense, it appears to have nothing; in another, it's a demonstration of architecture whose key attribute – wide open inner spaces – takes us back to the idea of space as an emptiness that should be modulated with the very lightest touch. The White House is big, and it certainly possesses a strong physical presence. Yet its very substance is strangely, and rather rewardingly, questionable; and the way the project architect, Paul Monaghan, has invoked this feeling is striking.

The living-room encapsulates the conceptual boldness of the White House. Walking into it is like walking into a strange interzone. We are aware only of the garden, delightfully planted with sub-tropical semi-succulents and striking architectural plants such as *Allium christophii* and *Melianthus major*. The garden is the living-room's dominant feature, flawlessly framed in a floor-to-ceiling window nearly 20 feet high, and almost the same across. The vast double-glazed unit – thought to be the



Thoroughly modern (clockwise from top left):

biggest ever made in Britain – slides aside on silent casters.

There is no inside and no outside here, no sense of enclosure. The garden's powerful presence makes the living-room a surprisingly transient, neutral space, somewhere to pass through rather than hunker down in. The raised fireplace set into one of the end walls seems an oddity: it's obviously too small to have any significant effect on the underfloor warmth of the room. It “reads” as either a romantic gesture, or an ironic atavism with a *New Yorker* cartoon caption: wealthy hominids shelter in cave, huddled around their FT-ignited fire.

But there is an obdurate resonance to the White House. Here is a hugely expensive home in a London enclave dotted and dashed with security cameras and high, electric gates. The owner of the almost-completed house is an international businessman, who does not wish to be named. Yet the house is an uncompromising exercise in physical openness. There is, I suppose, more than a whiff of the Pinteresque about that duality. But if we filter out images of



lean lines and (above) huge expanses of glass; the view from a bedroom over the flowering sedum roof; the rear Matt Chisnall

shambling caretakers and morally bankrupt dinner-party guests pretending not to be startled by the sound of gunfire in the burbs, there's no escaping the decisiveness of the vision delivered by the architects.

Light pours into every room, and the high, white-painted walls amplify it. One of the children's bedrooms looks across the flat roof of the pool annexe, which is hummocked with flowering sedum – a hanging garden, in effect. Even in the basement guest-quarters, light sluices into the bedroom via a sunken patio whose walls are lined with cedar boards. The kitchen is awash with white light from two sides. And the dining-room and living-room can be morphed into a single space: half the wall dividing the two rooms slides away.

Any feeling of a separation of the ground and first floors is minimised: apart from stairs leading up from the entrance area, there's a long, open gallery overlooking the living-room.

If the living-room (and, to an extent, the slate-floored poolhouse) tells the untram-

melled story of the architecture on the ground floor, the master bedroom sets the benchmark upstairs. This suite of rooms is extraordinary in two ways. First, it could be said to be pure *Elle Interiors*: twin changing-rooms whose joinery is straight out of Bond Street; a bathroom whose glistening, effulgent comforts make the word "luxury" seem peculiarly bereft; and a bedroom dominated by floor-to-ceiling glazing. But the core virtue persists: openness. The only hideaway in the whole house is the small, wood-paneled sun-deck enclosure just off this bedroom.

Nakedness and exposure. The point about the White House is that it's making a point. Its luxury – the Jinny Blom-designed garden, the fabulously sophisticated Lutron sound and comms system, the Martin Richman light installations, the Calderesque mobile in the entrance hall – is absolutely subservient to the purpose of the architecture: to produce a house which militates against enclosure or compartmentalisation; a home whose occupants must, by architectural dictat, embrace

communality. Conceptually, the White House is a house without walls – the absolute reverse of a crenulated and crannied Tudorbethan mansion in the stockbroker veldt of, say, Weybridge.

And so, rather against the grain of expectation, it's possible to admire the White House not only as a bold act of post-millennial architecture, but as a thorough homage to Bauhaus modernist archetypes, and the fervent discourse that spawned them. Of course, the default setting still applies. Where is radical modernism for the huddled masses and horny-handed sons of toil? Where, for punters, is the light, the glass, the pure, sweeping horizontal line? Perhaps they're irrelevant. Perhaps sharp-edged modernity can have nothing to do with urban dystopias where everything from accents to aspirations, and senses of reality to pensions, are in bish-bosh meltdown.

More information about Britain's modernist architecture from: [www.c20society.org.uk](http://www.c20society.org.uk)

