

# home



## Glittering prizes

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The Perez family took seven years to build their dream home in north London, left and above

The architects who designed this year's Riba award-winners are reinventing the way we live, says **Dominic Bradbury**

**B**uilding or reinventing your own house is a huge commitment in every sense, requiring more than a little courage. Anyone who has ever done any work on their home knows that it soon swallows up time, energy and passion — not to mention money, plus the inevitable battles with planners and negotiations with disgruntled neighbours.

At the end of these epic stories, the house itself is the main prize — but how rewarding it must be to achieve recognition from the judges of the Royal Institute of British Architects (Riba) awards for all the blood, sweat and imagination.

Last week, Seema and Charles Perez learnt that their home in Belsize Park, north London, was among this year's Riba winners. It's a deserved reward for an unusual project that has taken seven years to fulfil, creating a highly individual family home for Seema, Charles — who works in the fashion industry — and their three children, Noah, 11, Jonah, 9, and Ava, 7.

Their home is a striking contrast between new and old, with an open-plan, largely single-storey communal living space on the one hand — a glass pavilion opening out to the newly landscaped garden and courtyard — and an original late-Victorian cottage on the other. The two elements are

arranged in a U-shape formation, with a courtyard in between and a glass link connecting them.

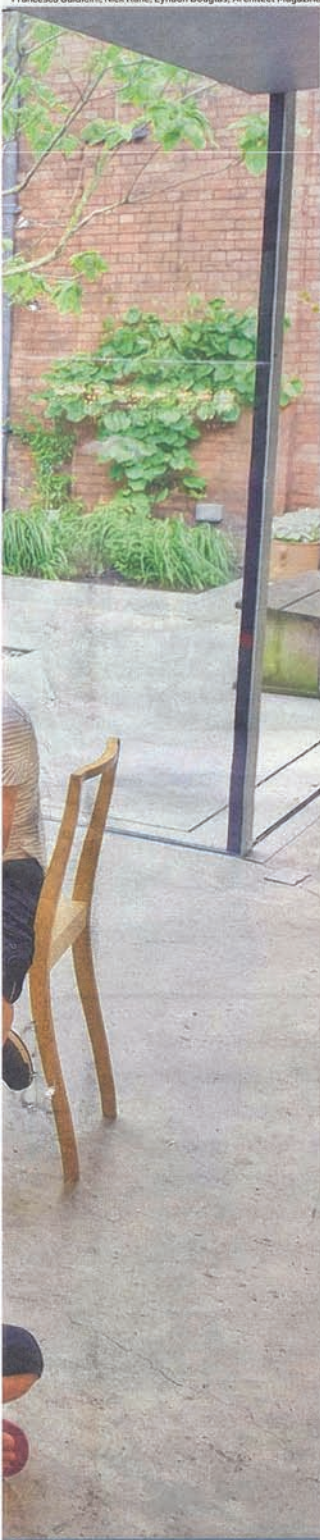
The Perez family used to live in a maisonette across the road, and had long been fascinated by this triangular plot, which had become overgrown while the house was semi-derelict. "Every day, we could see this tumble-down area, and the house, which was empty apart from a friendly squatter," says Seema, who used to work in public relations in the fashion industry. "It had become a curiosity, as well as a bit of a dumping ground. We had always been struck by the idea of doing something with this forgotten piece of land in the middle of NW3 that had such potential."

The small cottage was built as a home for the coachman of Sir Henry Harben, the first mayor of Hampstead, who lived round the corner. There had also been glasshouses and a small market garden that had turned into wilderness. Then, one day, a "for sale" sign appeared and the Perezes decided to buy the site, sell the maisonette and move into a small garden flat next door, where they lived for nearly five years.

They contacted Eldridge Smerin — architects who have designed a number of striking houses in north London — after seeing their first domestic project in Highgate, the Lawns, shortlisted for Riba's Stirling prize in 2001. Having listened closely to the couple's brief,

# Shock of the

Francesco Guidicini; Nick Kane; Lyndon Douglas; Architect Magazine



The House at Piper's End, in Hertfordshire, opens onto a reflecting pool and views over orchard gardens

## "THE BELSIZE PARK HOME COMBINES OLD AND NEW: A GLASS OPEN-PLAN LIVING SPACE AND A COSY VICTORIAN COTTAGE"

Piers Smerin and Nick Eldridge took the former glasshouses as inspiration for the new pavilion, which is juxtaposed with the restored and updated cottage.

"Creating this sense of contrast was always the intention," Seema says. "The main living space would be in this modern, open area filled with light, while the bedrooms would be in the cosier space of the old house, which was remodelled, opened up and extended a little at the back in matching brick."

"Our brief also included a courtyard — because we have always loved them — which they successfully incorporated in the way they wrapped the modern part of the house around the plot. We also liked the idea of an unassuming doorway giving way to the unexpected, and our entrance is very much like that. You come in off the street into this amazing garden, which is really the first room of the house that you enter."

Because the house is in a conservation area, on a sensitive site, gaining planning permission took two years. Then there was another year for the tendering process, and one and a half more for the building work. The planting and trees in the garden itself — designed by Ginny Blom — were a wedding gift from Charles and Seema's friends and family. They married at

the house in September 2007, just a few months after moving in.

"Charles and Seema really put their money into the architecture of the house," says Smerin, whose practice has also picked up a second Riba award this year for another unusual new house — in Highgate Cemetery. "It's not about expensive finishes, it's about creating an amazing family home from an unused building. Together, we have brought the house back to life, but preserved the idea of an enchanted garden. The neighbours have come round now they have seen the garden reinstated, the newly planted trees and the restored exterior of the Victorian house."

Tony Chapman, Riba's head of awards, says that the judges — who give a total of 97 prizes in a variety of categories — are looking for buildings that work for the people who use them. "They have to be practical and energy-efficient, but they should also give something to the environment, both aesthetically and in terms of enhancing the neighbourhood," he says. "The awards also encourage and reward imagination in terms of interpreting what the client wants and giving them more than they wanted."

One architect whose imagination is clearly healthy is Niall McLaughlin, who picked up four of this year's awards. One of them is for the House at Piper's End, in Hertfordshire, which he designed for friends and clients Jimmi and Liz Bradbury and their daughter, Kim, 14. McLaughlin had known the Bradburys for years: the two men went to university together, and Jimmi later worked as quantity surveyor on McLaughlin's first commission.

When the Bradburys bought a small 1850s home and outbuildings down a lane, surrounded by fields, they initially thought they would extend and update



Pencalenick House, in Cornwall, is on the market for £3.5m. Top, Eldridge Smerin's unusual design in Highgate Cemetery

the house. When McLaughlin and the planners started talking, however, the limitations of the original house became clear — especially its poor insulation and build quality. The planners were responsive to the idea of replacing it with a new house that could be better oriented and more environmentally friendly, as well as a striking piece of architecture.

"A few neighbours thought we should keep the original house, but the planners were quite excited about getting a modern, eco-friendly building on their patch," says Liz, a teacher and parish councillor. "When we realised we could build our own house, we both said we wanted something individual, with open spaces. I love it — it's so peaceful and calming."

The house, which has four bedrooms, is designed around a central double-height living room that opens out to a terrace, a reflecting pool and views over the orchard gardens. A large and dramatic canopy helps to soften the effect of the midday sun on this glazed side of the house, while the opposite side of the building, with the entrance area, is clad in cedar. The house has a wood-chip boiler and solar panels on the green, sedum-coated roof.

The Bradburys spent just over £500,000 on the original house in 2001 and £640,000 on the build — slightly more than they had planned, due to the rising price of steel. It is a flexible space, with sliding screens that partition off parts of the house for extra privacy when needed. There is also an element of calming minimalism, partly inspired by the time the Bradburys spent living in Asia. Most important, the design of the house is suited to the way the Bradburys want to live.

The same is true of many of this year's other Riba winners, which are

set apart by their bespoke and sensitive nature. These are courageous houses, but behind them is a warm and productive working relationship between architect and client, crucial to a truly successful and imaginative home.

Among them is the house that John Parrey architects, based in Lymington, Hampshire, built on a Buckinghamshire river bank for his clients, Steve and Dee Hind. To cope with the flood risk — which, last winter, briefly turned the building into a dramatic island — the contemporary, timber-clad house is on stilts, offering mesmerising views from the main living space across the waterway and willow trees.

Other equally innovative winners include a decaying second world war anti-aircraft gun emplacement near Whitstable, in Kent, which has been turned into a comfortable weekend retreat; Gap House, a four-bedroom eco-home squeezed into a space just 8ft wide between two listed buildings in west London; and Pencalenick House, a dynamic modern home of glass, stone and timber near Fowey, in Cornwall (featured in Home last September). It was built for Johnny Sandelson, the founder of GuestInvest, the buy-to-let hotel operator that went into administration last October.

✉ Eldridge Smerin, 020 7228 2824, [www.eldridgesmerin.com](http://www.eldridgesmerin.com); Niall McLaughlin Architects, 020 7485 9170, [niallmclaughlin.com](http://niallmclaughlin.com). See all the winners at [architecture.com](http://architecture.com). Pencalenick House is for sale for £3.5m with Savills; 01872 243200, [savills.com](http://savills.com)

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# new