



Clutter-free zone

Two small children and not a plastic toy in sight: **Gillian Rowe** visits a house which dispels the myth that young families and minimalism cannot coexist. Photographs by **Luke White**

To most people with small children, the thought of living in a stark, white, contemporary family home is simply beyond their imagination. In fact, it's almost laughable.

Yet somehow the architects Abigail Hopkins and Amir Sanei manage to share a state-of-the-art living space with two small children without drowning in clutter. There are no toys littering the floor, no Ikea storage boxes lurking in the corners, and yet this is not an exercise in childhood deprivation. Their house in Islington, north London, is simply proof that modern design is not just for urban singletons more obsessed with aesthetic detail than how we actually live.

The reason the couple chose this particular house was because it was a complete wreck and they knew they would be able to design a space that would fit entirely with the way they wanted to live.

Hopkins, 36, and Sanei, 35, started renovating in 1998; newly married, they knew that at some stage in the near future they would start a family together – Sanei already had a son, Zac, now

nine, from a previous marriage. They met when they were both working at the practice of Hopkins's architect parents, Michael and Patty Hopkins, creators of such modern landmarks as Glyndebourne Opera House and Westminster Underground Station. At the time of buying the house the couple had also recently set up a practice together and were planning to work from home. Space, then, would be tight in the flat-fronted, early Victorian, three-storey house with just two rooms on each floor.

To provide them with that extra space they came up with an ingenious and radical way of occupying the whole of the ground floor, both inside and out. The result is a stunning ground-floor redevelopment, with an extension that surrounds the entire rear garden producing a clever, effortless flow of cooking, dining and family spaces that focus on an open courtyard.

'The main driving force for the extension was that the garden was north-facing and was very small: we knew it would never get any light other



Above Hopkins and Sanei designed an L-shaped extension, with the kitchen acting as a corridor to the children's playroom. **Right** deep drawers along the length of the kitchen offer vast amounts of storage, while the mirrored work surface adds to the sense of uninterrupted space





than at the far end. We thought, we own a plot of land, so let's live in it; let's put a room at the end of the garden where we can get the maximum out of the light,' Hopkins says.

The living-room and dining area, which were created from the original building, are connected to the playroom at the far end of the extension by a long galley kitchen. The new living space projects out from the house to form an L-shaped enclosure, and all the internal space looks out from three sides through floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors on to the courtyard. Floors here, as throughout the house, are covered in white rubber tiles. 'It does tend to be a "shoes-off" house,' Hopkins admits, 'but we hardly shriek if friends don't kick them off when they come in. Actually, with the odd scuff mark and a bit of bleaching from direct sunlight, the floors are starting to develop more variation and a really nice character.'

To add to the seamless flow of space, there are mirrored worktops in the kitchen reflecting the white concrete-block walls. 'It was our intention to create as big an open space as possible. The worktops are quite deep but because they are mirrored it doesn't seem like a huge solid mass, and the reflected blocks make it look like the wall continues round from the playroom - it doesn't break up the space.'

The house is white throughout and also includes a grown-up living-room that takes up the upper ground floor, and two bedrooms and

a bathroom making the best use of the roof space. The project took more than two years to complete, and along the way the couple had two girls, Hana, now three, and Nina, 20 months.

As with any young family, money was tight and the project took longer than expected. 'We are like most couples in that we didn't have all the money for the project at the beginning. And I don't know any architects who don't end up living on site in their own homes. It was a classic scene, one that I actually grew up with, of children wandering around on concrete floors,' Hopkins says.

Having survived the ordeal, their greatest success is in creating a child-friendly environment without compromising on the design of the project. 'I think home life would be much easier if we all had open-plan living,' Hopkins says. 'When children come and play here you can tell they live in a series of small rooms because there's nothing they like more than running through the room at full speed and sliding on the rubber floor in their socks. It's the open nature of the house that we wanted to create. We wanted to have most of the living on one floor,' she adds.

As Hopkins glides through the kitchen, cleaning the worktops with a chamois leather, the answer to how the house stays so tidy suddenly starts to emerge. 'Food, food,' she says, pointing at each of the units, 'general, general, toys, toys, toys and more toys.' And there they are, hidden away behind huge pull-out drawers that run the length of



Above although the majority of the house is dedicated to modern design, Hopkins and Sanei decided to keep original features such as the Victorian shutters in the upper-ground-floor living-room. The Aluminium Group armchairs are by Charles and Ray Eames. **Right** against a stark, white backdrop, a traditional Iranian kilim, which was a present from Sanei's parents, is teamed with Le Corbusier armchairs and a leather Butterfly chair by Knoll





The custom-made, floor-to-ceiling mirrored wardrobes seem to double the size of the master bedroom. **Below left** the architects and owners, Abigail Hopkins and Amir Sanei

'It does tend to be a "shoes-off" house, but we hardly shriek if friends don't kick them off on arrival'



the kitchen. Larger toys remain at a distance in the playroom. 'It gives the girls some independence. They can see us through the glass and feel quite secure and all we can see from the living area are nice bright colours which seem quite delightful, not a sea of toys under our feet all the time.'

It's a relief to hear that it's not always spotlessly tidy. On the day I visited a baby's changing mat was lying on the worktop in the playroom, while Barbie dolls, architect's plans and a recipe for apple walnut muffins were all scattered on the dining table. But with such spare, restrained lines as a backdrop, it's only a matter of minutes before aesthetic calm is restored and any doubts that a minimal interior can double as a family home begin, like the children's mess, to disappear.

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Abigail Hopkins's address book

Glazed sliding doors Comar Architectural Aluminium Systems (020-8685 9685 for stockists)

White rubber flooring Dalsouple (01278-727733; www.dalsouple.com)

Underfloor heating Devi Electroheat (01359-242400; www.devi.com)

Mirrored work surfaces STA Refurbishment Services (020-7652 1502)

White Dry Ice paint Crown Paints (0870-240 1127; www.crownpaint.co.uk)

Furniture Century Design (020-7487 5100)

Lighting Flos (020-7258 0600)