

Backs to the future

Many British homes appear identical from the front but as more of us embrace modern architecture the view from behind is very different

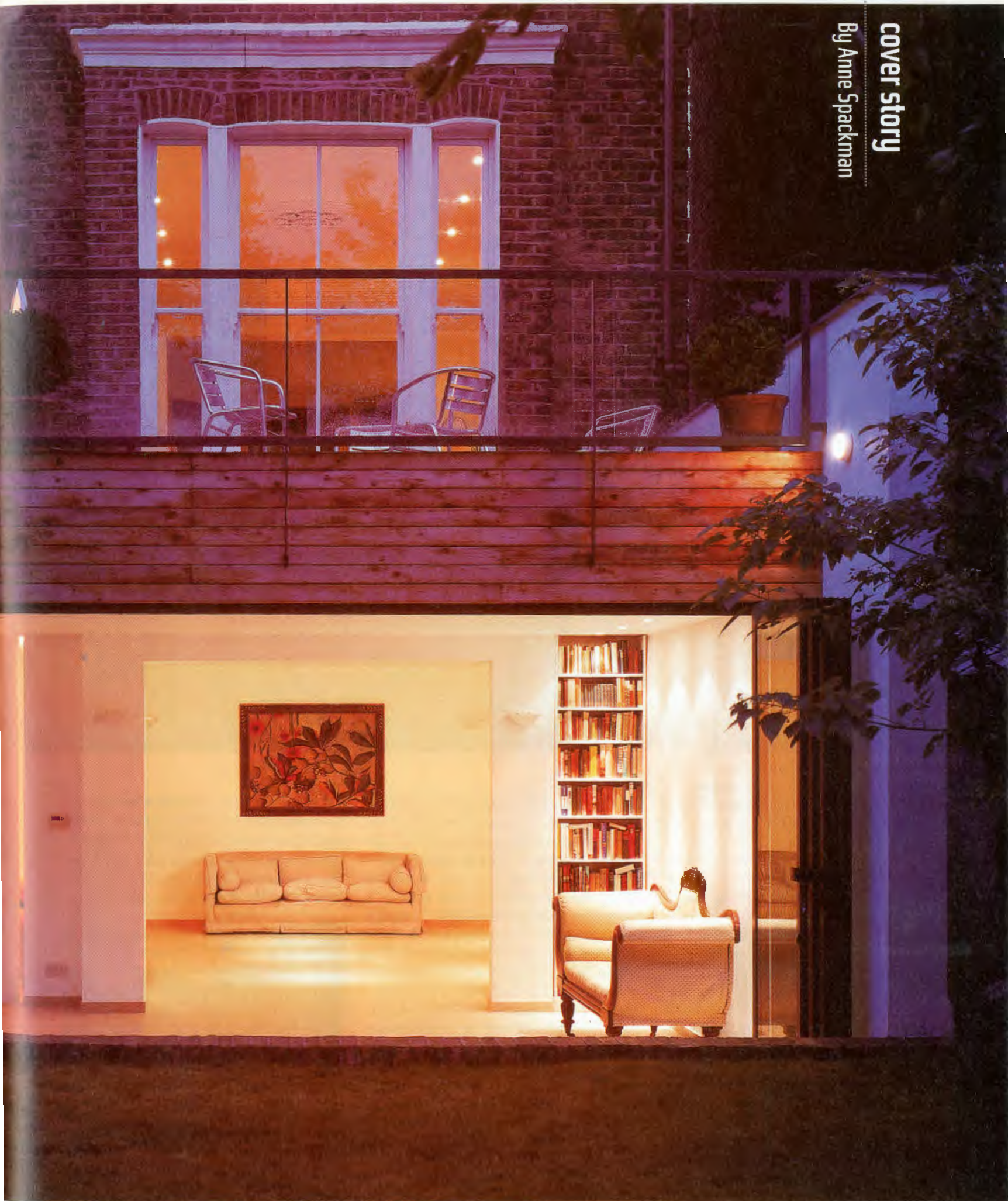
Architectural magazines generally feature British houses only in order to condemn them. Articles punctuated with examples of cutting-edge design in Denmark or the Netherlands include a standard British housing estate by way of miserable comparison. Architects seeking to impress their peers get out of the sector as soon as possible. Why oh why, they ask, can't the Brits love modern homes?

It seems they can – with one proviso: that the modernism is hidden from view. Contemporary architecture is creeping into British housing, but it is coming in through the back door. Period terraces, which offer a homogenous façade to the street, look increasingly different from behind. The rear view of brick-framed windows is giving way to high walls of glass, as private home-owners respond to the limitations of leading a 21st century existence in



cover story

By Anne Spackman



a 19th century space. This peculiarly British compromise suits planners charged with preserving traditional streetscapes and the neighbours in whose name they act. One marketing guru believes it is time developers followed suit. Hamish Pringle, director general of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) and co-author (with Marjorie Thompson) of *Brand Spirit* (John Wiley, £12.99), believes there are sound commercial reasons why the mix of old back and new front is the future for British domestic housing.

Pringle says period property has a powerful emotional appeal, which new homes have consistently failed to match. In recognising the virtues of the old, the public is responding to centuries of successful evolutionary development, rather than just nostalgic impulses. Old buildings also have the cachet of history, the sense of belonging in their particular place. Their very survival reinforces that claim and enhances their appeal.

There are equally sound reasons why people who have paid a premium for an old home then have to knock out the back and replace it with something more efficient. The challenge for architects and developers, according to Pringle, is to create properties that satisfy the holy trinity of emotional, aspirational and functional demands.

The British antipathy to modern architecture stems

principally from the 1960s form of concrete brutalism that swept aside all previous tradition. Too extreme for most people's tastes, it led to the heritage backlash, which saw the resurgence of Victorian conservatories and the worship of all period features. That phase seems to have come to an end. Whether it was due to the creation of monuments to mark the Millennium or new lottery-funded public buildings or the virulent spread of Ikea, public interest in contemporary design certainly took off at the start of the new century.

Architects have found more customers, with increasingly radical ideas, knocking at their doors. Whereas their European counterparts might want a completely new house, the British are more likely to want a new back on their old one.

One firm of London architects that specialises in this kind of work is Thomas de Cruz. Its founder sees this compromise as a natural response to the ugliness of 60s housing and the inefficiency of old homes. After 100 years of building a hallway with a staircase

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and doors leading off into three rooms, he believes the public is ready for a more modern interpretation of house design reflecting the way people live. "It is far easier to sell a house with a big contemporary space on the back, where people cook, eat and watch TV," says Peter Thomas de Cruz. "If you add a conservatory, you get a few extra feet of disconnected space; if you raise the ceiling and open up the walls to the garden you create the perception of far more space and people respond more emotionally to it."

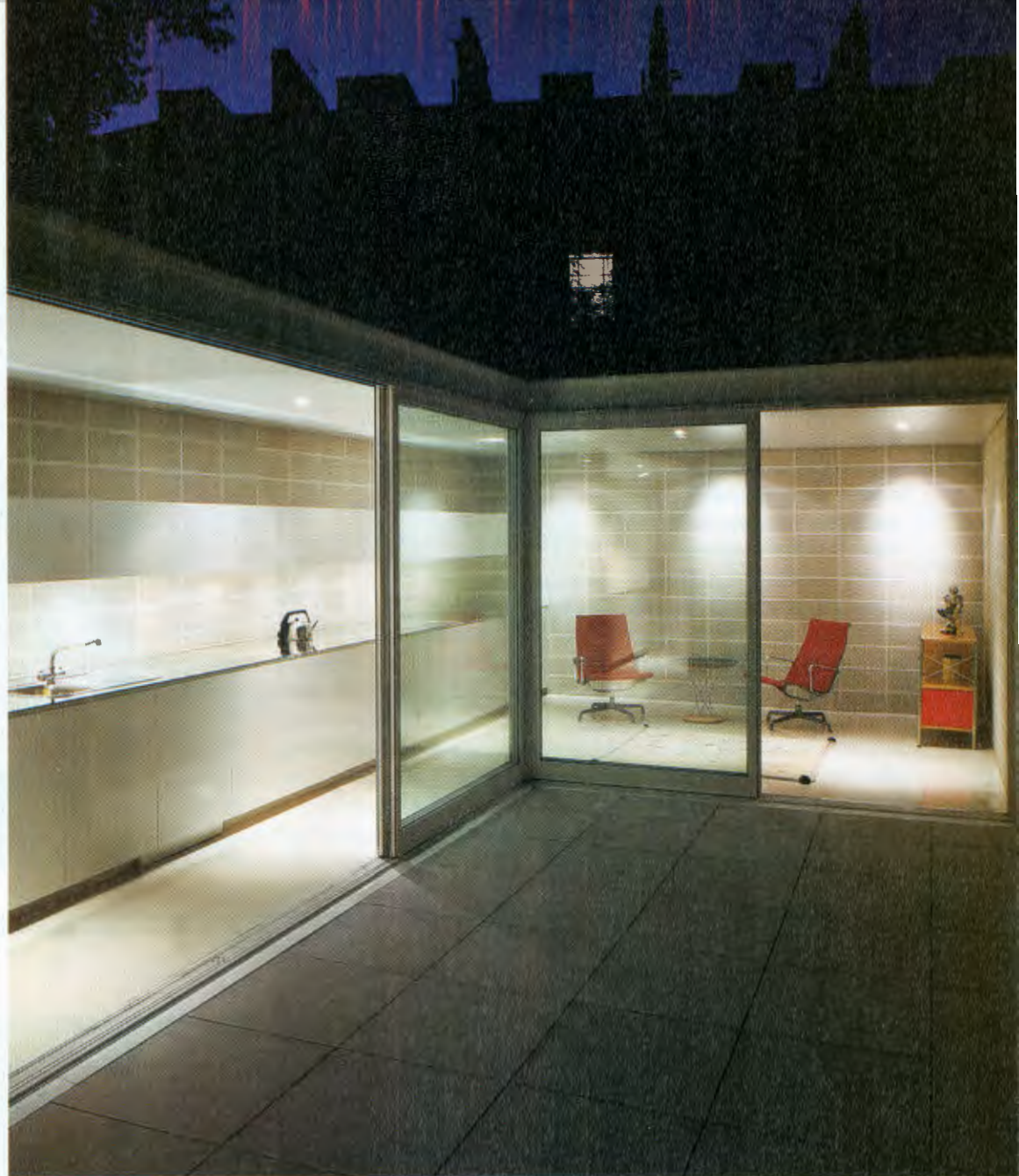
One of his clients is Hamish Pringle's colleague, Bruce Haines, the president of the IPA. He lives in a classic suburban house in the west London borough of Ealing. Classic, that is, from the front. The back of the house has been transformed by a high, glass-walled extension, designed to provide communal living space for Haines' family and his wife's parents.

When the work was first completed, Haines said he wanted the whole house to be like that. After a few months, he decided it would be too sterile. "A warm corner is necessary," he says. "Where we are, in suburbia, it is the right mix."



According to recent research from strategic marketing consultancy the Henley Centre, this architectural division of old at the front and new at the back reflects what is going on inside our homes. Most households still prefer to present a traditional face to their guests, in their entrances and their main





social room. The computers and other electronic gadgets, a regular part of modern life, get tucked away in the less visible back of the house. "It is the modern equivalent of hiding televisions in cabinets," explains one of their consultants, Alice Huntley.

Evidence for the commercial potential of mixing old and new comes from the upmarket developer, Northacre, which has been practising the Pringle philosophy in Kensington and Chelsea. Chief executive John Hunter believes the appearance of the old, coupled with the convenience of the new, equals the best of both worlds for buyer and seller. His belief has yielded Northacre the highest average pounds per sq ft values of any developer in London.

At The Bromptons, a recently completed scheme in South Kensington, Northacre did its classic mix of building new properties behind the red-brick façade of an existing building and adding new buildings in the same style at the back of the site. Buyers paid an average £850 per sq ft to be in the original buildings, compared with £650 per sq ft in the new. Their premium bought more than just historical

authenticity. "If you can take the old building away and replace it with something new, as a developer you can't resist the temptation to squeeze more in," Hunter admits. "You never get the same hierarchy of rooms; the ceiling heights come down. We are as guilty of that as anybody."

His latest scheme on the former King's College campus in Chelsea extends the idea of building new behind old to the entire site. Visitors enter from the King's Road between the columns of an old brick wall, crunch over a gravel drive leading past two retained listed buildings and pass under an old stone arch before arriving in what is essentially a development of new homes. They absorb the historic character of the site and the grandeur of its entrance long before they meet a salesman, who has the relatively one-dimensional task of convincing them of the merits of buying a new home with all mod cons.

Had they come in at the modern, Fulham Road end of the site, their perception would be completely

Old meets new in the mirrored roof extension, left, and the kitchen, right, of a private home in Dalston, north-east London, designed by Sanei Hopkins Architects

different. It was for this kind of marketing expertise that the main developer of the project, European Land, brought in Northacre.

Hunter says his method not only produces higher prices, but faster sales rates as well – which holds true for most, but not all of his schemes. Quick sales reduce some of the risk – and the costs – in what is a very risky industry. If this sounds an obvious trick, it is not one exploited by the vast majority of property developers in the UK. Some might use the thin excuse that they have no historic references to work with – though, as Northacre has shown, a little authenticity can go a long way.

If that genuinely is the case, says Hamish Pringle, they should fake it. Why not distress the materials, he asks? Why not create instant gardens that look like they've been there for 40 years, as they do at Chelsea Flower Show? "If you're doing repro, do old repro." If that improves the emotional appeal of new homes, the aspirational demands could be met by using

standard modern marketing devices. Here, the fragmented house-building industry is light years behind other sectors.

Pringle points out that car-makers use advertising constantly to reinforce their customers' decisions about choosing a particular brand. Supermarkets employ celebrity chefs to endorse their food. Meanwhile developers are still publishing basic product shots of the houses they are trying to sell on specific sites.

Given the antipathy of the architectural world towards residential development, attracting celebrity endorsement might seem impossible. In fact, it has already started. Three apartment blocks on the Thames in central London are being designed by three of the UK's leading architectural practices: Montevetro, on a former flour mill site, by Lord Rogers, is already complete; Albion Riverside, by Foster and Partners, is coming out of the ground and Terry Farrell's practice has been retained to convert the Lots Road power station in Fulham. The emergence of this trend might



The Bromptons, right, and work under way on Observatory Gardens, both by Northacre





suggest that “old front, new back” is merely a staging post on the road to fully contemporary domestic architecture, that it is only a matter of time before the modernist tide sweeps through the front door.

That idea has few takers. Dominic Grace, head of national new homes for estate agents FPD Savills, who advises on schemes across the UK, points out that these are flats, rather than houses, being built in

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neighbourhoods with no residential tradition, both of which make buyers – and planners – more open-minded about their external appearance.

Houses are a different matter. “Whether in London or the country, people have deeply ingrained ideas of how a house should look and work,” he says. “When I look through Architects’ Journal or Building magazine I see schemes in other parts of Europe that are fantastic in terms of system-building and use of energy, but I cannot see myself choosing to live in

them or selling them to other people.” That does not necessarily mean we are stuck with mock-Edwardian semis, however. Period architecture does not have to be executed in “period” materials. Stucco can be replaced by stone; brass by nickel.

This is the way John Hunter would like to move forward. He sees house façades in future becoming more contemporary in terms of materials, rather than form. One of the developments in his pipeline uses Portland stone instead of stock bricks.

That may work in Chelsea, where buyers can afford million-pound extras, but what about the mass housing estates planned for cheaper parts of the country? For the moment they would do well to get contemporary architecture as far as the back door.

Thomas de Cruz says it is more a question of commitment than of money. Raising and lowering ceiling heights to create a cosy hall and a dramatic living area is not expensive. Nor does it cost much to fit a deck in the garden at the same level as the kitchen floor and put sliding doors in between, thus opening up the back of the house.

“The key for architects is to make it cost-effective for developers.” **FT**

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