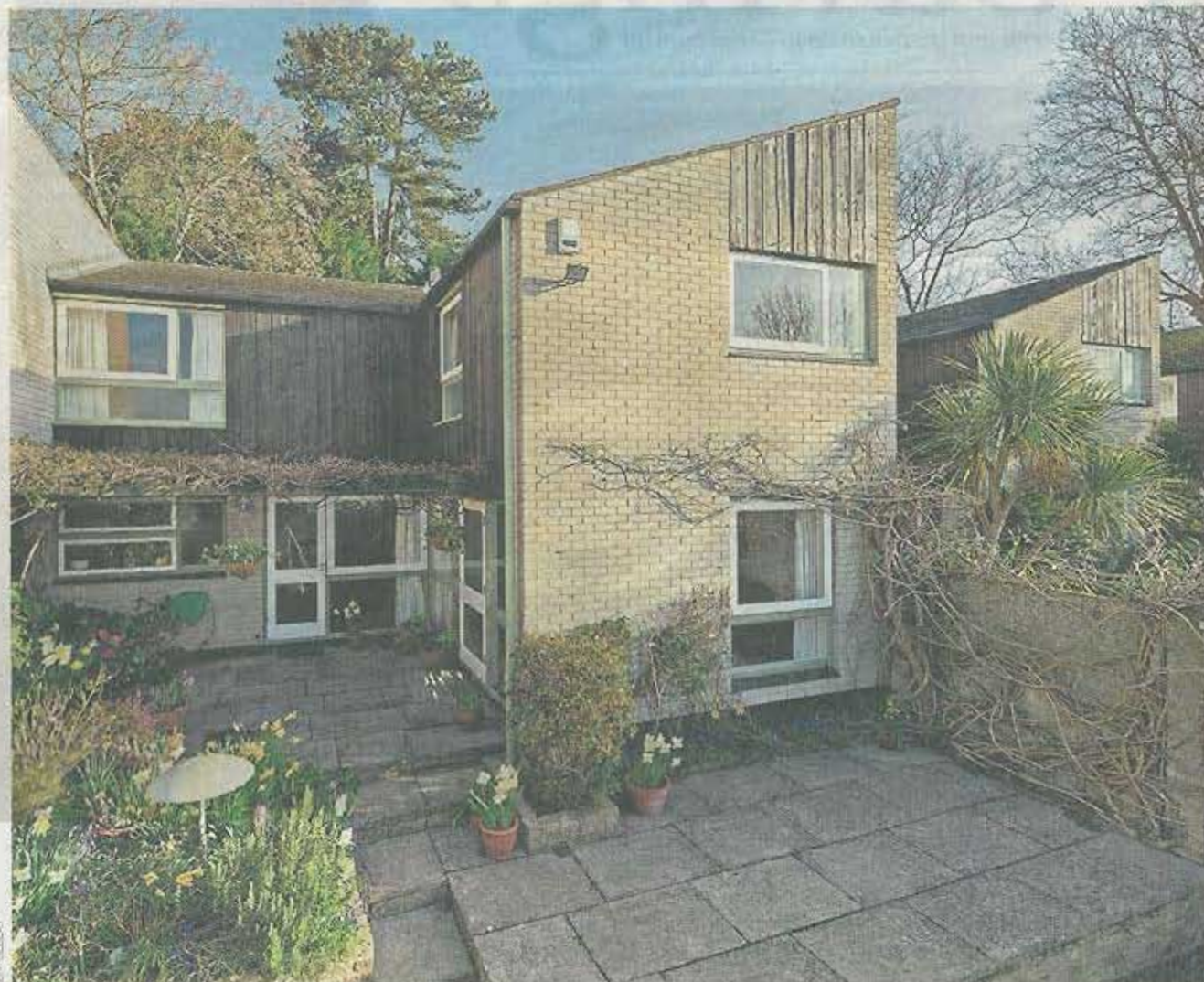


## PROPERTY



Tranquillity: this three-bedroom Span house in Cedar Chase, Bucks, is available for £490,000; Esther and Peter Holford, right, have renovated their home in a modernist style, inspired by mid-century design

# The extraordinary, ordinary house

'Span' homes are mini modern masterpieces that are attracting a cult following. **Zoe Dare Hall** explains why

**D**otted among the multimillion-pound Georgian mansions on Blackheath's Cator Estate in south-east London are rows of small, boxlike houses that attract devotion and distaste in equal measure.

To the uninitiated, these Span houses – designed by the architect Eric Lyons from the late Fifties to “span” the gap between soulless housing estates and what he considered isolating detached houses – can look like flimsy, utilitarian post-war constructions, uniform in size and design and lacking the beauty of their period neighbours. But to many, including plenty of architects, they are homes to cherish.

“They reflect a more idealistic age – elegant houses and apartments with light, open spaces set in beautiful landscaped grounds which encourage a strong sense of community,” says Albert Hill, founder of the architecturally minded estate agency The Modern House (020 7704 3504; themodernhouse.net), which regularly has Span houses on its books, including a three-bedroom house in Cedar Chase in Taplow, Bucks, for £490,000 and a two-bedroom apartment in

Blackheath for £480,000. The Cator Estate was particularly appealing for Span as it had many bomb-damaged houses with huge gardens and it was home to one of the company's founders, Leslie Bilby.

“Span were very good at finding great sites. They are usually slightly off the beaten track, tucked away from main roads in the quietest corners of a neighbourhood. Whenever I enter a Span estate, I am always impressed by the sense of tranquillity that the landscaping and the occupants create,” says Hill.

For Alan Berman, founder of Berman Guedes Stretton Architects, the sense of light, space and calm on a Span development is unbeatable. “Span has all the qualities the UK much later came to love about Scandinavian design – the simple clear lines, the order and the peacefulness. It's a perfect background for contemporary life.”

Lyons, who was Span's chief architect, designed about 2,000 properties in London and the South East, from estates with just a handful of houses such as Foxes Dale in Blackheath to New Ash Green in Kent, with 500 homes.

They have certain signature features in common, from the design of the properties –



Blank canvas: no-frills interiors allow for all sorts of styles

including large floor-to-ceiling windows, hung tiled or white, timber-clad facades, mono-pitch roofs and open-plan interiors – to the layout of the estate with car-free areas and communal lawns to promote neighbourly chat.

For families, the bright, open interiors of Span houses and the sense of being in a cocooned, car-free community (garages are usually in blocks away from the housing) is attractive. “It's hard to find anywhere as light and sunny as a Span house. You feel as if you are living outside because of the big windows and views of trees in every direction,” says Esther Holford, 36, who

lives on the Cator Estate in a three-bedroom Span home.

Inspired by Palm Springs' midcentury architecture, Esther and her husband, Peter, have fully renovated the house in modernist style, including a handmade walnut kitchen, solid oak floors and light fittings that evoke the era. Now they have three young children, they are squeezed for space and have put their house on the market for £790,000 through The Modern House. “We want a bigger version of this, which doesn't exist, and everything else seems so dark in comparison,” she says.

Span houses come with

standard-issue two or three bedrooms, but they have a Tardis-like quality, thinks another Span owner, Colin Hughes, who has lived at Marsham Lodge, a small Span estate in Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire, for nine years. “All the houses are of a similar size and ours is L shaped, with the longer arm extending from front to back. It makes the house seem large when viewed from the inside – much to the surprise of any visitors,” says Hughes.

Their lack of frills inside makes Span houses a blank canvas for all sorts of interior design styles, from faithful midcentury to contemporary. A more extreme redesign can be difficult, though, due to restrictive covenants. Typically, a residents' committee – with every owner holding a share and paying a monthly contribution – will oversee exterior decoration and estate maintenance.

“Apart from replacing the original windows, there is little that can be done to the vernacular. In Blackheath, a lot of Span houses have extensions to the rear or side, usually allowing for a large kitchen/dining area leading onto the garden, but I'm only aware of one property that has been dug down to create a

show-stopping bedroom suite,” says Elliott Walker, manager of Hamptons International in Blackheath. “Owners tend to enhance the interiors rather than creating more space.”

Their architecture may be an acquired taste, but the locations are invariably sought-after – Marsham Lodge, points out Hughes, is within a short walk of Gerrards Cross's shops, station and common – so Span houses have traditionally provided a good-value alternative to older houses. “The location, communal spirit and cooperation of all residents means houses are always sold in a matter of weeks,” says Hughes.

In Blackheath, the price gap between Span and alternative family homes is narrowing. “Until two or three years ago, Span attracted people who were out-priced on period properties locally, but now they are almost on a par with period or modern homes of a similar size,” says Walker. “Last year we sold an unextended three-bed house for £700,000, which set a new Span price record in the area. With limited housing stock under £1 million, we don't expect Span's popularity to wane.”