

THE MEANING OF LIGHT

One of London's best architects is on a mission to transform the city's often dark and narrow properties into bright, uplifting spaces. By **Kate Salter**Photographs by Tim Soar



ooking at the sunlight streaming in through the huge expanse of razor-sharp rooflights in the building on the left, you'd be forgiven for thinking we're in southern California, or perhaps somewhere even more exotic. But each of the buildings on these pages are in London, creations of one of architecture's rising stars, Phil Coffey.

That you can be described as a rising star at the age of 42 says something of how long it takes to establish a successful career as an architect, but Coffey and his studio have made a name for themselves transforming London's often dark and narrow period houses into buildings so light, spacious and airy, they seem to belong somewhere else altogether. "My first thought on any project is "'Where's the sun?'," Coffey says. "The sun makes spaces fresh and makes it feel like the building is alive."

Creating more light was at the heart of a radical approach to the home he shares with

Left: Folded House, a project in Stroud Green, north London, involved extending a house on an awkward triangular site

Far left: The carved oak staircase of the Modern Mews project with its polished concrete floor that seamlessly forms a modern open fireplace on the ground floor

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Below: Modern Terrace, Coffey's own home, was completed in 2008 and won *The* Daily Telegraph Best Renovation Award. The lack of partition walls downstairs gives an unbroken view to the garden. There is a glass staircase that brings light from the skylight above into the centre of the house his wife in north London. A house in a row of Victorian terraced houses in Highbury had captured their hearts, but the small two-storey building was dark inside and had low ceilings. To buy the house Coffey had to borrow £7,000 from his parents "which was probably their life savings," he says. "I told my wife Tamsyn we had bought the house in my wedding speech."

Coffey realised the only way to get the sense of light and space he wanted was to start from scratch. The original façade was left in place but almost everything else was demolished. "About three months later my mum and dad asked to see the house. We opened the front door and there were just two party walls and the sky. My mum fell to her knees and said 'you bought a house for £400,000 and you've knocked it down?'."

Now, though, there is a 14-metre view to the back of the garden, and when you stand at the bottom of the staircase, which is partly glass, you can look up and see the sky. "So for a house which is only 100 sq m it feels like its 150 sq m because of where your eye can go," Coffey says.

Coffey says that in London, period and modern can coexist well, and they often have to. "An awful lot of the housing stock in London is not related to the way we live now. The ways families live is changing," he says. "With young families, the kitchen is now the heart of the home so you need more open-plan space. But it's not a matter of trying to rip out all the character of the house. That sense of place and what made them beautiful we keep."

Creating light in a dingy Bayswater mews house with no windows at the rear was another challenge. In the Modern Mews project, nominated for RIBA's House of the Year and winner of the RIBA London Award, Coffey and his team decided to keep the external walls but completely remodel the interior. A new staircase, so beautifully carved it doubles as a piece of sculpture, was put in the middle of the house to rid it of its dark corridors, a new glazed roof let in light from above and glazed landings drew light into every floor.

Even in the trickiest of sites, Coffey can eke out daylight. Hidden House, a one-storey





Right: The Modern Detached house in Harpenden, a newly built property in serrated brick and charred black timber, took inspiration from the Arts and Crafts homes in the area



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Left: Hidden House, a two-bedroom, one-storey house built above the old prison vaults of the Clerkenwell House of Detention, where the rooflights allow a view of the sky. The project won the RIBA London Award, was shortlisted for RIBA's House of the Year and appeared on *Grand Designs*





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Left: Coffey's Modern Detached project, a new house built in Harpenden, has a contorted glazed threshold at the back which helps to bring the outside in and creates shading for the south-facing sliding doors that lead onto the garden

house which was again nominated for RIBA's House of the Year and featured on Grand Designs (it also won the RIBA London Award), was on the site of a caretaker's shed above former prison vaults, once the Clerkenwell House of Detention. Not only was it a conservation area, but the tiny site was overlooked on both sides by residential buildings. "Housing is a big issue in London," Coffey says. "An awful lot of the new housing stock is on large sites where you can put large amounts of units, but there are a huge number of small, difficult sites across London which can be transformed into homes for people and I think Hidden House is a very good example."

Coffey thinks the challenges of designing modern buildings in

London has meant the city's architects have had to raise their game, and it is paying dividends in terms of British architecture's reputation. "The level of intensity of London leads to a level of intense thinking in design," he says. "The London brand goes a long way in foreign markets and there's a huge kudos right now for British architecture."

It is not just residential projects in London that occupy Coffey's time. Already completed is an award-winning research centre at the Science Museum, a new library for the BFI on the Southbank and a huge office complex in Qingdao, China. Upcoming projects include the redevelopment of Holborn library, a building next to Somerset House, a residential

tower in Surrey Quays and an art studio in Bermondsey.

Coffey has an infectious optimism, visible in his lightfilled creations, and a belief that architecture can transform people's lives. Connecting people to the outside can serve a bigger purpose, he says. "As a young-ish contemporary architect I care about the planet, and for me it's incumbent on today's architects to connect people more to their environment in a very simple way, so that they care more about it not by putting windmills on the roof, or talking about thermal ratings, but actually do what architecture is all about: creating a sense of place and connection to your environment."

coffey architects. com

Left: The attic bedroom of Coffey's own home in north London. A rooflight lets light into the whole house from above