



Me and My House Cedarwood

Neil Swanson's home was a 'House of the Year' in 1960.
Photographs by Phil Sayer

It was a *Women's Journal* competition that picked a scheme by Gerald Beech and Dewi-Prys Thomas and paid for it to be built in leafy south Liverpool. Beech and Thomas both taught at Liverpool University's School of Architecture, but did not normally work together. The idea was that their four-bedroom House of the Year could be a prototype for future estates but, while this never came to anything, it survives as a remarkably intact one-off, never significantly altered, and still retaining many of its original interior fittings. It was seen by over 66,000 visitors who queued for entry during its four-week show period, and featured in the *Guardian* (in the 'Mainly for Women' section) where it was described as 'not exactly open plan, but with screens and glass doors to subdivide space' – it was progressive, but not too revolutionary.

Neil Swanson and his family have lived here for nearly twenty

years and still love it, though when the children were small the roof terrace was out of bounds – look at the handrail! Their children clearly survived such hazards, and the eldest is now reading architecture at the Mackintosh School of Architecture – something his parents say is perhaps due to the subconscious impact of the house, and the way its design gently reminds its occupiers of its thoughtfulness. As originally intended, it has provided flexible accommodation which has adapted to the family's differing needs as the children grew up.

Upstairs and downstairs have very different characters. The ground floor is constructed of brick, faced with white Tyrolean render. Windows at this level are expressed as punched holes, emphasized by splayed reveals, 'a bit like Ronchamp', suggests Neil. The fixed glazing and separate wooden opening panel below the front living-room window are a Corbusian quote too, and there are panels of coloured glass in the staircase



Previous pages: sunlight is reflected from the pool on to the ceiling of the south-facing living-room. Above, the front door and cloakroom pod. Right, the timber-clad first floor cantilevers over the masonry and glass walls below on four glulam beams

wall further referencing Ronchamp. But there are also Scandinavian influences, and Neil sees reflections of Aalto's Villa Maria in the timber cloakroom pod and staircase.

In contrast to the solidity of the ground floor, the first floor is a braced timber balloon frame, resting on four laminated timber crossbeams. These run front-to-back, and their ends project at each main façade, where they are covered with neatly-folded copper caps. When the Swansons bought the house, one of these beams had failed and the structure had slumped three inches, causing joinery to distort and doors and windows to jam. Perhaps because of this, other viewers saw no future for the house – most were just interested in the land as a development site to squeeze two new houses on. But the seller – who had owned it from new – was so fond of it that she was prepared to wait for them to finalise the purchase, rather than see it demolished.

Neil recalls that they replaced the failed beam with a new one with a metal fitch plate in it, sounding very blasé about what must have been a stressful operation: 'The house was jacked up on acrow-props, and ten burly Scouse lads just fed the replacement into the very narrow slot – we shaved 1mm off each dimension so it would slide into place.' A band of clerestory glazing between the beams adds to the impression of the upper floor almost appearing to float, while the first floor windows are expressed as slots left in the cedar cladding – placed with a structural freedom that allows them to wrap around external corners and to be positioned exactly where a view, or a shaft of light, will have most impact.

Two items complicate this basic concept; one is the vertically timber-boarded pod, which both shelters and subtly emphasises the front door (and contains a cloakroom), the other is the chimney stack, which rises adjacent to the timber box, rather than cutting through it.

Apart from rewiring and replacing the failed underfloor





Clockwise from above: the sheltered garden and pool seen from the house; the timber-panelled landing leading to the roof terrace; the living-room with Magistretti armchairs and lamp; the kitchen and dining-room separated by a sliding door and reeded glass panel; the suspended staircase with timber-lined wall and bust niche

heating with radiators, there was little else major to do. The low pyramidal form of the roof, hidden by copper-clad parapets, had worked well, and all the interior timber was in good condition. There are red cedar architraves and panelling to the stair wall, and Douglas fir ply is used both structurally and as panelling on the landing, where it is sanded back to a soft texture. The exterior cladding (cedar again) is original, and not bad at conserving heat. Neil slightly regrets that at some point it has been stained dark brown: 'When we have to replace it, we'll let it silver naturally.' The smaller windows have original double glazing, but Neil has no plans to replace the single-glazed sliding glass panels on the ground floor, accepting that extra-thick curtains to keep the heat in are part of the deal when you live in a modernist house of this date.

Neil says that the Milan-born architect and designer Vico Magistretti is 'a bit of a hero', and likes the fact that the upholstery of the 1973 Maralunga sofas and chairs in the living room can fold out easily, adapting to change like the sliding panels of the house itself. The white plastic table and domed Atollo lamp were also designed by Magistretti.

Neil is a landscape architect, and greatly admires the mature garden's relationship to the house. The pool is placed close to the house to reflect winter light inside, while the birch trees provide summer shade. The hard surfaces are simply but cleverly designed: 'Look at the band of gravel beneath the first floor overhang,' he says, 'that's put there because otherwise drips would stain the paving.' The path to the front door uses experimental bricks made from compressed slate waste mixed with concrete slabs and pebbles. Local red sandstone was used to make a low seating wall which leads the eye towards the two grassy mounds which gently interlock in the middle of the garden. Their curvaceous shapes hide the boundary and suggest that the garden could go on forever.

