

MAJESTIC FAMILY LIVING

PRACTICAL FAMILY LIVING DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN COMPROMISING ON STYLE, AS ARCHITECT MIKE COOPER EXPLAINS

WORDS ROSALIND SACK



Tucked into the hillside and nestled among the trees, these four majestic glass-fronted family homes almost look like they were always meant to sit there, proudly surveying the land. Grand and impressive, yet sympathetic to their surroundings, the stunning Bronlei Woods development by Kilpark Properties in the wealthy Surrey village of Bramley is a masterclass in blending practicality and flair – four three/four bedroom functional family homes that don't compromise on style.

In recognition of this, the development recently won the Best Family Home prize at the *Evening Standard* New Homes Awards, which celebrate excellence in the new homes sector in London and the Home Counties.

Project architect Mike Cooper of MC2 Design reveals





that the key to designing a successful family home, which works on both a practical and an aesthetic level, is flexibility. And the contemporary Bronlei Woods development – with houses that bear a strong resemblance to the famed flatpack German Huf Haus – offers that in abundance.

'All bedrooms have en-suites, so there isn't a queue for the bathroom in the morning,' says Mike. 'We designed it so the master bedroom suite is on the top floor, so parents have their own living quarters with their own balcony right at the top of the house, where they can be separate from youngsters who might be listening to music or socialising with friends. Then you have that common living area floor just beneath them – a terrific social space that connects the two different bedroom levels, where the whole family can come together and interact with each other. And the double height of the room gives a fantastic sense of space.'

He adds: 'The living space then connects with the rear garden, so there is a terrace at the front for you to throw open the doors onto and go outside.'

'I'm always very conscious that houses have souls. It's very important that you can walk into a house and there's a positive feeling about the building. It's also important that you can find your way around the house; that you can flow around it in a logical way. And I think we've achieved that.'

Being mindful of the environment was also a major factor in the design. Not only do the houses back into the hillside, they are surrounded by ancient woodland and look out across the valley at the front.

Mike explains: 'The whole idea was to try to have that relationship with the outside space. The traditional classical types of houses that get built in Surrey villages tend to have sash windows and very classical proportions. But at Bronlei Woods, we weren't restricted by that, so we were able to include a lot more glazing. Which means that when you're in the living area, and looking out through the trees, it almost feels like you're living within the canopy.'

Yet the surrounding woodland was also one of the major challenges of the design because all the ancient trees on the site have a tree

protection order on them. So Mike and the team had to erect the houses, while also preserving the mature trees that surround them.

The aspect and gradient of the site also threw up plenty of difficulties: 'The levels of the site were challenging and that took careful design on both the architectural front and structurally because the houses hold back the hillside in a sense,' Mike tells us.

A series of clever details combine to make the houses work seamlessly with the environment – from the positioning of the driveway and car park, to the materials used.

'The site is set back from the road and we wanted to preserve the landscaping at the front, so we took the access road to the side of the site so it didn't impact on the view out from the living room and just see a sea of cars scattered all

over the front would spoil the fantastic vista and lose that impact. So we've tried to preserve that woodland setting by adding an underground car park behind stone gabion walls,' explains Mike.

'What we didn't want to see was concrete retaining walls or traditional brick, so we chose a pallet of more contemporary materials, like the gabion stone wall and the frameless glass balconies. So there was this seamless wall between the inside of the

house and exterior woodland setting that the houses are within.'

Mike has also tried to apply the external ethos to the inside of the house, so they complement each other. For instance, you'll find full-height glazing in place of the walls down the side of the staircases to give the illusion they are floating.

The houses all have access to the ancient woodland behind on their title deeds – another element that makes this such a special place for families and children to thrive. And, with families now starting to move into the properties, Mike explains that the outside space took as much careful consideration as the inside of the buildings in order to make it family-friendly.

'There aren't many sites these days that nurture the old-fashioned sense that children can go outside and explore,' explains Mike. 'If houses and their outdoor space can help children connect with their natural environment again, I think that's really important. At Bronlei Woods

'We designed it so the master bedroom suite is on the top floor, so parents have their own living quarters'



you have that area at the front with artificial grass – that podium deck level – and the rear gardens, so there are different areas where parents can monitor younger children, but also allow them a bit of freedom.

‘We also didn’t want barriers between the inside of the house and the setting, so we used that structural glass in place of fences, which is a nice way of providing safety without feeling like a physical barrier.’

The abundance of glazing throughout the Bronlei Woods homes does come with a certain lack of privacy, yet all the windows have been designed so they can have blinds and some feature switching glass that turns from clear to opaque at the touch of a button. But to take away the sense of openness that the glass creates does tend to defeat the purpose somewhat. And there is a very definite purpose.

‘The benefits of being able to flood the buildings with light are there for all to see. It’s so lovely to be in a bright, sunny environment and, even on rainy days, the homes don’t feel gloomy. So if someone is staying at home looking after a family, hopefully they won’t feel as isolated. Anything that contributes to wellbeing is so important,’ says Mike.

Another side effect of having all the transparent glazing is being able to see and interact more with the neighbours. At Bronlei Woods there’s no hiding behind the garden fence or pretending you’re not at home when the doorbell rings!

‘We’ve almost lost that sense of community – often you can live somewhere and never get to know your neighbours,’ says Mike. ‘My family live in France and there’s a far more sociable family feel to life there, which is so nice, and hopefully we have that here at Bronlei Woods too.’

It’s clear that what Mike and his team have achieved at Bronlei Woods is so much more than just practical living and adventurous design. Both the inside and outside space of these homes offer freedom, they help children to reconnect with their environment, they encourage a sociable way of life and they help to boost wellbeing. Just as award-winning design should.

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