Greenwood Road House, London, by Lynch Architects
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this is the end of a terrace in hackney, north-east london.

Lynch Architects' timber house is situated not on a high-brow Bloomsbury terrace, but among a debased early Victorian example in an inner suburb of the city.

Hackney was built by developers long after the civic-minded philanthropy responsible for the inner-city squares of London had been exhausted. The new middle classes needed places to live, and, importantly, to entertain. Lynch Architects' house distorts the plain style of the terraces of Greenwood Road in Hackney, exposing the repressed display of individual wealth and culture. As partner Patrick Lynch says, "The bay window is where you displayed your most valuable possession – your piano, or daughter, or whatever."

Lynch's house attempts to mediate the forms of the surrounding terraces with the lifestyle of a newer bourgeois culture – one that is


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above the living room, with the balcony on the left
below the staircase, looking up towards the white glass corner of the house, which lets in afternoon sun
bottom a mirror between two of the structural members in the top room and a rope for opening the skylight
right the plywood staircase

entrepreneurial, not fixed to a single location and not bound by conventional class boundaries. This house is a pied-à-terre, a place for the couple that owns it (one a music journalist and the other a carpenter, dividing their time between London and America) to live and entertain when they are in the city.

The house consists of a ground floor with kitchen and dining room, an exquisite staircase, two small bedrooms, and one large L-shaped room on the top floor, with the balcony in the north-west corner. This small scale is the principal reason for the house's informal atmosphere. The floor area of the building is just 100sq m, with the upper timber structure overhanging the white brick base. It has the feeling of a hideaway, particularly on the ground floor with the use of white ceramic-faced bricks. The sunken walled garden feels snug beneath the 1m cantilever of the upper floors of the house, despite being just yards away from a busy road. The white brick continues inside the ground floor, uniting it with the garden and extending the dining room and kitchen into the outdoors.

The structure is loadbearing English oak, and uses oversized members in case of fire, fixed with tree nails (large oak dowels) that expand and contract with the softwood. The frame is regular and imposing, but appears different on each floor, sometimes suppressed, sometimes forming dividers for bookcases and at others washed with light from the rooflights. The staircase design is becoming a Lynch speciality. A simple plywood timber skin comprises step, wall and soffit, making the staircase appear as a large, folded piece of furniture.

An emphatically three-dimensional building, the house is a playful riff on the obsessive frontality of the surroundings. **These early Victorian terraces are based on the "Queen Anne at the front, Nell Gwyn at the back" school of thought,** with a front facade adorned with mouldings but side and back walls that are cheaply built and not intended for display to anyone but servants. That architecture serves an outdated type of mobility – for those arriving in carriages for a dinner party.

top left picture: Morley Von Sternberg

this page the sun hitting the facade from the south, bringing out the three-dimensional surface of the timber skin

concerned only with the view as you approach from the kerb. Despite Ford Mondeos and white vans long since replacing carriages in Hackney, the housing remains pure two-dimensional stage set in this sense.

Lynch's architecture attempts to deal with and critique this two-dimensionality. The house is viewed first on the approach from the main road – Dalston Lane – and the balcony slightly turns the corner to acknowledge this. The skin of the house has subtly projecting elements that dapple the light, giving depth and creating a changing view through the day.

The timber skin is striated by timber battens on all four sides, and this all-embracing fascia is peeled away to create the opening for the balcony, revealing the massive oak structure, and offering limited views into the depth of the upper room. From the street you can see all the way through to the white glass in the opposite corner of the room. The balcony, and the room behind it, are places for entertainment and the display of oneself rather than – as Lynch reads the neighbouring terraces – one's possessions.

Importantly, Lynch Architects' house has a critical relationship with its context, and not merely a formal one. With so much of Britain's contemporary architecture, it is sometimes tricky to see whether the arrangement of the windows of a facade are playing on the context or merely updating it for a world without lintels.

This house might appear to play that game, taking the proportions of the windows from those in the existing terrace, but **it also looks askance at the context, suggesting the relaxed gregariousness of an urban summer house.**

Lynch Architects' work has an intellectually-imposing reputation, with buildings such as

its Marsh View house (icon 002) making statements on a small scale that attempt to deal with the spiritual as well as the worldly requirements of creating a dwelling. But the pleasure of the Hackney house is in its tangential relationship to its context. Here there is a wit and a certain freedom about Lynch's form making. As he himself says: "I would rather my clients get more sunlight than to allow the typology to ossify or to be subservient to type. Form is the expression of freedom." The building is like a note in the margin of this terraced street, raising an eyebrow at a straightlaced London vernacular.

It has taken some time for British architecture to develop what might be called, under Kenneth Frampton's definition, a Critical Regionalist school of architecture, a generation interested in a cultured specificity to context. It has now emerged, it seems, led by those clearly influenced by such original critical regionalists as Alvaro Siza. **One of the biggest questions for these architects is how to avoid accusations of being retrograde in their view of the city.** The contemporary metropolis is complicated enough to demand more than mere complicity with archetypal models. Lynch's house understands its marginal role in a polyphony of attitudes to urban existence, and through this achieves a poise that is beyond many of his contemporaries.

top left the back of the house. Planning regulations meant that the house could not have views to the rear, so the windows are white glass

below sections showing the grander ceiling height of the upper room, and the overhanging upper floors

above the white-brick-lined, sunken garden

top right site plan