

As the cost of buying a home gets further from many people's grasp, some members of "generation rent" are showing that the squeezed middle isn't always a bad place to be. These aspiring homeowners are spurning the offer of a tiny city-centre flat costing up to £500,000 and choosing to buy impossibly small plots of land on which to build their own houses.

Why go to the trouble? The costs can be significantly lower than buying a "second-hand" property, and you can have a bespoke house for the price of a flat.

It was a chance encounter with an old workshop in Bethnal Green, east London, that set Fiona Kirkwood's mind on building a "gap house". As an architect, she immediately spotted the potential of the brownfield site.

"I was living in an apartment with my fiancé and we had been looking to buy," she says. "I was cutting through some back streets one Saturday and saw a 'For sale' sign on a dilapidated workshop. We bought it the following Sunday. A developer had put in an offer, but we went and met the owner and he liked our story, so we had a handshake and that was that."

After less than a year's work, she now has her first home. "We wanted to buy and this was the best entry into the market for us," she says. "It's very much a home for where we're at in our life now. We're a young couple with no children and want a nice house for us to share, with no other flatmates."

By excavating and creating a basement, Kirkwood was able to build a three-storey, 850 sq ft home on the plot, which is just over 12ft at its widest point, with two bedrooms and two bathrooms. The planning process was made easier because permission had been granted previously, but not used. The main limitation was the need for a red-brick exterior to match neighbouring properties. Another challenge was the limited space for construction work. Kirkwood also had to negotiate with the owners of the adjoining house to underpin their wall to gain an extra 30cm; this took eight weeks — so a gain of just over 5mm a day — but in a gap house, every millimetre counts.

The building was finished in seven months, at a cost of about £353 per sq ft. Kirkwood has had the house valued and says she is comfortably ahead of where she would have been if she had bought in a conventional fashion and the finish is far superior to anything she could have found on the market.

"In terms of the quality and efficiency, it is absolutely better value and it was also cheaper. Even if I weren't an architect and we had to employ one, we



The rear of the Bayswater Gap House opens out into extensive living space



The slim and elegant façade of Gap House in Bayswater, west London, designed by Pitman Tozer Architects

How to exploit the gap in the housing market

Slim pickings for first-time buyers are making it attractive to build a home on a tiny city-centre plot, says **Robin Ash**

would still be better off, just not by the same margin. There are also ongoing savings — we use about 20 per cent less energy, because it's so efficient."

To conserve space, the stairs have multiple functions — they serve as seats, shelves and storage. The upper stairs are made of steel, not wood, giving an extra 20cm of headroom as you go up the house. The stairs that face south are perforated to allow natural light through.

On the first floor, the bathroom is open-plan, separated by a sheer curtain. "You can buy an extra sense of space by not having a wall," Kirkwood says. "It's all about trickery to make everything seem bigger."

With some imagination and the right plot, gap houses needn't be small. A Tardis-like four-storey, four-bedroom family home squeezed between two stucco villas in Bayswater, west London, is barely 8ft wide at the front. Look behind the slim façade, however, and you will find that the award-winning house extends like a telescope into the space at the rear, cascading outwards and giving more living room.

The section of the house facing the street is essentially an entrance hall with



Before and after: a garage in Wadham Road, Putney, west London right, was replaced by an infill home, above. It is available to rent for £2,200 a month with the Seymour Green estate agency

a stack of bedrooms above. Putting the sleeping area in the least generous part of the plot allowed the rest to be used as an open-plan kitchen/dining area and sitting room, with glazing opening on to a courtyard. The only areas without natural light are the wet room and storage units. The restricted space on site meant



The Bethnal Green house designed by Fiona Kirkwood, above and top, had to fit in with its red-brick neighbours

that the designer and owner, Luke Tozer of Pitman Tozer Architects, had to think creatively. For example, he constructed a hut on wheels for the builders that could be moved about as building progressed. Despite the space constraints, Tozer found room to install a geothermal heating system and a rainwater harvesting system to flush the toilets.

The trend for gap building is catching on. A concept house the width of a garage was exhibited at this year's Ideal Home Show in London. The Gap House, which is 11.5ft wide, was created to address the shortage of affordable inner-city housing.

A kitchen and toilet are on the ground floor, with an open-plan living room on the next floor, and two bedrooms on the top floor. One contains a bath, and there is also a separate wet room. The shell costs £90,000 and the designers say that the property would usually cost half the price of a similar-size home.

Stephanie McMahon, head of research at Strutt & Parker, says: "The trend for this type of property is something that we should expect to see a lot more of in the UK. Small can be beautiful, and these homes are the ultimate living solution for those who prize location over space. These are not oddities, but carefully designed, well-planned homes."

With these homes, she says, the UK is catching up with other countries where space is at a premium. "Micro-mansions" of 100 sq ft-250 sq ft are well established in Japan and the United States. The typical small flat has an area of about 750 sq ft.