

Spanning the Decades

**The restoration of a
Blackheath townhouse**
By Frances Ambler
Photography Marcus Peel



Span houses have their own kind of cult following. The day before I visited South Row, one of the Span developments in Blackheath, I tweeted a link to a 1969 Omnibus documentary on Eric Lyons, the architect of Span Housing. The response was immediate and enthusiastic, showing that the ideas that Lyons pioneered about suburban architecture in the 1950s and '60s still resonate with many. It was his coupling of a modern aesthetic with community values that drew Dilys Maltby to her home on one of the many Span estates in this part of southeast London. As I approach from Blackheath Common, South Row – completed in 1963 – now appears every bit a proud part of the landscape as its neighbouring Georgian builds.

Dilys – Senior Partner of Circus, a management consultancy specialising in brand and proposition strategy – picked up a book about Span in London store Margaret Howell and quickly became “obsessed”. Circus was already based in a gorgeous, light building on London’s Marylebone High Street, designed by John Harris in 1964, and she noticed the positive impact it had on the behaviour and mood of colleagues and clients. So when Dilys sought a London base for herself, she refined her search to Span properties only, hoping to find a similar harmony in a domestic build.

This property also offered her something of a challenge. Although the bones of the terraced maisonette were intact, previous remodelling meant the interior was far removed from the original Modernist vision. Dilys’ intention was to

bring it back and, working with an architect friend, Ian Hill, she poured over original plans and photographs in order to create a contemporary interior that felt authentic to the spirit of the house.

The space is now a gorgeous testament to the power of pared-back design, celebrating, rather than concealing, its original structure. It’s impossible to miss the lines and patterns at play throughout the property – one of Dilys’ favourite things about the house – whether in the grid of windows that face onto the landscaped courtyard or in the pleasing repetition of the parquet floor in the open plan living and kitchen area that, aside from a small lobby, forms the ground-floor of the property.

The parquet floor in itself is indicative of the amount of work that has gone into the house, pieced together from repeated eBay searches, while original Span doors were tracked down from a shop in Wales. If this replication of the original finishes is one feature of the renovation, the second is the introduction of a contemporary design that’s sympathetic to the Span aesthetic. The kitchen is a prime illustration of this: open plan, with specially built units concealing the usual kitchen clutter, while reflecting the clean lines of the building.

Go up the open-tread stairs – an original feature – and the interventions are slightly more pronounced, but no more intrusive. The compact upper floor – Dilys describes her home as “a flat masquerading as house” – was originally split into two bedrooms, a bathroom and

**Previous: external view of the South Row estate from its entrance.
Right: Dilys Maltby.**

‘It is a manifesto for life’







Previous: living area, with view onto South Row's communal grounds and through to Blackheath Common; Danish two-seater sofa reupholstered in Ramshead by Timorous Beasties; Danish three-seater sofa reupholstered in charcoal wool from Bute's Kilnmore range; Hoof and Olé cushions by Thorody; Dieter Rams 606 Shelving for Vitsoe; Narsk Saga Figgjo Flint ceramics; Rope rug by Ligne Roset; Sonab speaker.

Left: dining area, dining table by Barber Osgerby for Isokon Plus; 1950s Italian dining chairs; Demby Odé teacups; Kay Bajesen dog. Above: kitchen area with Alpes-Inox units and inbuilt storage.



an open studio. A previous owner sectioned off the studio to form a third bedroom and this made the upstairs uncharacteristically dark, blocking the light coming from the back of the house. While Dilys has kept the third bedroom, she's solved these problems through cleverly reconfiguring the light source.

Although it's still enclosed, light is now maximised with floor to ceiling windows. A vertical glass window has been fitted into the corner facing the stairwell, while a narrow window runs, like a frieze, around the top of the internal wall dividing the room from the hallway. These "little kinks", as Dilys describes them, means the upstairs echoes the incredible light downstairs.

As South Row's 23 flats and ten terraced maisonettes were Grade II listed in 1996, Dilys was fortunate to have a sympathetic council planning officer who understood what she was trying to do. The project took about nine months, from adding insulation and strengthening the roof – unfortunately a common weakness in these houses – to perfecting the finish.

Aside from the interior, the other important space – as Span devotees will already know – is the communal grounds. Lyons saw these areas as a way of building community, and invested in them accordingly. The scheme at South Row was the work of Preben Jakobsen, a landscape architect who studied under C.Th. Sørensen (see the 'Architects at Play' feature). The result is controlled but not manicured, a mixture of trees and low-lying shrubs, as well as a grass lawn.

**Left: bathroom, with
inbuilt storage; sink
from Agape; original
Span door handle;
Roberts Radio.**

Cars and rubbish bins are subtly tucked beneath the building, while benches encourage residents to use the space.

If outside space was one of Lyons' methods for encouraging community, he also employed more formal means. Before any new Span housing scheme launched onto the market, a Residents Association was established and all purchasers automatically became members. Dilys tells me that her lease still contains the 1960s regulations, stipulating, among other things, no loud music and restrictions on hanging out washing. "I can see why some people might not like that," she admits, "it's perhaps not in vogue at the moment. Community living requires sacrifice and having to conform, I'm quite happy to sign up for that, but it is a manifesto for life."

Lyons' manifesto is subtly felt inside too. I can see what Dilys means when she says that the house "makes you want to sit up straight". The sense of order, combined with the fact that you're visible to your neighbours, means it's not the kind of place you'd feel comfortable lounging around in your pyjamas! But living a more pared back life certainly chimes with Dilys, whose strong sense of her own taste has been refined by a career working for the likes of Bonhams and Terence Conran. Her décor deliberately avoids a straight tribute, "where you feel like you've moved into some kind of archive".

She has furnished the house with an edit of her favourite pieces, a mix of contemporary and mid-century designs.

**'It's the lines
and the grids
I love'**





Previous: the downstairs living area, with parquet floor sourced from eBay; radiator by Hudevad. Left: third bedroom, Tra-Ra clothes rail by Tomoko Azumi; vintage blanket.

Above: master bedroom, bed from Muji; vintage blanket; Japanese Series wardrobe by Cees Braakman for Pastoe; original door sourced from a shop in Wales.

Many of these have been in her possession for a long time, such as the Isokon dining table by Barber Osgerby, which fits the South Row space beautifully, and a Stag C Range dressing table in the bedroom. Her favourite piece, however, is the Japanese series wardrobe, designed by Cees Braakman for Pastoe. A long-desired purchase, it arrived (to Dilys' surprise!) as a flat-pack, complete with its original instructions. Dilys admires the way its "pattern reflects the lines and the grids I love about my home".

She admits, however, to trying to break up the grids here and there. The dining chairs, for example, were originally a set of "more earnest Dutch chairs", but Dilys felt they looked too severe and swapped them for the gentler lines of an Italian set. She also tried some Tecta chairs designed by Lyons and found them far too austere. "There was clearly no slouching allowed in an Eric Lyons life!", she jokes. Sometimes Lyons' rules benefit from being bent slightly – after all, says Dilys, although it has its disciples, "it's not a religion!"

The space is softened further through vintage blankets, adding colour to the bedrooms, and wonderful ceramics from the likes of Stig Lindberg and Figgjo enliven the living space. There's an extensive vinyl collection to make use of the enviable Sonab pyramid speakers, as well as an impressive array of books. Ranging from children's Ladybirds to – of course – the book on Span that kick-started Dilys' enthusiasm, they're all given space on the Dieter Rams-designed

Vitsoe shelving. While I love the display, Dilys tells me that her architect wasn't so sure. "He left before the shelving went up, when the space was still really pure. He came to stay and I could see he was slightly distressed that we'd got all these books in here!"

Dilys' thoughtful consideration of the house's aesthetic is illustrated by her current quandary. She has been grappling with managing the light that pours through the windows, reluctant to block it out with curtains. "Everyone has run out of patience with me, especially my daughter who tells me to get blinds like other people!", she admits. But her deliberation is an effect of the house itself, "I'd never normally spend so long wondering about what to put in my windows. This house makes you consider things in a way that others don't."

Sitting in Dilys' house, with its view out to the duck pond on the Heath, I feel far from central London. Despite its proximity to the city, and to the other homes, South Row has an inescapable tranquility. "I do like the stillness," says Dilys. "And it's very quiet – that's so rare." Most of all, she loves how the house makes her feel – it slows her down and even makes her more optimistic.

Eric Lyons described his mission as "to provide an environment – at the right price – that will give people a lift". That purpose certainly lives on in the carefully restored proportions of South Row. Or, as Dilys describes her relationship with the property, "It's nice being able to put love in and to get it back in return."

Right: stairwell, with original open-tread stairs; vintage Danish trio chandelier.

**'It makes
you sit up
straight'**

