

Arts
Best of the London Film Festival

Open season for nosey parkers

With 75 homes opening their doors to visitors this weekend as part of Open House London, Catherine Moye takes her pick of the best on offer

As well as granting entry to famous buildings such as the Treasury and the Foreign Office, this weekend's Open House London will let you look inside a stranger's home without surreptitiously peering through the windows.

Not that any of the 75 residential homes on this year's list is likely to prove anything less than immaculate. RIBA award-winners and the stars of numerous television shows feature among a catalogue open to the public.

For those planning not to venture into the current bleak property climate and instead stay put and dig out a basement or raise the roof, this is a great opportunity to see how others have pulled it off.

Every imaginable style of house and renovation is covered, from a refurbished 1950s terrace house in Victoria Road, W8, to a restored 18th-century Queen Anne period house in Grange Walk, SE1. You can visit a Victorian extension in Chestnut Road, SE22; then over to St Stephen's Avenue, W12, to admire a self-contained teenagers' annexe, taking in a prefabricated wooden eco-house at Carmarthen Place, SE1, en route.

There is a modernist open space at Wilton Way, E8, and a "retro-zero carbon eco-home" (that's an energy-guzzling Victorian house that has been made carbon-neutral) in Coleman Road, SE5.

Whether you're radically transforming an Edwardian cottage or struggling to make the most of your studio shoe-box, this weekend it might just be worth putting down your drill bits, picking up a notepad and heading out to glean a few tips from the experts. More architects than ever before will be available to answer questions at their own kitchen sink.

Architects Andy and Aurore Down, who run the Archplan residential practice, will be opening their home at Cholmeley Crescent, Highgate, which Andy describes



Drop in and see: the Downs' new take on the semi (top left and right) and the updated 1960s home (above) of Richard and Wendy Grierson (right)

Downs, who bought the property four years ago, turned a traditional two-storey house into four storeys by digging into the cellar and building into the attic.

As part of the transformation, they created a fantastic double-height glazed



with light. "We wanted to create a big lateral space that faced on to the garden," says Andy. "We were lucky to discover a cellar through a trapdoor directly under the house and all this unused space. But it had no windows, so we had to excavate the garden and create a north-south aspect level."



"We took part in Open House last year for the first time and more than 100 people visited our home in one day. It was exhausting"

Another architect, Richard Grierson, brought himself temporarily out of retirement to modernise and transform an existing 1960s semi at Duke Humphrey Road in Blackheath. Richard, 74, married his new wife, Wendy, in 2003 and used the proceeds of selling his own house to literally "take it up a level".

"We have amazing views of Blackheath but because our front garden is very short we had this conflict between wanting privacy but also the views," he says.

As a solution, he reconfigured the house to create a gallery along the length of the first floor that affords views of the heath without being overlooked. This also meant that the Griersons could build on the

shrubbery and improve privacy in their front garden. He also added another storey and created a mono-pitched roof.

Open House is not without its challenges. "We did it last year for the first time and we had over 100 people through in one day," Richard says. "We did tours every hour but it was a bit chaotic and exhausting. This year we might have to restrict each tour to 12 people and try to give out tickets in advance."

You can find the full list of 700 buildings and architectural walks available to visit for free this weekend on the Open House website. You can visit cinemas and theatres, cemeteries and stations, mosques and cathedrals, but the chance to drop in on some of the capital's more genial homes enthusiasts shouldn't be snafled at either. And if all you want to do is to see how other people mix their cushions with their curtains, it's pretty good for that, too.

◆ Open House London is on today and tomorrow. Architects will be present at 37 homes and 15 architects' offices. To find out where to meet them, visit www.openhouse.org.uk, click on Open House London Sweet and talk to the Open House team.