

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’



