

The 'spaceship house' squeezed between suburban terraces

Amid 1930s houses in Zone 4, you'll find Station Lodge, a futuristic 'bat cave' designed by an architect for his family overlooking railway lines



Station Lodge sits next to Motspur Park railway station in southwest London

WILL PRYCE



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In a sea of 1930s terraces, Station Lodge stands out from the crowd. With its aerodynamic shape, jet-black mass and orange platform, it resembles a spaceship hovering above suburban Motspur Park, southwest London.

Viewed from above, it seems to loom over the neighbourhood. In fact when approached from the street, it is invisible — you can only catch a glimpse of it through a narrow gap between two terraces. It is nevertheless a local curiosity, according to its owner and designer, the architect Andrei Saltykov.

“People would ask the builders, ‘What are you building here, a library, a recording studio?’ Because obviously it doesn’t look like a house,” Saltykov says.

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“Passersby always do a double take,” adds Siwan, his wife.

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A glimpse of the house can be seen through two neighbouring properties

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Mysterious from the outside, with hardly any windows at the front, the house is like the Tardis inside. There is a jaw-dropping three-storey living room overlooked by two levels of mezzanines and a showstopping high-tech ceiling, with steel beams, timber cross bracing and joists left exposed, an influence from Saltykov's days working for Richard Rogers. One of his clients compared his living room to the Pompidou Centre, the famously expressive inside-out building in Paris.

The prefab steel staircase, for example, is painted an eye-catching shade of fluorescent red. "I like to highlight things in the building that give you structure or circulation and create some splash with colour," says Saltykov, 52, who previously worked on Heathrow Terminal 5, Madrid's Barajas airport and the International Towers in Sydney.



Andrei Saltykov in the living room with his wife, Siwan, and their daughters, Inessa and Gina

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The four bedrooms are on the first floor, off a mezzanine, and the top floor has a large study and family room that opens onto a roof terrace with an unorthodox view: the railway station platform of Motspur Park. Saltykov has been known to wave and converse with passengers on the platform who are intrigued by the building. Siwan says exchanges are all very good-natured.

“People are surprised when they get off the train because it’s a very suburban area,” she says. “And you’re having a drink one evening and people are like, ‘Is this a house?’ Because if you’re coming on the train and it’s all commuter land, you’re like, what’s that big black bat cave? People are curious.”

Saltykov didn’t set out to build a wacky house overlooking a train platform but in 2020 the family had outgrown their house in Wimbledon. Their two daughters, Gina and Inessa, were soon to enter secondary school. Saltykov had been looking for land for a client and an advert for a site with seven rental garages popped up on his algorithm. It was in Motspur Park, where his daughters played football. Saltykov was intrigued. “Plus an architect always wants to build a house,” he says.



Two mezzanines provide expansive views of the three-storey living room, which features a wraparound bookcase

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Living next to a train track



Station Lodge viewed from above shows its proximity to the train tracks

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The garage site was awkward, however. A triangular shape, it's hemmed in by the railway track, the terraced houses and a substation with a right of way for energy crews. The site was narrow at the entrance so it made no sense for Saltykov to build the house there. For one thing, it would block the light passing through to the neighbours' gardens. He would have more room if he built at the back of the site, right beside the railway track, and set the garden at the front. But placing windows at the back of the property would mean there would be no privacy from the train platform. Similarly, any windows at the front of the house would overlook the gardens of the terraced houses.

No wonder the site had been for sale for a long time. Most developers would run a mile. "But they miss the opportunity," Saltykov says. "I love constraints. I take advantage of them."

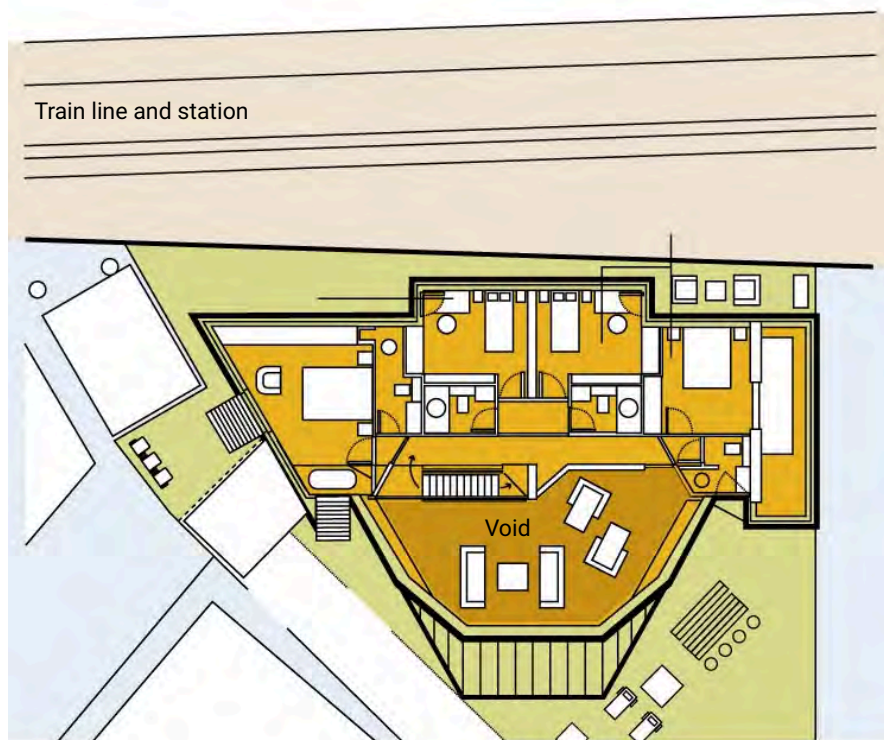
His solution? The conventional part of the floorplan is a straight line of rooms against the railway tracks at the rear. For privacy from the train platform, the bedrooms only have side windows, which look onto the train tracks. But the lack of windows meant he needed a view of something, so he made an internal one: mezzanines overlooking the vast atrium-style living room at the front. "To compensate for the absence of view, I made volume."

Station Lodge

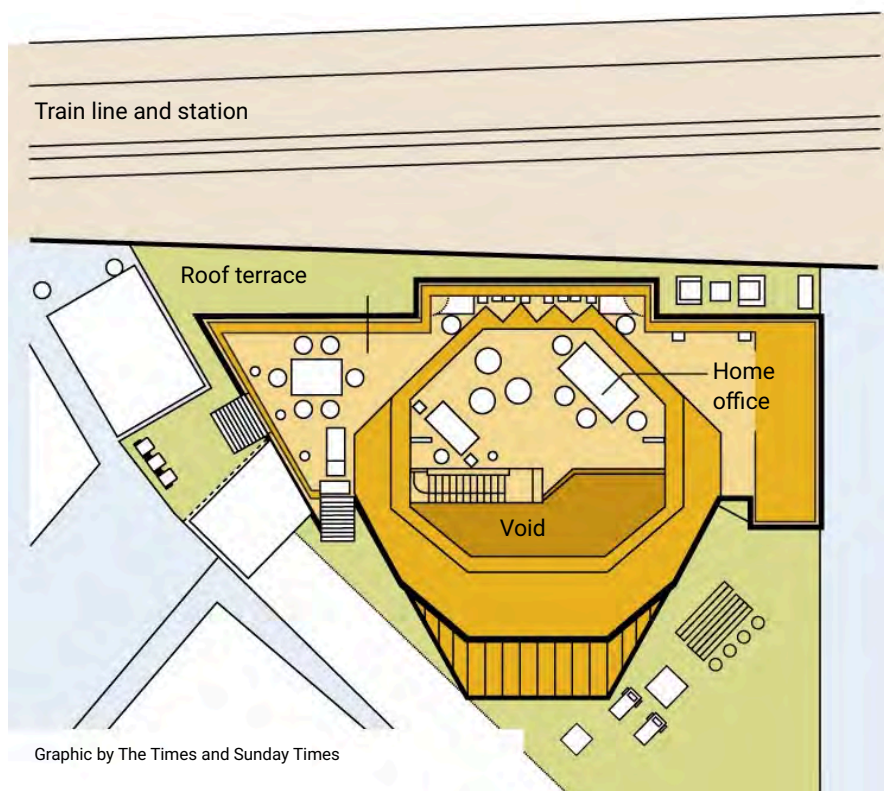
Ground-floor plan



First-floor plan



Second-floor plan



Letting the light in

So how does the light get in? There's a huge window at the top of the house. The light spills into the second-floor study, over the mezzanine and down into the living room. At the front of the house, at ground level, light enters from two ribbons of glass bricks, which are frosted to prevent overlooking neighbours.



A large window at the top of the house allows light into the study and down into the living room

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The unconventional roof wasn't a design gimmick. Its form is purely functional: the long angled slope avoids blocking the neighbours' light; the black aluminium hides train dirt; the angular ribbed design funnels rainwater into a French drain on the ground as Saltykov did not want gutters.

You would think that living next to a railway track would be noisy but in my 90 minutes at the property I heard no trains. That's thanks to the installation of triple-glazed windows, thick blockwork and reams of insulation. Fresh air comes courtesy of a mechanical heat ventilation recovery system.

The kitchen does have a long picture window facing the railway line but it is shielded by a concrete panel wall recycled from the site's old garages.



Triple-glazed windows, thick blockwork and reams of insulation help to dull the sounds of nearby trains

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The industrial design has the potential to feel cold and clinical but Saltykov has softened the aesthetic with a wraparound birch ply bookcase that hugs the living room. Siwan's Welsh art collection warms things up further and the exposed beams also liven things up. "It would be pretty awful if it were just a white ceiling. This makes it interesting and dynamic."

Saltykov is reluctant to reveal the project's overall budget. The grey and green German kitchen by Kitchen Revolutions was £35,000 but, when building costs spiralled during the pandemic, he tweaked the design to futureproof his investment. Developers are advised against building the most expensive house on a street so he designed the layout of the house, which is 3,000 sq ft, so it could be split down the middle and sold as two homes in the future. He put in foundations for a second staircase, as well as separate plumbing infrastructure.



The open-plan dining space, which features pieces from Siwan's Welsh art collection, sits adjacent to the kitchen

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'Fitting in drives me mad'

To his surprise, Saltykov says that neither of his next-door neighbours objected to his plans. They seemed glad to see the back of the seven garages. Planners approved the project in four months.

What does he say to traditionalists who might say the house isn't in keeping with the terraces? "If that's your attitude, you might as well live in an open-air museum where nothing can ever change. This plot was left unloved. There was no way of building on it satisfactorily from a blueprint that had gone before.

"The 1930s terraces were built using the technology allowed at the time. When they were built, they didn't fit in either. There were fields here. When the Victorians built terraces, nobody had built them before."



The house has been described as a 'bat cave'

WILL PRYCE

He didn't set out to provoke. "It's not a look-at-me house. It's so well hidden. It's purely about achieving a better result through means that are not necessarily conventional."

A challenge when running his architecture practice, Andrei Saltykov and Partners (ASaP), is finding clients that want brave and unconventional designs. "I'm happy to fit in if it makes sense but this fitting in business drives me mad," he says. "Is there ever going to be progress if all you're doing is what you've done before? Isn't that the biggest criticism of AI? It just recirculates what's already been created. That's why it can never be original. Just by fitting in, you might as well design with ChatGPT. You don't need people."

Saltykov is encouraged by the public response. Two hundred people came for a tour last year at the Open House festival and he's opening it again this year, on September 19. He recently stood on the station platform and overheard two women chatting about his house. It could have been mortifying. "But they said, 'Isn't this amazing?' And I said, 'Thank you, it's my house.' And I went to the dentist the other day and they were saying, 'Oh, you live in that amazing house'. It's known in the area."



Saltykov's daughter believes the house was inspired by a 1980s space Lego set

LUCY YOUNG FOR THE TIMES

Clearly it has tickled the public imagination. He's even signed it up with filming location agencies. The possibilities are tantalising. Is he sure he wasn't inspired by sci-fi just a bit? "When we were moving, I found a 1980s poster from my old space Lego set. It was a space station that had a similar shape to this. And my daughter Gina is convinced that the Lego set inspired the house."

The reality, he insists, is more prosaic. "It's more about the boring things: sunlight, views, shadows, access, how you get rid of water, all this practical stuff is what drives the design."

Maybe so. But for the rest of us, it's more fun to call it the spaceship house.

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