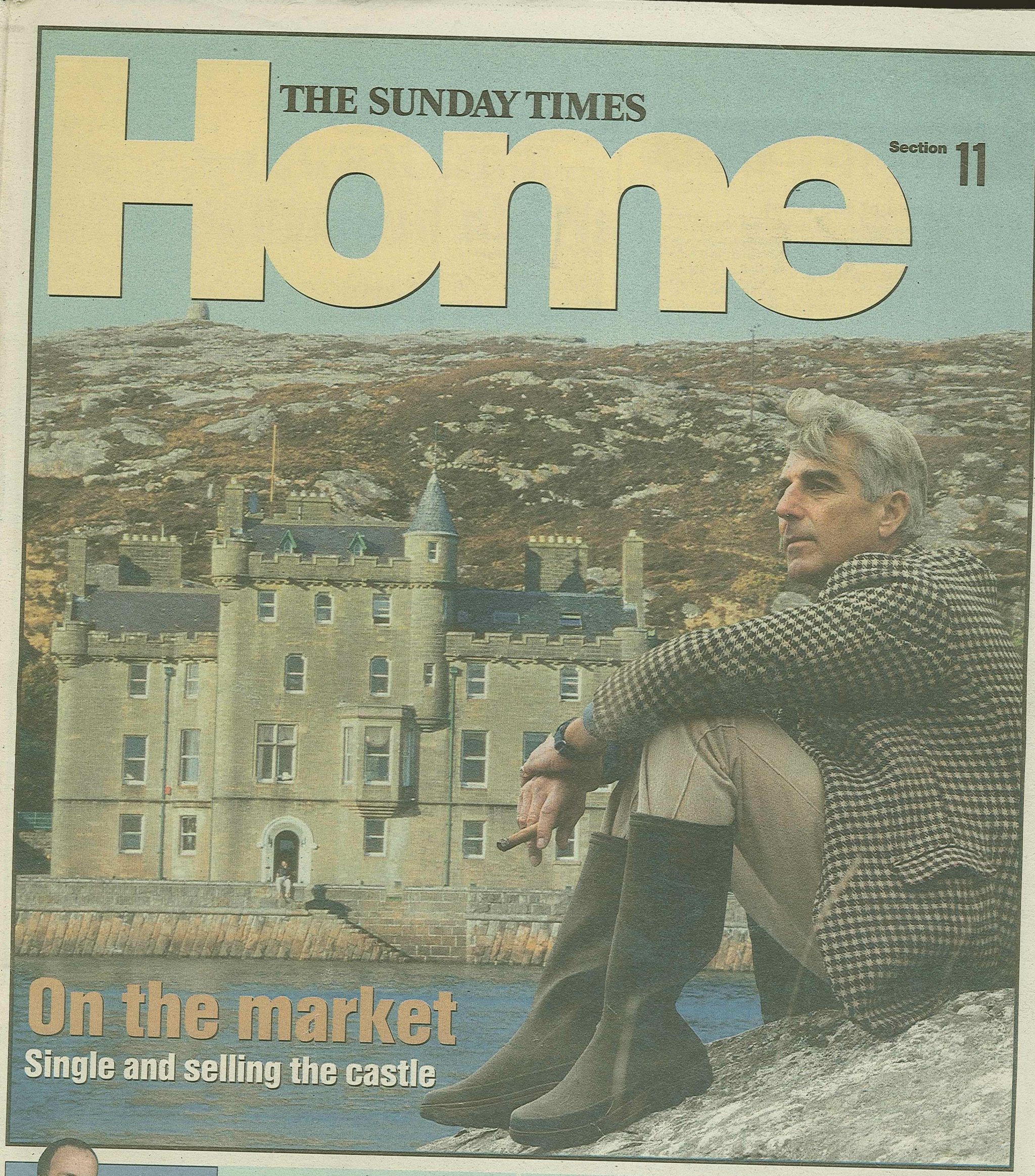
THE SUNDAY TIMES

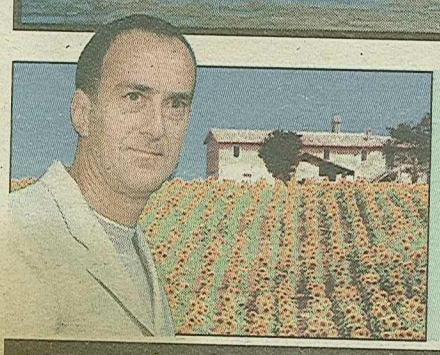
Home

Section 11



On the market

Single and selling the castle



The green heart of Italy

Escape to the verdant valleys of Umbria, friendly and cheaper than Tuscany (it's where Angus Deayton fled the paparazzi)

pages 24-25

Open-plan living

Is it the modern answer to how we live now or just a noisy, smelly way for families to drive each other mad?

pages 22-23

Open-plan v cellular

Room to manoeuvre: light, creative spaces, in which inflexible divisions between work, rest and play are consigned to the past where they belong, make sense in the 21st century

Is open-plan the answer to modern living? Absolutely, says **Jonathan Miller**. Nonsense, says **Hugh Pearman**. It's smelly and ignores the need for privacy

Knocking down walls is the first principle of property development. The British house has too many of them in the wrong places. This is true whether you occupy a listed 17th-century farmhouse (as I do) or a Victorian, Edwardian or later terrace in Stockport or north London (as I did).

Victorians and Edwardians had reasons of their own for attempting to recreate in the suburban villa the many private spaces of the grander homes they were unable to afford. The result has been a disaster for families trying to live in the 21st century. Worse, this pattern continues to be repeated by many of those building new homes today — haplessly replicating obsolete spaces with scant regard for changes to the way we lead our lives.

Rooms and stairs are in the wrong place. There's underused space in some corners of the house and space that cannot cope in others. Basic services are an afterthought. The traditional arguments to leave all alone are nonsensical unless you believe that some property developer in the 18th century should dictate the way we are trying to live now in an era of working at home, executive mums, and computerised children.

Now here is a fact about ripping the guts out of a house: most people are afraid to do it and for good reasons. Only politicians are dodgier than the building trade. It costs a lot of money. There is a surreal bureaucracy to be satisfied. It is too disruptive. The conventional wisdom is: better move houses instead.

This theory has worked up to a point, but many people are now discovering they do not want to move. Isabel Allen, editor of Architect's Journal, says that as property values and transaction costs rise: "It is becoming more economic for many owners to upgrade their existing property than to move." With stamp duty so high, and estate agents more avaricious than ever, moving is expensive.

So, as you cannot change houses, change the house. The decisive argument for going ahead is that a homeowner can add spectacular value to a property by doing the right things to it.

It is pretty easy and no bad thing to take out a wall between a kitchen and dining room or to build over a grim bit of the back terrace. But stop before you call Bob the Builder. Much more than this can be done if you can train your mind to dissolve all the walls and think of a potential volume of space and what can be put within it.

At the Royal Institute of British Architects in Portland Place last month, the Architect's Journal sponsored an exhibition of small projects (under £250,000) featuring the work of smaller practices attempting to answer the question: what are our houses for?

Some of their ideas are incredibly clever. This is not conventional open-plan architecture. Walls disappear but spaces retain function. Areas of activity — such as a more expansive kitchen/social area — are demarcated not by solid masonry and narrow doors but by sculptural changes of glass flooring and computer-controlled lighting.

Most (but not all) of the doors have gone. It is not about an absence of rooms as such but of new spaces created to be more in tune with the way homeowners wish to inhabit their spaces.

In the 20th century, various modernists tried building houses without walls but it often went disastrously wrong. As works of art, the bold return to the ur-house, executed in glass and rock and timber, was sometimes formidable and beautiful, but too often cold and clinical. The most modern realisation of the form, the minimalist loft space, is dramatic to look at, and clever ones have pioneered new techniques such as changes demarcated by floor level and texture, sophisticated lighting systems, waist-high walls (sometimes of glass), and curved corners to large rooms as an alternative to 90-degree angles. But as many of their owners have had families, some have now bought traditional houses.

However, there are now architects approaching conventional British houses with a wide-open imagination, taking nothing for granted, not even the location of the stairs. Front facades are usually protected, and often there may be one or two good rooms inside, but otherwise, in the judgement of the new school of young British architects, it is time to let the sledgehammers of the imagination rip. Are they right?

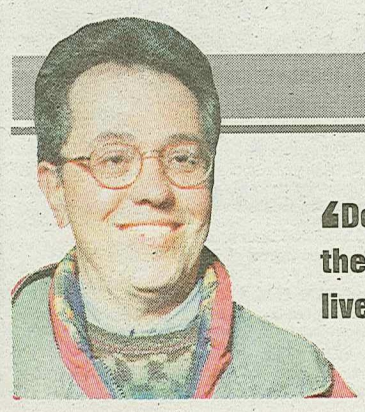
Obviously, you need to do this intelligently. Robin Ellis, an architect whose building company specialises in small schemes, warns: "You can ruin a room by treating it insensitively, whether it is large or small."

Yet, says Ellis, "open living is by and large the way in which communal space in houses is developing, very often between kitchen and dining room or dining and living room. In central London people take that a good way further, removing all internal walls to open up space, often between bathrooms and principal bedrooms — perhaps with discreet screens to give an element of visual privacy — to achieve all the elements within as large a volume as they possibly can."

A spectacular one-bedroom flat on the Regents Canal in Islington, designed by Jonathan Dransfield, and featured at Riba, has two main spaces that are completely separate: a large living room with a series of different spaces including a raised dining area and then a working area entered via stepping stones over an internal pond through a moon-arch door. The kitchen is part of the living space and changes in floor textures are used to demarcate function: most of the living space is parquet but the kitchen has a concrete floor and concrete worktops and the dining area is separated by a two-step change of level.

The bathroom is open to the bedroom, three steps up. Because there had to be a separate hall for fire-regulation purposes, the architects specified a big door — 1m wide and 3m tall, and of highly polished timber — on magnetic latches, so that if a fire alarm goes off in the building or the flat, the door closes.

The cowards flinch — surely this is all too complicated? True, it's brutal to go through, but you'll feel smug when you're done.



Jonathan Miller

"Do you believe some property developer in the 18th century should dictate the way we live now, in an era of working at home?"

View/Red Cover

living

Divide and rule: rooms need clear functions

I like big, spacious, open-plan interiors. I like them a lot. They look great, and they make good pictures. Editors and advertisers and TV producers rightly love them. You can hold big parties. Space, it is said, is the ultimate luxury, and lots of people are prepared to pay for it. Space is a lifestyle manifesto statement. Oh yes, the open-plan lifestyle has a lot going for it. I find myself envying friends who have it. But when it comes to my own home, I undergo a character change. I'll have none of it. You see, I go in for cellular living.

I have never knocked two rooms together, let alone gutted a whole house from top to bottom. I have never lived in a loft apartment. From my first-ever flat to my present house, I have always liked to inhabit warrens of rooms. If anything, I tend to divide them further, or add more small rooms to the mix. In the architectural world, this is distinctly off-message right now. Even some volume housebuilders, who conventionally always price their products on the numbers of rooms rather than the amount of overall space, are now starting to dabble in the open-plan ideal, to catch the loft-dwellers as they start families. And that's fine. You can't beat the instant rush you get from all that space. But when it comes to personal choice, I suspect plenty of others share my view: open plan stinks.

Sometimes literally. You can't close the kitchen door on a smoking grill pan in an open-plan home. And anyone who thinks that extractor fans and cooker hoods solve that problem is deluded. They don't. But that's a relatively minor thing, compared to the big, big problem: privacy, or the lack of it.

I'm forever amazed at the number of architects who design "sleeping platforms" overlooking living rooms. Not bedrooms — these are open mezzanine galleries. They do it because this makes the apparent space from downstairs look even bigger. These architects must have no children, or must never have their in-laws to stay, or perhaps are stone-deaf, or chronically exhibitionist, or mad.

Otherwise, they'd notice the obvious downside: noise. Whatever you go to a bedroom for, chances are it's not a public display you had in mind. Unless you are a Big Brother contestant, obviously. But the worse problem is the other way round. Everyone in a house tends not to retire to bed at the same time. Consequently, the latesters watching MTV in the living space below make sleep impossible for anyone else.

This is perhaps extreme. There are plenty of houses where the downstairs is open plan, say, and the upstairs is chastely compartmented — to each a private bedroom. What's the problem there? Plenty. In order for children to get away from their parents, or vice-versa, there's nowhere to run to except the bedrooms. Which is fine if they are big, but usually they're small.

I think I can trace my aversion to open plan to my own upbringing. From the age of seven I lived in a modern architect-designed house arranged in such as way as to be essentially a series of interconnecting open spaces downstairs and a row of tiny bedrooms off a landing upstairs. Flimsy folding plastic partitions were supposed to give privacy between the downstairs spaces — these were so useless we eventually got rid of them altogether. It was okay, but not exactly ideal. I remember regarding my friends' houses as wonderful — whether they were council flats or big old Victorian houses — precisely because you could open a door and be in another place.

And that's what it comes down to. With open plan, what you see is what you get, and you generally see everything at once. It's immediately impressive but there's no discovery, no surprise, no magic. There are, of course, honourable exceptions. The best architects can design sequences of interlocking areas, often on different levels, that preserve something of the sense of the house possessing rooms with clearly defined functions, and which maintain the necessary base level of privacy. But there are not many of those, and they are not and never will be made by the mass housebuilders.

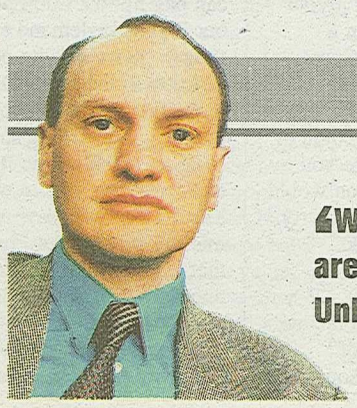
But the task is anyway getting steadily more difficult because houses have to do much more than they used to.

Children do not conveniently leave home young anymore. They hang around, saddled with student debt or on low wages, unable to afford a place of their own as prices rise and rise. Meanwhile, it's likely that one or both parents will be working from home, needing to talk on the phone, to concentrate. Like some ghastly soap opera, families will be getting on each others' nerves and under each others' feet much more, and for much longer.

From a sustainability point of view, open-plan living is anathema. Instead of heating and lighting only the parts of the house you happen to be using, you have to heat and light the whole lot. It is much more difficult and expensive to keep one big space warm and light than it is to keep several separate spaces warm and light. A very telling recent environmental study in Bristol discovered that a high-density, city-centre, brownfield development of big open apartments designed by eco-aware architects — precisely the kind of living sanctioned by the government — was no more energy-efficient overall than a bog-standard, supposedly wasteful suburban development nearby.

The answer to this problem — modern cellular living — is clearly not to be found in your average edge-of-town, spec-built, over-compartmented house, usually designed with minute rooms off a ridiculously overscaled hall. But what exactly is the problem? If the Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian speculative builders could manage elegant cellular living with a fine balance of private and public spaces, why is it so difficult for us?

Believe me: we will quickly tire of open plan as people realise that far from being ultimately flexible and groovy, as its adherents claim, it is actually completely inflexible, inherently wasteful and all wrong for changing patterns of living and working. Unless, that is, you divide it all up.



Hugh Pearman

"Whatever you go to a bedroom for, chances are it's not a public display you had in mind. Unless you are a Big Brother contestant"