REFLECTIONS OF YOU

Their three-bedroom flat was bulging at the seams, but the Caines family loved their home and didn't want to move. The solution? A glamorous bolt hole at the bottom of the garden. Caroline Roux reports. Photographs by Kilian O'Sullivan

Hackney council initiated its own design prize late last year. At an awards ceremony at the glitteringly restored Hackney Empire, six architectural projects were pronounced winners. These included Lord Richard Rogers' Mossbourne Community Academy (Hackney's much-discussed new secondary school); the Empire itself, renovated by Tim Ronalds Architects; and a summerhouse in a Stoke Newington back garden.

A summerhouse? "It doesn't sound right, does it?" says its co-architect Allan Sylvester. "But it was great — we were in a collection of really interesting buildings."

The New Summerhouse, as it's now officially known, was designed by Sylvester and Silvia Ullmayer as a response to that most common inner-city problem: a dire lack of living space. The garden in which it's situated belongs to David and Sybil Caines, who for 13 years have lived in the accompanying three-bedroom flat with their two boys, aged six and 10. "There was nowhere else I wanted to live," says Sybil. "I love it here." Which is why they started considering the end of their extra-long garden — it's 200ft — as the solution.

What was conceived in autumn 2002 as a £10,000-£15,000 shed was finally completed in spring 2004 as a £35,000 summerhouse. Despite the lurch in budget, the final structure looks very like David's original drawing. "The materials have changed completely, but not the idea," says Ullmayer. "David's a graphic designer, so he can think conceptually, but he didn't have any idea of materials."

David's main inspiration was the Eames house: a steel-framed structure on stilts built by Charles and Ray Eames in California in the 1940s. "I love the International Style," he says, "its lightness, simplicity and formality." The architects took his rectangular design and tweaked it, making the front of the building sit at a slight angle to the back (think of an oblong, then rotate the back half through several degrees), creating an angled dip in the roof in the same way.

The summerhouse has a steel frame and timber walls. The carpentry of the pine studwork inside was executed so beautifully by a pair of New Zealanders that it has simply been planed down and left exposed. The struts of wood that make up the stud structure can be used as slender shelves. The roof is polycarbonate. "We went for the cheapest construction method," says Ullmayer.

There are advantages to building a stand-alone structure. Where your back extension necessitates weeks of living with plastic sheeting instead of walls, and sharing your home with the builders and their radio, the outdoor location keeps the inconvenience at arm's length. "We watched this thing emerge in the garden," says David. "It was really painless. And it took only eight weeks to complete." In fact, says Ullmayer, it took longer to design and draw than to build: "It was tiny and fast. Really inspiring."

The end result is two rooms (a small back one with a sink and some storage, and a larger, minimally furnished front one that opens right up to the garden) and a separate tool room slotted in between. This contains an industrial chipper to chop branches into bark, a mower and some of David's paintings. (He paints in his spare time; Sybil is training to be a professional garden designer.) The side wall has been mirrored with a sheet of highly polished stainless steel. "I love it now," says Sybil, "but at first I thought it sounded over the top. I have to rein David in sometimes. He has great drive, but I'm the voice of reason."

"Actually, she thought it might look pretentious," says David. The designers waited until the 11th hour to put it in place. "I've loved doing up the flowerbed beside it more than any other," says Sybil. "It gets the afternoon and evening sun — it changes the whole garden."

On summer Sundays, lunch is taken down the garden, and the family stays in or around the summerhouse all day. In winter, it's the scene of fiercely fought table tennis contests. It's sparsely furnished with a battered brown leather armchair, a couple of wooden chairs and a Habitat coffee table. But the floor is insulated and half an hour with a blow heater is enough to warm it.

So, is the outbuilding the next stop for the family bulging beyond the walls of its metropolitan house? There's no doubt that the short walk from kitchen to shed can dispel much family fury. And, as Sylvester says, "It pushes the garden shed to the limit."

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Mirror, mirror: David and Sybil Caines (right, with their two sons) employed architects to design their summerhouse. The mirroring was David's idea, but Sybil was less sure: 'I thought it sounded over the top,' she says. 'I have to rein David in sometimes. But now I love it. It changes the whole garden.'

SUMMER HOUSE RULES

1 Spend time developing a detailed brief. The more your architect understands what you want, the quicker and better the result.

2 Phone your local planning officer (ask for planning control) to discuss what comes under the category of 'shed/summerhouse'. Generally, guidelines state that it cannot be more than 50 cubic metres, or within 5m of the house. It cannot occupy more than 50% of the garden, or be more than 3m (flat roof) or 4m (pitched roof) high.

3 You won't be able to have running water: connection to the mains elevates a structure from a shed to a building. The Caines' summerhouse has a hose pipe connection back to the house. But it does have an electrical supply, which is permitted.

4 If you don't need planning permission, then you don't need to talk to the neighbours. But a bit of local consultation never goes amiss. One wall of the Caines's building looks on to a neighbour's garden, so they asked her to choose what colour she wanted it painted.

5 Insist on hardy materials — this is an outbuilding after all; make sure they are properly sealed and weatherproofed; and be aware that maintenance will be involved. The Caines' plywood wall will need to be resealed once a year to keep the building in good shape.

6 This is a vulnerable building, so it's important to consider issues of security at the design stage.

7 'I see this as a long-term investment for us as a family, rather than a way of upping the value of our house,' says Sybil. But while it might not increase the market price of the property, it certainly elevates its desirability.

8 'Modest projects like this can be good for talented, young architects,' says David. 'Just because it's small, don't think a young architect won't be interested.'