

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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## Inside an architect's head

By Edwin Heathcote

### A look at two 'built expositions of ideas' in the third of a series on influential houses



Ernő Goldfinger at 2 Willow Road

Modern British architects have traditionally been accused of building concrete monstrosities for the masses and then returning home to their elegant Georgian houses. Sir John Soane (1753-1837) couldn't really help it – he was, after all, a Georgian. Ernő Goldfinger (1902-1987), however, famously lived at his Brutalist concrete Balfour Tower in east London for a couple of months in 1968, his wife throwing champagne receptions for the residents while Goldfinger asked probing questions about what the new inhabitants liked or disliked about life in the tower. In the end, of course, he returned to his house in Hampstead.

These were two very different architects from very different eras yet their houses, both open to the public, betray a number of intriguing similarities.

Soane was the most brilliant British architect of his time. His work on the Bank of England (most of which has since been replaced or demolished) made him famous among his peers. But it is his brilliantly eccentric house that has ensured his survival in London's collective memory as the city's strangest architectural mind.

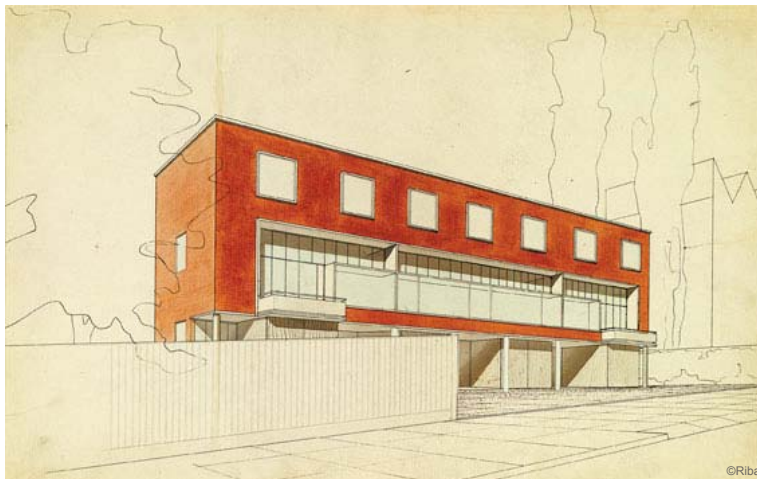
Soane bought a plain, brick-fronted house in Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1792 and added two neighbouring houses over the next three decades. During his lifetime, he referred to the houses as his "museum", and that is exactly what they were: a repository of artefacts from ancient sculptures and contemporary paintings to the massive stone sarcophagus of Egyptian pharaoh Seti I. The façade gives little away. With its applied stone screen it is distinguished from the neighbouring brick frontages but it gives no hint of the rich interior.

This is a curious kind of house, a place stuffed with mirrors and books, with arches and niches, with mysterious sources of light falling on sculpted stone heads and architectural salvage. Each room has a distinctly different character, each defined by its light and colour, by the density of its decoration but also, more importantly, by its place in a narrative that Soane constructed to give the house a fictional past. The architect created a spurious history, which explained the existence of such spaces as the "Monk's Yard" and the "Monument Court". Even today it is an extraordinary work of architectural narrative that imbues the house with a sense of instant intrigue, history and meaning quite apart from that which it has gathered over the past two centuries. But it also means that a walk around the house becomes something as close as it is possible to get to a journey around the inside of an architect's head. It is like strolling around the mind of Soane, with its memories, its engrained debt to history and myth, its dark corners and surprising fictions – and it is one of the world's outstanding architectural experiences.

Like Soane's house, the home of Ernő Goldfinger hides behind an unassuming façade. But whereas Soane tried to differentiate his house from the brick terrace through the application of a theatrical screen, Goldfinger has attempted to tone down his more usual rigorous modernism with a contextual approach designed not to frighten the neighbours of liberal, genteel Hampstead.

It failed. If the name Goldfinger is familiar it is more likely to be because of the Bond villain than the architect. Bond creator Ian Fleming was a neighbour and, outraged at the Hungarian architect's design, he named one of his most despicable, money and power-hungry villains Goldfinger.

Looking at it now, that degree of venom is hard to understand. Goldfinger was a continental modernist in a country not yet ready for modernism. Many of the big figures of the movement – Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy – had come through London and escaped to the US (where they were lauded and commissioned) as soon as they were able. Goldfinger stayed.



Design for the exterior of 13 Willow Road, Hampstead

His house was designed on the edge of Hampstead Heath in 1938 and paid for largely by his wife's inheritance. She was Ursula Blackwell of the Crosse & Blackwell food company. Like Soane's house it is three units of flat-fronted brickwork. Goldfinger rented out the two houses on either side to provide an income for his fledgling practice. Also like Soane's house, Goldfinger creates a central feature that stands proud of the façade, a long picture window that spans all three houses giving the impression of a single grand dwelling. The façade is split in classic modernist tripartite style, with *piloti* (slender round columns), a *piano nobile* (expressed in that long window) and an upper, more private floor with a row of square windows. Inside however, the house becomes much more interesting. The entrance lobby features screen walls, backlit from the street, creating a grid of shelves on each of which is an object. It becomes the first of many cabinets of curiosities, more contained than Soane's but perhaps more striking against the plainness of the architecture. The main reception room spans the building, back to front, and the rear windows open up to give a view of Hampstead's expensive rooftops. The room can be divided with a folding timber wall but it is split level with the architect's studio at a lower level and the living room raised on a kind of stage – with storage beneath. It raises the act of everyday living to a heightened drama, a theatrical approach in an otherwise apparently simple space.

While Soane's house is cluttered with antiquities and furniture, Goldfinger's displays are more concentrated but, nevertheless, striking. One wall features a mounted timber box containing abstract artworks but they are made less precious by a row of books standing upright at the bottom of the box and a few small sculptures sitting outside the box on its top. It looks like a modernist manifesto – art, form and text together. Everything here is built-in, though often made from the most mundane of materials, veneered wood, bent piping, bolted-on lamps and clocks. The furniture is ingenious, every wall seemingly hiding a cabinet or a set of drawers. It is as if the house has a secret life, one hidden behind the flush fittings and built-in bookcases. Soane's house similarly features an ingenious folding gallery in which paintings are hung one behind the other and pivot out like a series of doors. Both architects were notable collectors, friends of the great artists of their day. Soane's collection includes Turners alongside works by Piranesi, Canaletto and Hogarth; Goldfinger's embraces Max Ernst, Bridget Riley and Henry Moore.

Both houses now appear the epitome of good taste and intelligence in architecture; in fact, Goldfinger's was the first modernist building to be acquired by the National Trust. Yet both caused a stir at the time. Soane's neighbours complained about the excessive ego displayed in his stone frontages (though, to contemporary eyes, they look rather modest), and Goldfinger's about the lack of pitched roofs. Defending the form of the houses, Goldfinger wrote: "They are designed in a modern adaptation of the 18th-century style, and are far more in keeping with the beautiful Downshire Hill houses round the corner than their neighbours in Willow Road ... As for the objection that the houses are rectangular, only the Eskimos and the Zulus build anything but rectangular houses."

Both Soane's and Goldfinger's houses have become museums and, in a way, it suits them as well as when they were dwellings. Both embody architects' ideals of the house not only as a place for living but as a built exposition of ideas. They are advertising, psychoanalysis, gallery and memorial and they remain London's most inspirational interiors.

2 Willow Road is owned by the National Trust, [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/2-willow-road](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/2-willow-road)

13 Lincoln's Inn Fields is open to the public, [www.soane.org](http://www.soane.org)

*'The Meaning of Home'* by Edwin Heathcote is published by Frances Lincoln (£12.99)

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