

Interiors: My own private hidey hole

It's every dad's fantasy: a state-of-the-art studio at the bottom of the garden. John Crace explores one man's masterpiece



John Crace
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'My partner didn't mind me using the dead space at the end of the garden, but she insisted that both the fig trees had to stay.' Photograph: Michael Franke for the Guardian

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Whatever it is, it's striking. With half the building below ground and with no two walls or windows the same, it's even bigger than it first appears. "The architects [[the Latis Group](#)] and I wanted to create a structure that maximised the work space while minimising the footprint, so it made sense to dig out the garden. But we also wanted a design that disorientated people, so you couldn't necessarily tell what was happening on the inside from the outside."

Compromise also played its part. The neighbours on both sides had been reasonably accommodating in the planning process – not least because they, too, had either already built a studio or were thinking about doing so. "There was – how shall I put it? – a certain synergy," he laughs. "No one raised any objections and they both claim to love the design." The real obstacle was Joseph-Lester's partner.

The studio was always planned as his work space, both for creating video installations and for writing, so his partner, film editor Mopsa Wolff, didn't get too much say in its design. "She didn't mind me using the dead space at the end of the garden," he says, "but she insisted both the fig trees had to stay. And that's really how the cantilevered upper storey came about, as you can't build within a certain distance of a tree because of the roots."

The project took about two years and went about £10K over the £20K budget, but Joseph-Lester reckons he still created a lot of space comparatively cheaply. So has it all worked out as intended? "The stairwell down to the door is steeper than we expected, so we'll probably have to put a grate over it to stop the kids falling down," he says. "And it sticks out a couple of feet further into the garden than we thought. You'd be amazed how important 2ft of garden can be in a relationship."

Inside the studio, things haven't entirely worked out either. "You can never be sure how you're going to use a building until you move in, and I'd imagined I'd use the upper floor for thinking and designing, and the ground floor for making things. But I enjoy the ground floor more, so that's where I spend most of my time. And although the building was deliberately designed without phone or internet access, they've somehow made their way in."

There are also unexpected pleasures, such as the worm's-eye view of the garden from the basement-level window, but the interior still looks unfinished. Again that's part accident, part design. "I always wanted the walls to be blank so I could use them as a projection screen, but there's still a load of snagging to do. I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever get round to it. I haven't a clue what to do with the floor, so I might just leave it as concrete."

And how does he imagine the building in 10 years' time? "Almost certainly as a place that has been taken over by teenage children, from which I will be banned."

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