

View to a thrill

For ideas and inspiration you can't beat next month's London Open House, when a record 600 buildings open their doors to the public, says Jane Barry

LONDONERS will next month have an extraordinary chance to overdose on architecture, entirely free of charge, from Brent to Bexley, from Havering to Hackney. The weekend of 18-19 September is London Open House weekend. New domestic houses on show include the 2003 U-shaped Highgate house by Beisize Architects, with its triple-height glass atrium, basement swimming pool and sunken garden, and two Grade II* listed sensitively restored Bauhaus semis in Ruislip.

The weekend will allow visitors the biggest snoop through the widest selection of buildings not normally available to visitors, from architects' offices and the headquarters of the Crown Estate to the Institute of Psychoanalysis.

Last year, 500 buildings opened, this year 100 new venues have been added, while old favourites, such as Ralph Erskine's 1992 Ark, in Hammersmith, are back after a break. And other enduring attractions remain.

"The Foreign Office is hugely popular," says Open House's project manager, Nicolette Spera. "And there are always queues for City Hall. Last year, it had 10,000 visits across the weekend."

There is, I discovered last year, a technique to get the most out of the Open House event. Pick up the guide book (available from local libraries from Friday, or by contacting Open House) and it will instantly break your heart. There is just so much to see.

After all, how do you reconcile your longing to view Grade II* listed 16th century Walnut Tree House in Waltham Forest with the exotic appeal of Hounslow's Russian Orthodox Cathedral, or the chance to go behind the scenes at Arne Jacobsen's 1977 Danish Embassy in Knightsbridge with visiting the expressionist Rudolf Steiner House off Baker Street?

My companion, Diana, a Blue Badge tourist

guide, sensibly pointed out that, with this programme, what we would see most of was the Tube. In the end, by concentrating mainly on one borough, Westminster, and choosing mainly Georgian architecture, we managed to visit 11 buildings, enjoying a feast of Kent, Nash, Wyatt and Adam that dizzied us with cantilevered staircases, rich inlays and opulent mouldings.

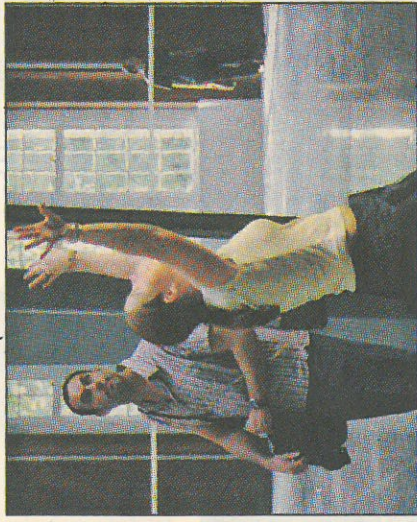
Tearing down Park Lane on the Sunday afternoon, we just missed the last tour of the recently refurbished Art Deco Park Lane Hotel — but settled for the hotel's traditional English tea as we soothed our blistered feet.

We also volunteered to help out for one morning. More than 3,000 people act as volunteer guides and stewards, and volunteering comes with a useful perk: a badge that lets you jump those queues at top-draw destinations such as City Hall and Horse Guards. And it is also huge fun.

At Trinity House, the restored Wyatt building opposite the Tower of London that is the headquarters of two mariners' charities and the body that looks after Britain's lighthouses, Diana used her skill to guide visitors round the collection of marine artefacts and paintings. As a steward, I myself needed no specialist knowledge. But as an architecture nut, I am eternally intrigued by what attracts so many of us to historic buildings.

You cannot visit a building without becoming fascinated by the life within. At Richard Rogers' Lloyd's Building, for instance, the conflict that arose between architect and client is writ large in the clash between the soaring structure and the traditional 1930s-style wooden brokers desks huddling, earth-bound, beneath.

At Marlborough House, famously the scene of lavish partying by Edward VII when he was Prince of Wales and now the London headquarters of the Commonwealth, it is intriguing to think of all those Commonwealth leaders



Inner space: it is hard to visit the London Open House buildings without becoming fascinated and inspired



Class class: the U-shaped Highgate house, 67 Sheldon Avenue, N6, is a breathtaking design by Beisize Architects

meeting amid the trappings of Empire they achieved independence to escape.

Some people visit buildings to get inspiration for their own interior décor. At Trinity House, the quality of the dusting was frequently praised — far superior, in fact, as one lady told me, to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (26 Whitehall, SW6), where the Grimalding Gibbons carvings were thickly coated.

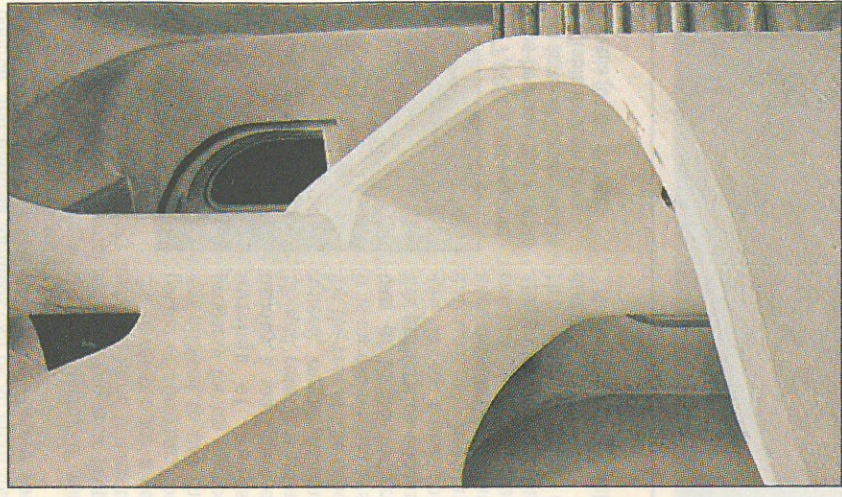
New public buildings to enjoy this year include the refurbished Empress State in Fulham, a 1960s office tower with a revolving 30th floor offering spectacular views across London. There are also

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the 2003 BBC White City Media Village, featuring a central street inlaid with work by Poet Laureate Andrew Motion and graphic designer John Morgan, and Sloane Square's Peter Jones, the Grade II* listed modernist department store that recently underwent a five-year, £107 million refurbishment.

Will I get to see those Ruislip semis? Will I finally be in time for the last tour at the Park Lane Hotel? One thing is certain — this year's Open House is yet again going to leave me dazzled and blistered.

For further details about the London Open House weekend, call 0900 160 0061, or visit www.londonopenhouse.org.



Step inside: based on organic plant forms, this sculptural staircase is at Rudolf Steiner House and Theatre, 35 Park Road, NW1, Grade II listed and a unique example of London expressionist architecture



Towering vision: 360-degree views from the 30-storey 1960s Empress State Building, Empress Approach, SW6, recently given an £80 million refit



Round trip: a Chinese-style apartment in The Canal Building, 135 Shepherdess Walk, N1, complete with carp pond and moon gate



Dwelling on art: these two restored semi-detached houses are a surprise in Park Avenue, Ruislip. Grade II* listed, they are built in the Bauhaus style