



The courtyard on Sheldon Avenue by Belsize Architects Picture: BELSIZE ARCHITECTS

Courtyards aren't just the preserve of a warmer, sunnier climes. Belsize Architects' Shahriar Nasser talks to **Frankie Crossley** about why they are growing in popularity in London

In the metropolis it can be hard at times to find a quiet space to take in the fresh air. Many north Londoners are turning to courtyards as a means by which to make the most of their space without compromising on style or access to the outdoors.

By definition a courtyard is an area enclosed by walls or buildings but left open to the sky, an arrangement that lends itself perfectly to homeowners looking to carve out niches of serenity in the urban sprawl.

Shahriar Nasser of Belsize Architects explains that the courtyard has a long and illustrious heritage in Europe and further afield.

Quads in Oxford and Cambridge have been established for centuries, and many European towns and cities were laid out around residential courtyards.

"Courtyard typology was heavily in use in 18th and 19th century French, Italian and Spanish buildings," he says. "The courtyard became a refuge from the hustle and bustle of the town."

Nasser found his passion for courtyard architecture whilst studying in Tehran. Wandering its streets, he was inspired by the ancient Persian architecture all around him. "The discovery of old houses was fascinating," he says. "Walking

around going through narrow, winding lanes and coming across portal entrances from time to time. You felt you had reached a destination."

Once inside, surprises abound. Often courtyards would have been planted with fragrant citrus trees or plants bearing pomegranates. The Iranian climate necessitated this architectural style.

"In the centre of Iran the climate is harsh," explains Nasser. "Exposed outdoors areas are inhospitable in dusty desert winds. "By having a courtyard you could remove the wind and create warmer areas as the heat can be retained," he explains.

Although no shamal winds blow through Hampstead and Highgate, the design ideal translates beautifully to the British climate, where a courtyard can allow year-round use of the outside space.

Even if you are one of the lucky cohort to own property with a large garden space, our temperamental island climate renders them obsolete for much of the year.

A conservatory or the hugely popular 'glass box' style extension is one way to bring the outside in, but only a courtyard can give you access to fresh air within the sheltered confines of walls.

No wonder homeowners are turning

The courtyard at Sheldon Avenue allows views of the adjacent rooms. Picture: BHSZ ARCHITECTS



Centre court

to courtyard designs to make better use of their precious outside space.

"You can create your own micro climate," Nasser explains. "You might be able to sit out in the middle of March, whereas in an open garden it would be unpleasant."

A courtyard can keep an outdoor area cool during the summer months, whilst sheltering it from chill winds in the colder months and retaining heat absorbed from the winter sun.

For once in London, it's not just all about the weather. Courtyards can have an important social function to play within a home.

"I think it creates a better connectivity and healthier social life within," says Nasser. "Courtyards make community, they make us have to face each other and not ignore each other."

At a property he designed on Sheldon Avenue, a courtyard was installed between the bedrooms and family room to allow views of the adjoining rooms, including the indoor swimming pool.



The interior courtyard at Kent Terrace by Belsize Architects. Picture: NICK KANE

"The courtyard itself functions as a room," he explains. If you're hosting a party, a courtyard space can be covered to provide an extra space for socialising whatever the weather.

After extensive research, Fiona Kirkwood of Kirkwood McCarthy also came to the conclusion that courtyards are the perfect solution for creating outside spaces that



Case study

An Interior Courtyard

A semi-detached property in Muswell Hill was transformed by an interior courtyard. The project on Pages Lane was Highly Commended in the Lew London Architecture 2017 Improve, Don't Move awards. Architects Kirkwood McCarthy were faced with a dark and introverted plan, typical of Victorian properties, and tasked with creating an extension that would up the interior living space without compromising on the original structure.

"The courtyard is critical to the successful extension and reconfiguration of this home," says Fiona Kirkwood, director at Kirkwood McCarthy.

"It preserved the daylight and outlook of the original front living rooms and establishes a

garden sequenced view through the house that has a magical dappled light quality from the Acer tree. The design instils clarity between the original and new elements, widening the interior space and making the most of the southern garden aspect.

"Centralised within the ground floor layout, the courtyard structures a visual interconnectivity between the various living and garden spaces," says Kirkwood.

With a monochromatic palette integrating graphite zinc and black steel with original brick and timber panelling, the effect is one of synergy between old and new, a seamless flow between the garden and interior, and a holistic sense of space and light.



are completely functional.

"We have explored a variety of mechanisms to help clients improve the relationship of house with garden," she says. She experimented with green walls in dense urban spaces and double height glazing to overcome limited daylight, but in the end courtyards came up trumps.

"Courtyards treat the outdoors as a room of equal value to an internal room," she explains.

Courtyards don't necessarily have to be outside, either. On Kent Terrace, Nasser modernised a listed property by integrating a courtyard into the interior of the basement. The original building was set slightly apart from a newer rear extension, with a small landscaped area filling the void.

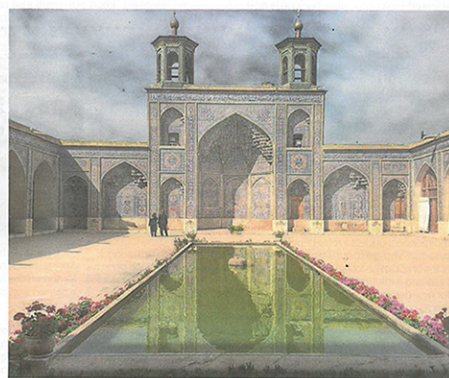
"The reason for this is to let them both breathe and see each other, and have a dialogue with each other," explains Nasser. The natural light that now floods the basement has the added benefit of a positive impact on wellbeing. "It creates a feeling of calm and joy."



Andalusian open spaces have a long tradition of courtyard architecture. Picture: GETTY IMAGES

With increasing numbers of homeowners choosing to improve their existing homes instead of moving, we predict that integrated courtyard spaces are only set to become more popular.

As for Nasser, the search for the ideal courtyard continues. "I am yet to design my dream courtyard building," he says.



The courtyard of the Pink Mosque in Shiraz, Iran. Picture: GETTY IMAGES