

Forget granny flats, here's a three-generation house deluxe

For one London family, building a better home for grandma was an opportunity to create something truly inspiring, finds Emily Brooks

When Ben Magid and his mother, Christine, realised the home that she was renting was no longer fit for purpose as she got older, they didn't take the usual route of looking for a bungalow, or some alternative accommodation with a granny annexe. Their solution was more drastic, but far more exciting: the pair bought the overgrown plot of land that backed on to her home and turned it into an eco-friendly, architect-designed new house that will suit three generations of family living for years to come.

Christine was renting a first-floor flat in a north London terraced house with no outside space – a lack that, as a gardener, she keenly felt – and her health had been deteriorating, so the stairs were far from ideal. The plot of land in question was part of a dairy farm in the early 20th century and had last been used as a martial-arts studio, but was completely neglected. It was owned by Ben's friend, who also owned the house that Christine was renting. The friend had secured planning permission to create a new home on the land, but couldn't afford to do it himself, so Ben bought the site instead.

"We wanted to use the opportunity to build something that could house all of us together at the same time," says Ben. "It seemed a waste of money and opportunity to build a smaller home just for my mum."

"We didn't really explore a granny-flat idea. This was to be a house primarily that blended my mum's needs and the family's needs so that the house was more usable for generations to come."



▲ Everywhere in the house has access to the garden, including the bedrooms

Sustainable design was something else he was passionate about, which led him to the architect Sarah Wigglesworth. Wigglesworth is best known for her own home, which appeared on the first series of *Grand Designs* in 1999, and was most memorable for its straw-bale insulation, but packed with other ahead-of-its-time eco-experiments. Remarkably, she hadn't been asked to build a one-off house since that project, but Ben and Christine's venture chimed in with her twin interests in sustainable design and buildings that can evolve over time to suit multiple ages and stages of life.

The three-bedroom, single-storey house she has designed has a magical sense of unfolding discovery about it, approached through an unassuming timber door and then via a long garden to reach the front door proper. Visitors then find themselves at the crook of an L-shaped layout, with the bedrooms straight ahead and an open-plan kitchen-diner, with a sitting area beyond, to the left. Both sides overlook an enclosed garden that is a haven of tranquillity, which has incorporated an old greenhouse frame, a relic from the site that's now an outdoor seating area. "Everybody benefits from the garden, no matter where you are in the building," says Wigglesworth, adding that the openings on to the garden from both sides of the L-shape give the house a "porosity" so that all the family members – Christine, Ben, his partner, Tereza, and their four-year-old son, Ray – can always be popping in and out of the garden.

A straightforward layout is more desirable for older occupants, says Wigglesworth, because it is still easy to understand for people with dementia, but in Christine's case it is a package of smaller but important details that make her life easier. The level thresholds between inside and out don't present trip hazards; a boiling-water tap means not having to lift a heavy kettle; lever door handles and taps rather than



'In the shower, there's just one button to press and the water comes on at the right temperature'

turning ones help arthritic hands. Wigglesworth laments the lack of choice on the market for things such as grab-bars and handles that suit her architect's eye for aesthetics but also have the necessary functionality.

"It's lovely. So easy to live in," is Christine's review of her new home. "Everything is on one level and it's away from the road, so there's no noise. In the shower, there's just one button to press and the water comes on at the right temperature – no knobs to turn." She says she "only asked for one thing – a fireplace" and this, too, has been thought through, with a raised brick edge that can be sat on while tending the fire and wood-storage at standing level.

What's good for Christine is good for the youngest generation, too. With everything on one level, says Ben: "Ray can

push his toys and cars around the whole house without stubbing a toe or tripping, and there's a handle to hold on to for getting into the deep bath."

The house is a passive one, which means that, via thick insulation, triple glazing, airtightness and other measures, it's highly energy efficient, costing about £50 per month in electricity bills (there's no gas as the heating is electric, via air-source heat pump). As with all of the design tweaks made to make this a "lifetime home", lots of small changes have added up to a more sustainable whole, such as Sarah and Ben's rejection of plastic-bead insulation in favour of paper mulch.

This extended family's home may be unusual for its urban backland setting, but many of the lessons contained within it are not. Multigenerational living is on the rise: according to a



▲ Design tweaks in every room enable an elderly person to be comfortable and safe

report published by insurance firm Aviva in September, one in three homes can be classified this way. And while younger adult children staying at home longer accounts for a good chunk of these statistics, the report also found

that older relatives living with family members were increasing, accounting for 14 per cent of all multigenerational households, up from 9 per cent in 2016.

As Wigglesworth points out, though, the type of housing the UK actually builds lags behind these changes in the way we're living: greater flexibility is what's required. "Typically, the way that marketing of housing works is that you've got your first-time buyer, then your family home and then your downsizers," she says. "It's all very targeted, when in fact, 'long life, loose fit' is actually quite good. There's lots of models of how to live: we're interested in really opening up the possibilities of different ways of doing it that mean that people can stay in their communities for longer." By not opting for the typical "granny annexe" set-up, Ben reflects: "I think the house will do well over time. Because it is one house and not an annexed house, I think it suits us now and will suit us as just as much when my partner, son and I live there in the years to come."

Typical of the upheaval that 2020 brought, Ben and Tereza's plans did not go as expected. Because of coronavirus travel restrictions, in April they found themselves unable to fly home from a trip to Australia and New Zealand to visit family. It brought home how different things would have been if Christine had still been in the old house. Ben says that living there "simply wouldn't have been possible in her current state of health". He says: "I talked to my mum about this just recently as she came out of hospital, and any stairs would have made life impossible. The new house caters for her so well and means she can live at home comfortably and safely. Knowing that she is safe and happy there made being away so much easier."



Ben Magid, his mother, Christine, and four-year-old son, Ray, live in the same house

The L-shaped design enables occupants to walk into the garden from either side



'Everybody benefits from the garden, no matter where you are in the building'

With everything on one level, there are no trip hazards for Christine