

**Architecture** | Unorthodox properties call for unorthodox methods when putting them on the market. By *Edwin Heathcote*

In architecture, the conventional wisdom is that a radical statement home is expensive to build, difficult to maintain and, if you one day need to sell it, will have niche appeal. You should expect it to depreciate in value more than if you build something bland.

I never entirely understood this sentiment, but the market has proven it true: it is not easy to sell eccentricity.

Take Walmer Yard, Peter Salter's four brilliant west London houses; quirky, intense, exciting — his sketches are in the V&A — yet despite being completed in 2016, they are not all yet sold. There could be a number of reasons: unusual homes might demand a particular way of living that doesn't chime with contemporary tastes. Their plans could be radical but not include the things people actually want (lots of bedrooms, even more bathrooms). And they might look outright odd: they attract attention.

Something, though, may be changing. A new breed of estate agent is capitalising on individuality: the modus operandi for these relative newcomers — such as Swiss outfit Poeticwalls and others — is to market unusual homes not as real estate, but as art.

The Blue House in Hackney, built in 2002 by architects FAT (an acronym for Fashion, Architecture, Taste) as a home for founder Sean Griffiths, is the latest addition to Poeticwalls' international portfolio, priced at £3.7mn. It is perhaps one of the best — and certainly one of the most fun — houses in the city (and architecture is rarely known for its fun): part pop art, part postmodern and "cartoonish".

Architecture is a three-dimensional art form, but FAT used the facade as a tricky two-dimensional canvas, enveloping the building in shiplap cladding painted as blue as the sky in a child's painting. Cutouts along the facade and roofline portray and subvert familiar domestic motifs, from gabled roofs and suburban scenes to fluffy clouds — and the loft conversions that were proliferating across the city when it was built.

Griffiths later added a pebble-dash roof extension; something between a



seaside cottage and a brutalist gallery. The interiors, however, are airy and liveable. With blocks of colour, oversized architraves and balustrades like cutesy picket fences, they are perhaps less eccentric than the exterior might suggest, but still thoughtful, colourful and consistently surprising.

The humour of FAT's design was, in part, because it was sited in a largely ungentrified area of light industry and social housing and — at the time — devoid of the archetypes it satirised. That part of east London is now thoroughly gentrified; few young architects can afford to build their own homes here. Yet, even with the now-desirable location, you still might think this distinctive curio is a hard sell.

That's where Poeticwalls comes in. Founded by Swiss-based couple Michelle Nicol and Rudolf Schürmann, the estate agency markets a rarefied list of architecturally significant properties. Switzerland, much more so than the UK, has a number of noteworthy one-off modernist houses — the agency's listings



Clockwise from main: the Blue House in Hackney, £3.7mn through Poeticwalls; a home in Peter Salter's Walmer Yard, for sale through the Modern House; Upper Lawn, a slice of architectural history, £895,000 through The Modern House — Edmund Sumner; The Modern House

include those by the outstanding German architect Arno Brandhuber, the enigmatic and brilliant Peter Märkli, and Herzog & de Meuron, who rarely do private houses. The homes Poeticwalls takes on are selected by a "jury" of experts, and the website is more like browsing an expensive magazine than a listings site. Now they are taking on the Blue House.

Marketing houses partly based on their moment in the cultural canon isn't

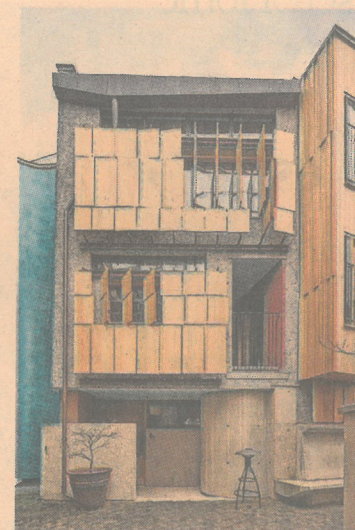
entirely new. In 2008 auction house Christie's listed Richard Neutra's sublime 1946 Palm Springs Kaufmann House in its Post-War and Contemporary Art sale, alongside works by Mark Rothko, Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol. It wasn't an unalloyed success, however: the great

**A new breed of estate agent is marketing unusual homes not as real estate, but as art**

modernist home sold at the lower end of its estimate — \$16.8mn — and then the purchase fell through.

Next to art, Griffiths says, architecture can look like a bargain. "Compared to a Gerhard Richter, a house is cheap," he says. (Earlier this year, Richter's "Korsika (Schiff)" (1968) was sold for \$15.245mn including buyer's premium at Christie's New York — though many have sold for much higher.) But is it weird seeing the home

## House&Home



that you lived in reimagined as art? "I suppose it always was meant as a kind of artwork," he laughs, "a statement. So it's OK."

Houses present a more reasonable and unarguably more useful alternative to blue-chip modern and contemporary art — which is now the preserve of only the very wealthiest and often kept in storage, unseen.

Architecture, conversely, is already on display. And it can be surprisingly easy to pick up a house that is an important part of architectural history. Alison and Peter Smithson's hugely influential Upper Lawn in Wiltshire, built in the early 1960s, is on the market for £895,000, for instance (you should know, however, that the Smithsons actually lived in a cottage nearby).

It is listed with The Modern House, another example of an estate agency that prizes design and architectural ingenuity over square footage. These houses are cultural artefacts and they can be enjoyed by everyone — including passers-by — as well as lived in. They are ready-made installations turning the streets themselves into galleries.

It's true that statement houses often do not have the same facilities as luxury developments aimed at the wealthy. They might be a tenth of the size of the McMansion that would be built on the plot if it were demolished (space expectations have hyper-inflated in recent years, particularly in the US).

But, realistically, these are unlikely to be the buyer's only residence. These homes deserve to be lived in — and when it comes to art the whole city can enjoy, the more exciting the better.