

Patrick Ellard's Span bungalow in New Ash Green, Kent,
is in harmony with its leafy surroundings

Spanning the years

PATRICK ELLARD HAD A SPAN UPBRINGING HOUSE, SCHOOL, SHOPPING CENTRE. YEARS LATER, UNABLE TO FIND ANYTHING THAT TOPPED IT, HE RETURNED WITH HIS PARTNER ALISON, AND BOUGHT THIS SPAN BUNGALOW IN THE SAME VILLAGE IN KENT

Words by **Claire Barrett** Photographs by **Adrian Briscoe**



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Patrick Ellard lives and breathes Span. His parents moved to New Ash Green, Kent, the only entire village to be planned by Span, in 1969. The family moved to Manchester in 1979 but five years later they packed up and, you guessed it, moved back. Patrick was a Span kid. 'I just saw everywhere else as unusual. I lived in a Span house, went shopping in a Span shopping centre and went to school in a Span school,' he tells me. It wasn't long before he was lured back. After years of renting grotty accommodation in London, Patrick and his partner, Alison Oakley, moved into their charming bungalow in New Ash Green.

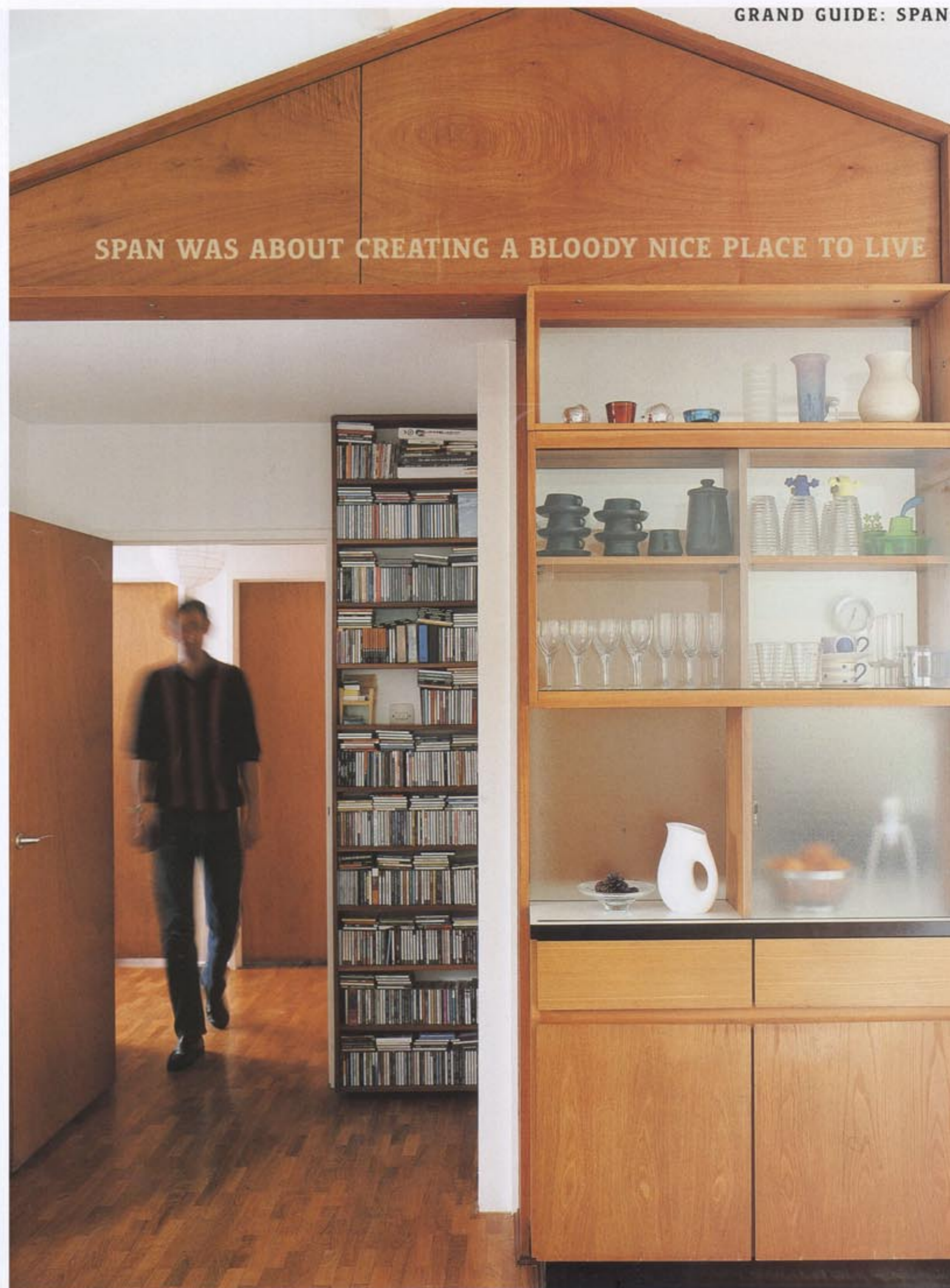
But Patrick's interest in the scheme doesn't stop there. He really is 'Mr Span' and must be the authority on its history. Having begun his own research into the period in 1997 (Patrick is an architecture and design historian and lecturer), he's now working on a book and exhibition on the subject (alongside Neil Bingham, among others, whose house also features in this issue). It therefore comes as no surprise that Patrick would want to live in a Span house. But going back to where you've grown up? It's not for everyone. 'There were questions,' he says. 'Should I go back to my old village? We weighed up what we could afford to buy in and out of London, as well as knowing that this was our only chance to buy an architect-designed house.' So, like many, Patrick and Alison decided to take their highfalutin standards outside London and Span fitted the bill.

Their exacting expectations led to the choice of a bungalow. The couple could afford a three-bed house in the village but they plumped for a two-bed semi-detached bungalow. They passed up more space as well as an upstairs. Why? The bungalow had had one owner who was a Span devotee, meaning that all the original fittings were intact. Patrick and Alison didn't want a house that had been stripped of all its good bits. There were original doors, windows, taps, tiles, handles and a parquet floor that had been hidden under Axminster for 30 years. Patrick's grin says it all. The original kitchen still exists, as does the original bathroom suite (made by Royal Doulton, meaning it still looks brand new), except for the toilet seat, which is a story in itself.

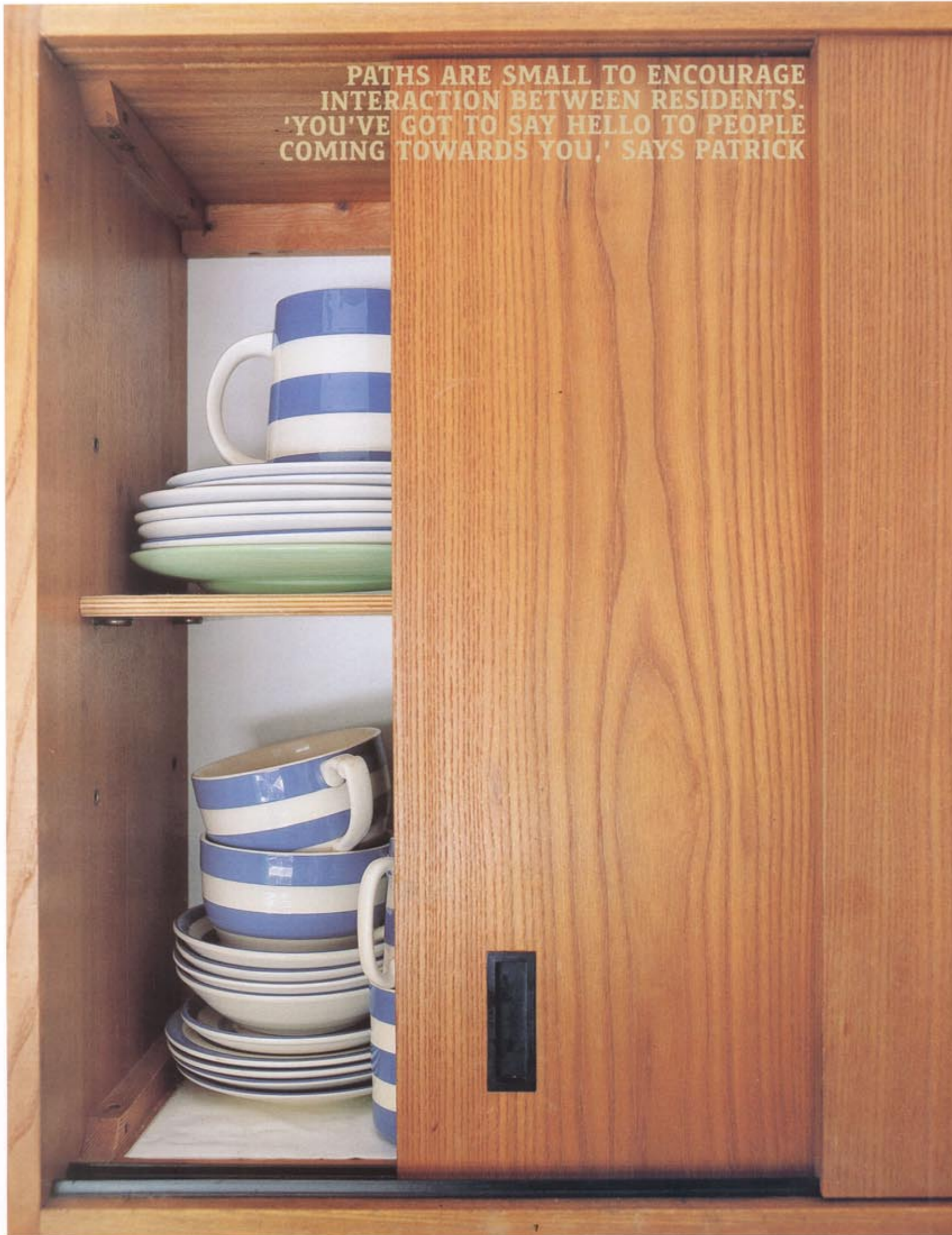
Recently, the seat finally caved in and had to be replaced. Easy, you think. Pop down to the local DIY store. But things are never that easy where Span and Patrick are concerned. He was after a replica. It had to be black and look pretty much the same as the last one. 'You can't buy black toilet seats these days,' he says, 'well, ones that haven't got scalloped edges!' Ooh, Span and scalloped edges. Any true devotee knows that the two just don't go. So Patrick got on the web. The old toilet seat still had its original maker's stamp and he traced the company, still in business in Manchester. Remarkably, it



This page, clockwise from above, Patrick and Alison at the entrance to their Span bungalow; the doors, handles and wood floor are all original; landscape is an important element of the Span vision; Span employed graphic designers to create house numbers. Opposite page, an integral storage unit divides the open-plan living room and kitchen



PATHS ARE SMALL TO ENCOURAGE INTERACTION BETWEEN RESIDENTS. 'YOU'VE GOT TO SAY HELLO TO PEOPLE COMING TOWARDS YOU,' SAYS PATRICK



This page, clockwise from right, sliding doors lead out on to the garden. The stool is by Alvar Aalto; a spread from Ideal Home magazine trumped New Ash Green; a chair designed by Patrick in the corner of the dining area; Eternit tiles have replaced original Span ceramic tiles; Patrick with a prototype for an outdoor wooden chair. Opposite page, a kitchen cupboard is full of TG Green Cornish Ware pottery



still makes the exact same seat and Patrick is now the proud owner of another. 'It's a basic contract toilet seat that costs £8, but I couldn't buy it direct,' he says as he begins to recount his story. 'It had to be shipped to a retailer, who had to sell it to me and then send it here. They thought I was potty! It cost me £48 for a toilet seat they use in schools!' That's dedication for you.

The story goes a long way to show the couple's respect for the building. They simply think that Span got it right, designing high-quality houses for everybody. 'They didn't want to create an exclusive middle class place,' Patrick says. 'Leslie Bilsby [the developer] talked about catering for the family in depth, which meant for children through to grandparents and relatives.' Houses were designed accordingly. Bungalows (of which there are many versions) were designed for the elderly and placed in a quieter area of the village. There were houses nicknamed 'newlyweds', after the 95 per cent mortgage scheme run by Span, which accepted couples if it was their first house purchase and the husband was between 21 and 30 years of age. They were able to decorate their house themselves from a palette of paints and wallpapers (Span usually did all this for you), and the usual cost was subtracted from the deposit. A whole range of different-sized houses was designed for the needs of people of different ages and their different family situations: two-beds to five-beds, various configurations, various neighbourhoods.

And Span's approach to architecture was just as rigorous. Patrick's description of Eric Lyons, Span's architect, is illuminating. 'He'd always be on site. He'd redesign part of the house on site in the mud if he thought it could be improved. He had this vision. He was a very driven man, a dynamic figure. That's why I've got this appreciation for him.' Small details in Patrick and Alison's house highlight this. Five doorways peel off the hall. Not one has the same dimensions. The largest leads into the living room, accentuating it as both the key social space and the place of entry. The elements in the house aren't off the peg. 'It was all dictated by the need of the user,' says Patrick. It was about making a better space for people to inhabit. If something needed to be changed, it was. The next house was always better. 'Not a day goes by when I don't think what New Ash Green would have been like if it had been finished,' Patrick tells me. Span went bust in 1969, primarily because the Greater





This page, clockwise from left, the kitchen side of the integral storage unit/room divider; an original Span light switch; glassware neatly stored; the original Royal Doulton bathroom, with replacement black toilet seat. Opposite page, the master bedroom looks out on to the garden

London Council (GLC) had signed up to take a quarter of the houses for council tenants but a Tory election victory led to a political change within the GLC and the plug was pulled. Span lost £1 million. The rest of the village was finished by Bovis, but the ethos was lost. They increased the density of houses, skimmed on landscaping and played with the designs. The result is a pale imitation.

This ethos extended beyond the houses to the gardens, to the communal spaces and the whole village. The fact that your garden was bathed in sunlight wasn't an accident. The splitting of car and pedestrian access was also planned – cars have their own roads, while villagers have their own narrow paths, deliberately small so as to encourage interaction between residents. 'You've got to say hello to people coming towards you,' says Patrick. Even the kitchens were put at the front of houses so that you could wave to people passing by. None of this was accidental. The fact that Span built on only 190 acres of a 430-acre site says it all. The rest is given over to communal space, which was the pull for Alison. 'It was the landscaping that impressed me most,' she says. Span was about creating a bloody nice place to live. 'An architect must offer something to society,' Lyons was known for saying.

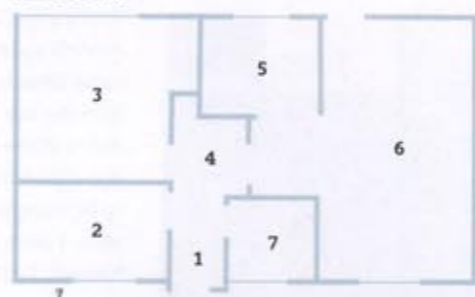
People loved it. New Ash Green was trendy. 'New Ash Green. New Village. New Way of Life', trumpeted the impressed *Ideal Home* magazine. 'People had different priorities then. It was the height of the Swinging Sixties and they wanted to embrace something new. Span was sold as new, as a utopian vision of the future,' says Patrick. 'It attracted people with a shared outlook, many from the architectural profession, who wanted to make it work.' But while it attracted designery types, it certainly had a broad base of residents. Its choice of materials helped. 'People like natural materials,' says Patrick. Span clad the houses at New Ash Green in wood and left brick exposed. 'It's softened modernism,' he continues. 'Although it's something very modern, there's a Britishness. It was accessible to everyone.'

Patrick's proud of his pad. So proud that he's scared of messing it up. Although they've got posters to hang on the walls and brightly coloured CD racks stashed under the bed for his huge collection, he and Alison are still mulling over where to put them. 'It took so long to get these bloody walls flat that I don't want to start drilling into them yet! I think it was the minimalist architect John Pawson that said most people like to see works of art on the walls but I see a wall as a work of art. I'll go along with that for the moment!' Patrick sees Span as perfection. It's easy to see why. ■

For further information on Span and New Ash Green, see the website created by Patrick and Alison: span-kent.co.uk



FLOOR PLAN



- 1 Entrance hall
- 2 Bedroom 2
- 3 Bedroom 1
- 4 Lobby
- 5 Kitchen
- 6 Living room
- 7 Bathroom



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