

# The logic of upside-down homes

There is a growing trend for topsy-turvy houses with living spaces upstairs. Hugh Graham investigates



A modern take on a ski chalet, this six-bedroom house in the Lake District was reconfigured by the interior design studio Nielsen House to maximise the water views. It has terraces on two levels

After centuries of going upstairs to bed, British homeowners are changing direction. When the Royal Institute of British Architects (Riba) released the longlist of contenders for its [house of the year](#) in July, six of the 20 properties had an upside-down layout: the living spaces upstairs, the bedrooms downstairs.

Stuart and Triff Skepelhorn can understand the appeal of

topsy-turvy living. The couple, both 59, who run Lolly Agency, a design and marketing agency in Sherborne, Dorset, previously lived in a converted Georgian manor house in a scenic location. “We had a beautiful view from the bedroom, but it was such a waste,” Triff says.

So when they set out to build their dream house in 2019 they were adamant about one thing: it had to be upside down. Stuart

had dreamt of having a house with the living room upstairs since he was eight, when he visited a house in Essex with an upstairs living room that was flooded with light. “I was, like, why can’t we live in a house like this? It has stuck with me.”

After their daughter, Daisy, left home the pair bought a cottage on two thirds of an acre outside Sherborne and decided to build a 2,580 sq ft house with







**4 Views** by AR Design Studio overlooks the countryside around Winchester. The views from the living room “make it a real time-wasting room”, the owner says

three bedrooms downstairs and a large living/dining/kitchen upstairs with two terraces. “The plot had views over open countryside,” Stuart explains. “To get the full benefit it made sense to go upstairs. We wanted maximum light, maximum visibility. I’m now looking out over blue sky, hedgerows, green grass, fields, and my eyeline is not the boundary of the fence 50m away, it’s the hills in the distance, six miles away. There’s such a sense of space and airiness. It’s uplifting and emotionally satisfying.”

“When we first moved in it



**Boase Street** by Dow Jones Architects is a conversion of a 1950s house in Newlyn, Cornwall. Its living space makes the most of views of the harbour and the Lizard peninsula

was like being on holiday every day,” Triff adds. “It’s calming. Whether it’s a winter’s night or a summer evening on the

terrace, we watch the sun set and it makes your heart sing.”

There are trade-offs. They have to carry the groceries upstairs, for instance (they contemplated putting in a dumb waiter or small lift but abandoned the idea for budgetary reasons). The flip side is that they don’t have to carry laundry up and down stairs, because they put the utility room downstairs. The living space got very hot this summer, but they compensated for that by opening the two sliding doors and erecting an awning over the south-facing terrace;





they also have a shady north-facing terrace. And the bonus is the downstairs bedrooms are cool in the summer.

Having the bedroom downstairs is a security concern for some clients, according to Tom Gascoyne, the creative director of Orme Architecture in Glastonbury, which built the project. The Skepelhorns are not concerned. “We feel secure in the countryside,” Stuart says. “We don’t even think about it. We don’t have curtains.”

They don’t use the garden much, instead preferring to view it from the terrace above, watching their Husqvarna Automower 405X robotic lawnmower doing its thing. Gascoyne says that most upsider-downers are not hands-on gardeners. They are empty nesters, though. “We’ve done quite a few upside-down houses, and the common denominator is the clients have got past the family stage; they’re between 50 and 70 and either retired or the kids have gone off to university. They want to have a bit of fun and design a house and try something they have never done before. They don’t have to keep an eye on the kids in the garden any more and worry about them eating worms off the lawn — they don’t have to get to them quickly.”

The obvious draw is the far-reaching view, and a better quality of light — roof lights can be installed if the living space is upstairs — as well as a feeling of openness. “It unlocks something that improves wellbeing,” Gascoyne says.

If clients are worried about the security of sleeping downstairs with the windows open, Orme will design a house with a master bedroom upstairs alongside the living area, if space allows. And there are ways around security concerns. You could, for example, landscape the area around the downstairs bedrooms with high shrubs in front of the windows, or install windows with vents that mean they don’t need to be opened. Or you could install security windows that you can lock at an opening of 10cm, says the architect Andy Ramus, the founder of AR Design Studio in Winchester.

Ramus warns that if you are a keen gardener, have kids or entertain outside a lot, you may want to think twice about building upside down. “Any time we build an upside-down home we put a kitchenette downstairs and an extra living room on the ground floor — if you entertain in the garden it can be quite a pain going up and down stairs carrying drinks and food and washing up.”

At the very least, he advises putting in an upstairs terrace that is big enough for entertaining, with room for a table and chairs and a barbecue. “I wouldn’t do an upside-down house unless the site demands it,” Ramus says. “If you’ve got a view from upstairs that you don’t get downstairs, it’s a no-brainer. You want the view in the living spaces. And you actually get more privacy on the first floor than you do on the ground floor. You don’t want

people looking directly into your lounge. If you’re elevated, when people look up at glass all they see is a reflection of sky.”

He has noticed that over the past five years Brits have opened their minds about upside-down living — after decades of watching *Grand Designs* they are less concerned that it will hurt resale value. On the contrary, says Blair Stewart, an agent with Strutt & Parker in the South Hams, Devon, who says about 60 per cent of the stock in coastal areas around Salcombe now have upside-down floorplans. The estate agency recently sold a house, marketed at £2.25 million, overlooking the Kingsbridge Estuary. “If the house had a standard layout you could assume it would lose 40 per cent of its value. Those ‘wow’ views are what people pay for and they want them in the most utilised rooms.”

Even housebuilders are dabbling. Barratt has built a house with a first-floor living room at Hunters Wood in Melksham, Wiltshire, and Lifestory has done the same at Jesmond Assembly near Newcastle.

There’s one unforeseen risk to first-floor living rooms, however. “It’s so nice upstairs, and I love the view so much, that I’ve become a hermit,” Stuart says. “Triff is always trying to get me to go out and do things, but I’ve got my little piece of paradise — I’m happy as Larry just staying in.”

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