

# Property: It's the pits!



by Oliver Stallwood

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■ We visit an ingenious development of 15 homes in a disused chalk

DISUSED quarries may be a dream for horror-movie location scouts but luxury home developers have tended to steer clear. Until now, that is.

A former chalk quarry near Guildford is now the site of 15 luxurious new homes, thanks in no small part to the vision of the engineers Thomasons and London-based Brookes Architects.

It's not difficult to see why the site is tempting. Out of commission for decades, Chantry Quarry is in a beautiful, secluded location, tucked away among natural woodland.



Terraced homes: The staggered design makes the most of the unusual site

It is also only ten minutes from Guildford town centre, which already has good transport connections, but will also eventually benefit from Crossrail 2, if the scheme finally goes ahead.

metre chalk cliff looms over the steep site which is surrounded by embankments from former quarry tailings and overgrown with self-seeded trees.

Rock stability, resident wildlife and even just getting access would all be a challenge.



Open house: Wide bifold doors bring the outside in

Tim Lane, from Brookes Architects says it was one of the most unusual locations he has seen, with many issues to consider. For example, the rockside had to be stabilised and a huge amount of material needed to be removed from the site while the properties' half-basements were excavated.

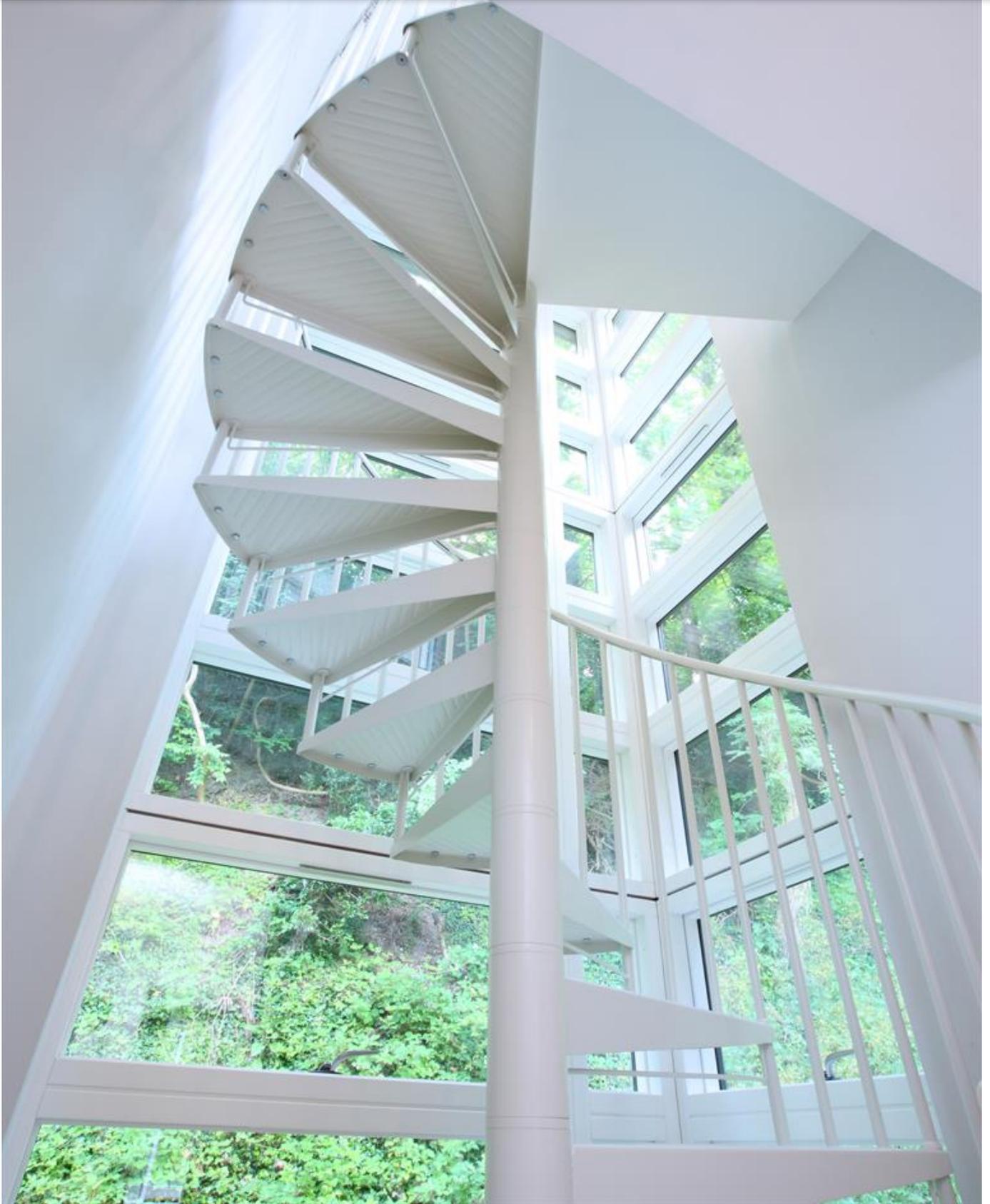
'Physically dealing with the quarry was by far the most challenging thing, although it was great fun watching the workers trying to stabilise the rock face, applying the netting and pinning by going up and down on abseils and ropes.'



Life on a cliff edge: The quarry's rocky sides are covered with Italian ivy

Rick Mallett, associate at Thomasons, says the site was in worse shape than had been anticipated when they embarked on the £12.5million project. 'The site had been quarried to a far greater extent than originally thought. There were many areas of chalk-fill embankments which needed stabilisation, once excavated, for the wider access way and the houses themselves.'

The design solutions needed to be creative. The first, and what turned out to be the biggest, problem was getting into the place at all. Because of the relatively thin nature of the site and its relationship to the adjacent plot, the developers had to cut in a steep bank all the way round up the access road.



Tread lightly: Not so much a stairwell as a lightwell

which was shipped over from Italy, and then planted. It's taken a very long time to establish. I think it's bedded in now, but it was a great challenge to get it applied to the quarry wall and make it grow.'

You enter at the lower level of the pit and the natural landscape banks up around the perimeter, so the back of the houses are half submerged and you come out first or second floor level at the rear of the houses, creating a visually interesting space between the back of the houses and the quarry. 'It was a pretty big challenge overall to achieve this,' says Tim.



Room with two views: One of the spacious bedrooms

There were more. There were the existing residents to consider — there were badger sets in the vicinity, and slow worms which had to be temporarily relocated from one area of the site to another.

'You can probably say they were the world's most expensive slow worm,' jokes Tim. The 15 four-bedroom houses were designed to fit along a long crescent terrace which gradually followed the curve of the quarry. Although

Tim explains: 'Because they are quite close to the road, we were trying to make the best use of the space at the back of the houses but we couldn't use it for the lower bits because of the nature of the structure. So we stepped them back to achieve living terraces and levels.'



Glass act: Interior glass walls mean that light can stream into every corner, even under the stairs

'As such, there are balconies at the first floor, then at the second you have large living terraces, on the third you have large terraces off the top bedrooms and on the roof there's further garden space. These step-back terraces were created so that you feel you are living in the trees and can enjoy the space, compensating for the very small yard space at the back of the property.'

The overall feel of the houses is firstly seclusion — impressive considering how close to the town they are. It's a small community hidden in an English jungle. The luxury cars parked outside are the only giveaway.

'There is an interesting quirkiness about these properties,' says Tim. 'As you go into these houses you have the main circulation stair core. This means

and there are glass screens between the stairs and the living areas, so you have this sense of connection through the house and light coming down from the top. It's quite special, really.'



Rock solid: The homes are beautifully finished, but there was a lot of ground work to do first

There is, indeed, a wow factor from the way the light cascades into the house. But, in theory, could this project be about far more than 15 luxury homes complete with their sun-dappled terraces?

Tim certainly hopes so. The development, which won four awards in the International Property Awards 2014, may inspire others to see the potential for sites such as these to be successfully developed into new housing.

'It's not something that's commonly done. It would be great if it set a precedent for future developments. But certainly, the secluded elements you get in this type of location are not matched by other sorts of sites, especially in town centres,' he says.

■ **Latchmere Properties**