

Out with the old

We have all dreamt of getting rid of our furniture and starting over... but few of us get round to it. Tamsin Blanchard meets two who've made a business from it

When Lucy Ryder Richardson threw open the doors of her home one Sunday last summer, she sold almost every piece of furniture and every vase and lamp in the place. She just about managed to hold on to her sofa — and a precious Alvar Aalto chair that her husband found in his mother's attic. But this wasn't a house clearance. She wasn't selling up - she had only recently moved in. The reason she was selling all her worldly goods was to raise money to buy more stuff so that she could do it all over again. You see, Ryder Richardson's home is also her shop. It is the central pivot of a business she set up with her friend, Petra Curtis, and provides the perfect backdrop for the furniture and accessories they sell on their website, ourshowhome.com.

Visiting the show home is a bit like stepping back to the future. It's a typical early-Seventies house on a large estate in south London.

'I thought I might turn into a Stepford Wife when I moved here,' she says, showing me around. In fact she looks anything but, with a business to run, a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter to look after, and a photographer with all his equipment spread around the hall. But — there's no denying it — this is the perfect place to become a Stepford Wife. The four-bedroom house was built to accommodate the typical family of two-point-four kids and it's eerily quiet outside, with identical houses dotted around the estate. I couldn't see much evidence of serial coffee mornings or even a kaftan, but I did spy a blue enamel fondue set in the kitchen — though apparently it's there for its design credentials.

The houses on the estate are built in the mould of Sixties and Seventies architecture and have a high proportion of glass to brick, two sets of French doors, and a double-height hallway as you enter. 'Some people really hate them because they think they look like they're from a council estate,' says Ryder Richardson. But when she and her architect husband were looking to move from their Thirties apartment two years ago, this is exactly what they were looking for. 'We wanted to live somewhere modern,' she says. 'There's so much glass and light. The space is so interesting with the double-height hall and the house has a character all of its own. It's definitely changed my life.'

Before she moved in she was working as a fashion journalist, but she has put the catwalk behind her in pursuit of all things midcentury-modern and Scandinavian. Curtis, too, a mother of three, has moved on from a career as a graphic designer to her new life as a specialist furniture dealer and trader. She moved in to her modernist house three and half years ago. 'We specifically wanted a Sixties home because of the good use of space — no alcoves — and fantastic windows and light. Also, many are on estates where the kids can

go out and play football or ride bikes safely. People sneer at the thought of a Sixties house, but they are very refreshing places to live.'

When Ryder Richardson and Curtis began looking for a few period pieces to put into their homes, they were surprised by the lack of local retail outlets and saw a gap in the market. For the first show home open-house event, they sent out leaflets to around 100 likely looking home owners — sometimes just dropping them through the letterboxes of houses like theirs. 'It's been a huge learning curve, getting this to fit around our lives,' says Petra.

'We're not in it for the money... yet,' adds Ryder Richardson. And if you look at their website, it shows. It's not just about flogging stuff. Each piece is lovingly described, with a bit about its history and who designed it and a picture of it in the show home. In a way it's just an excuse for Ryder Richardson to live with some of the furniture and objects she loves, even if it's just for a few weeks until someone buys it all. 'I love Scandinavian design,' she says. 'It's so easy, so simple.' Her first purchase for the house was a set of Hans Wegner Wishbone chairs, which she still has in her hall. And pride of place in the living room is a curvy, soft-leather Pernilla chair, designed by the Swede, Bruno Mathsson. 'Everybody always wants to sit in it. It's incredibly comfortable, but difficult to get out of once you're in,' she says.

As well as collecting midcentury-modern furniture and accessories, they also deal in contemporary pieces, too. 'The modern stuff sharpens up the midcentury,' says Ryder Richardson. Her home is by no means a museum piece. Dangling dramatically from the hall ceiling is a trio of Michael Young's futuristic Sticklights (a perk of the job being that she can now buy at wholesale prices).

Neither women are interested in the snob value of collecting 'classics' by famous designers — they are far more interested in buying pieces simply because they like them. Due to the success of their open house event, and their ever increasing need for space, they've set up a fair specialising in midcentury modern furniture and contemporary design. The second one happens in Dulwich, southeast London, next Sunday, and is a good opportunity to see the website come to life. Other exhibitors are encouraged to stage mini room-sets to show how their pieces work in the home, and there will be pieces ranging from Eames to contemporary textile designs by Sharon Elphick. If you'd rather shop from the more intimate confines of the show home itself, (ie, if you're a nosy parker like most of us), you'll have to join the mailing list and wait for the next open house on 27 June.

press@modernshows.com