

# Why a developer raised our roof — free of charge

Residents tell us how signing up to an airspace development breathed new life into their ageing flats



The new upper storeys at 50 Oakley Square in Camden  
PIERCE SCOURFIELD

Five years ago the residents of 50 Oakley Square in Camden, north London, were facing a six-figure bill to fix the roof.

Last month the work was finished and the building has been newly redecorated. It has a wheelchair ramp and a new parcel room — and the residents didn't have to pay a penny.

How did they do it? They allowed a developer to build two extra storeys on top of their existing building.



A view of the block before the upper extension was added

“The service charges were very high here, which meant it was difficult to sell the [existing] flats,” says Samuel Pye, creative director of [Echlin](#), the residential design and development company, who saw an opportunity at 50 Oakley Square. “The residents were trying to get money in the till to pay for the new roof because it was leaking and there were problems all around the building.”





A computer-generated image showed how the block would look with the extra two storeys

For small and medium-sized developers like Echlin, airspace development — or building on top of existing structures — makes economic sense. They can avoid paying high city centre land costs, and they don't have to be able to buy and demolish an entire building.

While airspace development has been happening for decades, applications are flooding in since the government created a permitted development right (PDR) in 2020 that allows the owner of a building to extend up to two storeys upwards without needing full planning permission.



A living/dining room in the new section  
NICK ROCHOWSKI

The residents who live in the buildings, however, are sometimes less convinced. Some councils have restricted its use following complaints that it is a [cash grab](#) by freeholders, many of whom are accused of maximising the building's value at the expense of leaseholders living below: they are forced to endure the building works but gain little from it.

However, the flat owners at 50 Oakley Square collectively own their building's freehold and they have made the new planning rules work for them. In the end the occupants of 21 out of the 36 flats, or 58 per cent, voted in favour of the works.



Bill Collins, who has been the daytime porter at Oakley Square for 24 years, says: “The building was a bit old-fashioned and falling apart in places before these guys came in.



Bill Collins, the daytime porter at Oakley Square, says the developer had done “a great job” with the new roof extension

“There were a few grumbles because of the noise and stuff, but [the dissenting residents] came around in the end because [Echlin has] done a great job, I think.”

Collins has a wide-ranging role that ranges from checking in visitors to checking up on elderly residents. He’s such an established part of the furniture that he’s often invited up for lunch in the flats above.

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Part of the improvements include an office for Collins and a dedicated parcel room with extra space for the new apartments’ deliveries. The dated burgundy carpet in the foyer has been replaced with sleek stone-effect porcelain tiles.

There is now a second lift that goes to all floors “because we wanted all the residents to benefit from it, not to feel like it was an ‘elite’ lift for the new floors”, Pye says, as well as a new cycle store, redecorated corridors and stairwells, and a disability access ramp outside the main entrance.

“I think there’s a lot of talk about how you can just go and find a roof and build another building on top, have it made off-site, and dump it on the roof,” Pye says.



A bedroom in one of the new apartments  
NICK ROCHOWSKI



“It’s not actually like that. There are a lot of hoops you have to go through. It needs to have a proper structural engineer report before you can go anywhere near it because some buildings cannot hold the weight.

“Then you’ve got to make sure the entire building adheres to the new post-Grenfell fire regulations, including sprinkler systems and fire doors, because they’re now much stricter, which is a good thing.”

Originally 50 Oakley Square, near Mornington Crescent, was going to be taller than its four storeys, but the developer ran out of money before it could finish the building.

This made Mark O’Callaghan, Echlin’s co-founder and director, feel as though he was “finishing it off” by adding a fifth and sixth floor containing eight one and two-bedroom apartments priced from £795,000 to £1.315 million. Three are still on sale — a one-bedroom flat and two with two bedrooms.

“There’s a lower risk for something like this,” O’Callaghan says. “Once you’ve sold half the development, or five flats, you’ve paid off most of the bank debt. When you’ve got one big unit you’ve renovated stuck in central London, sometimes you’re waiting for a while for that to sell.”



The interiors are modern and unfussy  
NICK ROCHOWSKI

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From the outside the new balconies align with the old ones, but there’s a horizontal strip of lighter brick at the top, which will fade over time to match the brick at the bottom.

The block was built in the early 1980s in a rundown part of Camden, an area that has rapidly gentrified since then. The high street is lined with chain restaurants and the distinctive dome of the Koko music venue — formerly Camden Palace — visible from the flats, now has a private members’ club attached.

Echlin has been building small to medium-sized housing developments in central London for almost a decade. O’Callaghan has a luxury retail background, having worked with brands such as Harrods, Burberry and Mulberry, and runs Echlin with his business partner, Sam McNally, whom he met as a result of an article in The Sunday Times. “He was on the front page as a developer to watch,” he says.

Most of Echlin’s work is for private clients in Hampstead and St John’s Wood, northwest London, but the business is scouting for more rooftop opportunities in Shoreditch, east London, and has bid to develop another site in Angel, north London.



The colour scheme in the new apartments is neutral

Inside the new apartments at 50 Oakley Square, Echlin's first airspace project, the furnishings are pale and neutral to exude a sense of calm in the midst of the bustling city. The Italian bespoke kitchens have terrazzo worktops from Caesarstone, there are punches of natural light from skylights in cleverly placed nooks, and air conditioning streams into the bedrooms from sleek slats embedded above the built-in wardrobes.

Unlike the flats built in the 1980s, the new ones are triple-glazed and heated using air source heat pumps and underfloor heating with a ten-year Build-Zone new-build warranty. The whole building benefits from the new brown roof system, a substrate surface that's left to allow plants and insects to grow on it to improve biodiversity and reduce water run-off.

"There's a bit of concern about how well these [airspace extensions] can be delivered on existing buildings," O'Callaghan admits. "Hopefully we can show that they can be done in a way that is thoughtful, exceeds minimum housing standards and isn't just a case of ticking boxes and knocking them up."



The new apartments have underfloor heating  
NICK ROCHOWSKI



The service charge has come down to £4 per square foot, “which is good for central London as most are £9 or £10”, O’Callaghan says, and maintenance costs are now spread between more flats.

“After all these flats are sold, the residents will have a big lump sum [in the sinking fund], which will financially future-proof the building against other problems that come up,” he adds.

The work took two years to complete — all of it on site. Echlin did not rate the quality of off-site or factory builds that are craned on top.

There were two towers of scaffolding on the side of the building — one to build the lift — and they did not have any large-scale construction going through the centre of the building until the end of the build to minimise the disruption for residents.

Towards the end of the build they were contacted by Jack, a tenant who had been renting a flat on a lower floor in the building for two and a half years, who bought one of the new one-bedroom apartments.

Jack, who works as a creative producer and did not want to give his surname, says: “Knowing the building and the area well was a significant advantage, so this was a chance I didn’t want to pass up.



A view of the updated block from a nearby street  
SCOURFIELD

“Airspace development is a smart solution for a city like London, where space is limited. It seems like a practical way to address the significant lack of housing while preserving green spaces.

“I think it’s important that this is done carefully, though, and that developments blend in with existing architecture and do not go too high — and this project has done a great job of that.”

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Originally Echlin had planning permission to add one storey on top, but it won an appeal to add another storey around the same time as the PDR approval came back, which allowed them to build bigger balconies for each of the new apartments.

Building this way is also popular with local authorities, which are reluctant to demolish existing buildings because that has a bigger environmental impact than simply adapting existing ones.

Pye says: “There are lots of opportunities to do this in London compared to other cities like New York.

“We’re still a fairly low-built city — which is fine and should remain that way in pockets — but in other areas where you’ve got lots of different tall buildings, like around here, it’s not necessary.”

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