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It's hard to believe that this bright, open space lies behind the facade of an unremarkable London semi. By digging down, the owners have created a spectacular family home

words Birna Helgadóttir photography Jim Cooper



The border between inside and out is marked by a metre-wide 'miniature moat' that runs the width of the house



There are those who see their homes as fortresses of privacy, who prefer to play out their domestic lives behind discreet sheer voiles and towering hedges. Arriving at the front door of architects Andy and Aurore Down, you sense that they are not of this persuasion. Next to the door of their five-bedroom semi, originally built in 1928, there is a giant glass panel where the wall should be, giving a ringside view of the family hallway.

It helps that the crescent where they live in Highgate, in north London, has little through traffic. But, say Andy and Aurore, 'We're not bothered if people want to look in.' What's more important is to keep a sense of continuous space between inside and out – the grey-white pebbles, bamboo and cherry tree of the front garden complement the simplicity of the limestone floor and African sculptures in the hallway.

'It is like a moving painting,' says Aurore. 'We love light, we love the view outside, and the fact that we can enjoy the garden. It's a characteristic of our work to make a link between inside and outside space.' In her homeland of Ghana, the outside area of a house is, if anything, more important than the inside – it's the home's chief social space.

The border between inside and outside at the back of the Downs' house is marked by a water feature, more than a metre wide and around six inches deep, stretching the length of the house at the back. To the delight of the couple's three sons, this miniature moat has recently been colonised by newts. The crossing to the garden is made over metre-square stepping stones – the same Bulgarian limestone tiles that are used for the interior floor and exterior patio.

The principle of breaking down barriers between inside and >>

This page: clockwise from top left: the facade is typical 'garden suburb' architecture; the back is a total contrast – the garden has been dug away so the basement and ground floor appear as two storeys; light floods through the roof of the ground floor; Andy and Aurore in their stainless-steel kitchen. Opposite: this 1960s desk was bought by the couple from Solomon, a shop in north London which specialises in furniture restoration





outside space is emphasised by the way the walls of the basement and ground floors have been replaced almost entirely with glass – double-glazed, soft-coat, low-E (low emission) 2.6m x 2m glass panels. Only the first-floor bedroom level retains the brick of the original 1928 ‘garden suburb’ architecture.

The Downs bought the house in September 2003, and the family moved in before Christmas 2004, although the building work was far from finished. The couple were surprised by just how long the project took – and the expense. ‘We got a bit carried away,’ laughs Aurore.

The house was, at £730,000, relatively inexpensive for the area, due to structural unsoundness in the basement: deep foundations were needed in the boggy ground the road was built on. Given that such major work was needed to the basement anyway, Andy and Aurore

made the courageous decision to transform the house entirely and convert the cellar into the main living space. What first attracted them to the property was the width: while Victorian houses usually have a frontage of around five metres, 1920s homes were more generous, so the Downs had eight metres to play with. ‘We ended up taking the house back to the brick and changing everything – doors, windows... It may have been cheaper to knock it down and start again,’ says Andy.

The conversion increased the footprint of the house from 1,800 sq ft to 3,000 sq ft, and involved the loss of two load-bearing walls across two floors. This in turn meant an awful lot of steel – six ‘picture frames’ in all.

The house currently has five bedrooms but, in time, the Downs will also convert their attic into the master bedroom, bringing the

Above: sliding doors lead from the basement onto the ‘water crossing’. To open up the basement area, a quarter of the garden space was excavated



footprint to 4,000 sq feet over four floors, and a total of 15 rooms.

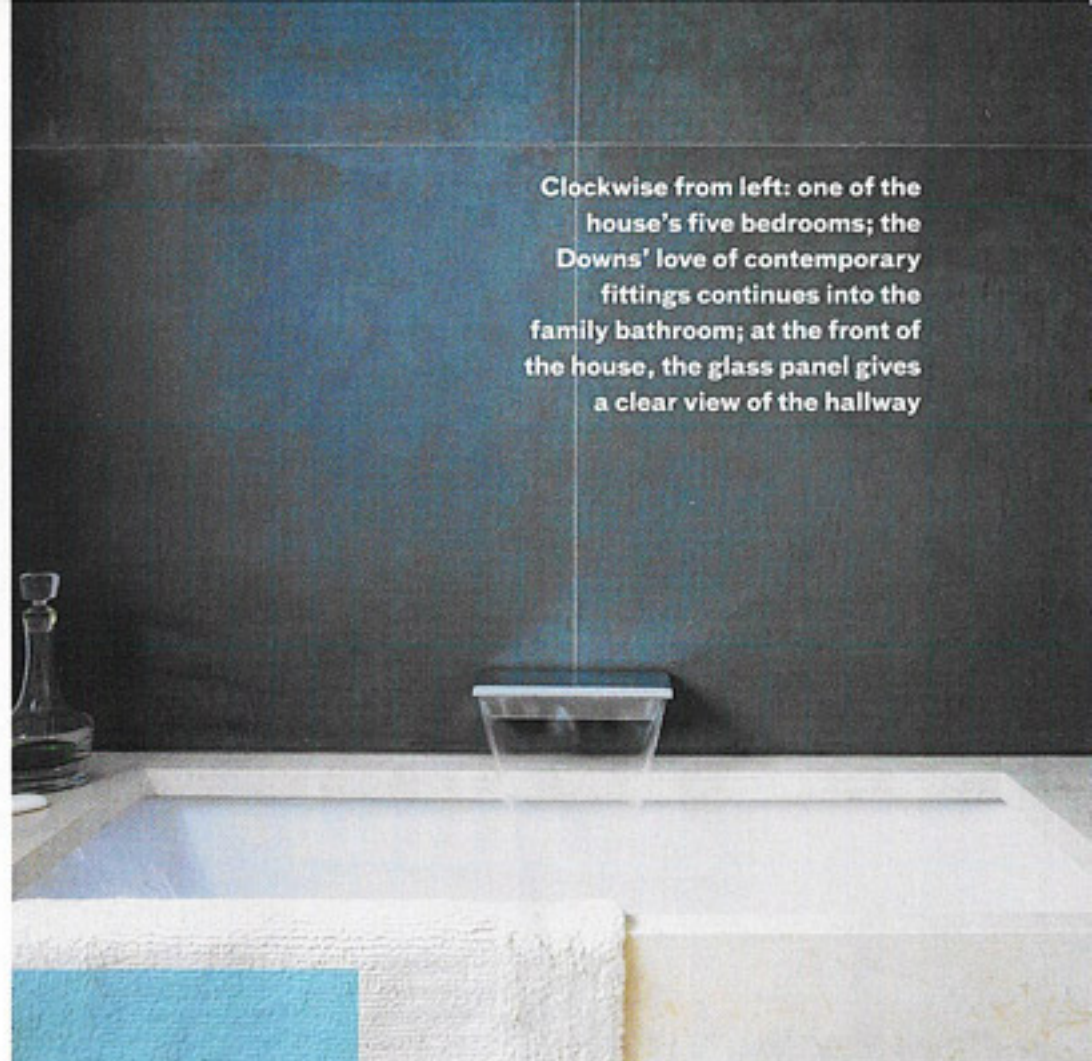
To open up the basement at the back, the Downs excavated a quarter of the garden, providing patio space at basement level. The garden eventually reaches its original level by an undulating grass slope. 'We didn't want to look at just a wall outside,' explains Aurore.

Such a transformation led to many compromises with council planners. 'We are now experts in the area of "permitted development",' says Andy ruefully. Some of the concessions, though, were blessings in disguise: settling for a smaller extension means a larger patio area, and more roof overhang keeps the glass-fronted interior cooler in summer. The view outside is tranquil and simple – grass flanked by white walls and grey pebbles, dotted with silver birch, cherry and white-flowering bushes. 'I don't like gardening, so it's very low-maintenance,' says Aurore.

From the inside, the space works extremely well in terms of light, warmth and ventilation. Unsure if the underfloor heating would be adequate, the Downs left pipes open for radiators but, despite the cold winter, they weren't needed. Similarly, the Velux windows which were put in the ground-floor roof, in case the south-facing sunlight made the space too hot, have never been opened.

Andy and Aurore met while studying architecture at Dundee University, and run a joint practice. They admit to having been 'typical architects' over the project, adding impractical yet aesthetically pleasing design features they probably wouldn't inflict on clients. For the sake of minimalist purity, for example, the kitchen cabinets have a 'push-click' mechanism instead of handles, and there are no plug sockets to mar the sleek beauty of the five-metre-long blue-glass splashback. >>

Above: the view from the original ground floor onto the low-maintenance garden. The brick back wall has been replaced entirely with glass panels



Clockwise from left: one of the house's five bedrooms; the Downs' love of contemporary fittings continues into the family bathroom; at the front of the house, the glass panel gives a clear view of the hallway

cellar living

A basement conversion is a popular way of expanding: compared with an attic extension, it's an unobtrusive way of altering a house and, not being constrained by roof shape, provides more space. But the downsides, as Andrew and Aurore experienced, are cost, and more intrusive building work. In high-value property areas, they can be worth it: the Downs' conversion cost up to £200,000, but has probably added twice that to the house's value. Basements don't usually need planning permission, unless you live in a listed building or conservation area. However, neighbours should be informed (there is the Party Wall Act to consider), and building regulations met.

Waterproofing is a problem. Two solutions are tanking (structural waterproofing) or lining walls with cavity-drain membranes. Getting daylight into the space is another challenge: the Downs' solution – removing the back wall entirely and excavating the garden – may not work for everyone.

>> Contact the Basement Information Centre (01276 33155, basements.org.uk)

Not that the couple are inured to the realities of family living – their three sons are aged between 12 and 20. After experiencing open-plan noise levels in their previous home, they've now given the boys their own den – formerly a garage – at the front of the house. And they have conceded a blot on the pure white walls bordering the back garden in the form of a basketball net.

And despite the occasional design whim, they feel that the alterations they have made to the house are in tune with the needs of modern families. The kitchen was once a pokey, out-of-the-way place for servants' exclusive use, but in the 21st century it is the most used room in the house. So it is obvious that it should also be the room most easily accessible to the outside. As Andy says, 'You don't want to have to undo a lot of doors and bolts, just to drink your coffee on the patio.'

Andy and Aurore Down's practice is Archplan Architects and Property Managers (020 8340 1747, archplan.co.uk).



plywood flooring

When it comes to cheap and cheerful flooring, most people plump for timber-effect laminate. The Downs had been alerted to a more interesting alternative by a client who had requested and sourced plywood panels. Clean and modern in feel, 'they are simple to lay, economical and ecologically sound,' says Andy. Panels can be bought unfinished, to be stained in limewash and sealed by the home-owner, but you can go for an easier, pre-finished option and get a similar effect. The drawback is the lack of wearability: plywood can be sanded down only once. But because it is so cost efficient, replacing the panels becomes less of a worry.

>> Finished birch floor panels, 1200 x 600mm, from £22.75 each, Latham Timber (01442 849100, lathamtimber.co.uk)



inspiration highgate

Combine contemporary and antique furniture with African-influenced finds

From left Birch plywood veneer **flooring**, 120W x 240cmL, £44.99 per sheet, Travis Perkins. Antique **teak table**, 100 x 100 x 50cmH, £550, Old Teak. 'Hamilton' 100% cotton double **duvet cover**, 200 x 200cm, £85, and **pillowcase**, 75 x 50cm, £20, both Designers Guild. '365+' **plates**, 25cmDia, £1.99 each and **bowls**, 5H x 15cmDia, £2.59 each, both Ikea. Basalt **work surface**, 100L x 60W x 3cmD, £250 per m, Limestone Gallery. Glass low **vase**, 10H x 30cmDia, £39.50, and white **pebbles**, £17.99 per 35-litre bag, both The Chelsea Gardener. 'Princess B' ebony **sculpture**, 25.5H x 10cmW, £45.99, Grains of Africa. 'Applad' laminate **base unit**, 60 x 60 x 70cmH, from £30, Ikea. 'Cherner' walnut veneer and solid beech **chair**, 78H x 66W x 52.5cmD, £895, The Conran Shop. 'Spun' **lamp**, 176.5H x 50cmDia, £595, Ocean. Cercis siliquastrum **shrub**, 175H x 135cmW, £74.50, The Chelsea Gardener. 'Glaze' ceramic **planter**, 34H x 33cmD, £12, Habitat.

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