

Homes & Property

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The MDF island unit was clad in stainless steel, made by a swimming pool company



Aurore and Andy Down were attracted to their house by its potential — dark rooms ready to be transformed

One architect couple with bold vision transformed a dark semi into a light and spacious modern home, says the architect

The light of our lives



The large light-filled family room that has sliding doors out on to the landscaped garden was created as the hub of the Downs' house

MOST people would be horrified to come home and see the entire rear of their house missing. But when Aurore and Andy Down's builders had finished taking down the back wall of their Muswell Hill semi-detached home the couple were not the slightest bit jittery, just thrilled.

"There's nothing better than knocking a wall down because suddenly it gives you a new view," says Andy. "And when this wall came down it completely transformed the house overnight. The advantage of being architects is that we know it's going to be all right."

The couple were looking for more space for their growing family when they found the house. They were not originally drawn to the two-storey, late-Twenties semi but as the estate agent took them round, they came across a huge basement below a trap door.

"There was no natural light but lots of volume. Our architects' brains started working, thinking we must be able to do something with the space," says Andy.

The house was in bad shape. With the weight of earth from the garden pushing in on the basement's back wall it was in real danger of collapse. Rather than spend a fortune shoring it up, they decided on a more radical solution: to dig down and lower the level of the garden, completely demolish the lower back half of the house and replace it with double-height glass.

It was a bold vision, and it paid off. Today, in their huge light-filled family room — the hub of the house with sliding doors out on to the garden and a double height atrium opening out into the sitting room above — you would never guess that once this was a forgotten basement.

The other big draw of the house was how much wider it was than the Downs' former home. They wanted to make the most of that and keep the former basement as a single

space without walls or ceiling. The solution was to ring it with a steel frame and a ribbon around a box — to create a double-height glass wall.

A second steel frame, like the double-height glass wall, was built around the back of the house. It sounds like gutting the entire space is a pretty straightforward job.

Even planning wasn't as straightforward as it seems. The glass was only 6ft 6in so they could get it out of the house.

What turned out to be the most difficult part was getting out the garden. The side path was dug out by a mechanical digger so the garden could be levelled.

"To the horror of our previous owners, the garden was



A fresh-looking painting and simple glazed pots add to the look of the living room

helped a lot. They ordered the living room floors, the patio and a job lot from a quarry in Italy, rather than the usual Italian tiles.

Other bathroom fittings were chosen in Italy, rather than the usual Italian tiles. "I learned a lot about Custom Living from the Downs' house," says Andy.

They did look into buying the house but realised they couldn't afford it. They decided to make their own from MDI, which was a quarter of the price. The house was clad in stainless steel by a



transformed into bright living spaces

and a dreary Twenties
by Zoë Blackler



The level of the garden was lowered and the back half of the house was demolished and replaced with double-height glass, changes that allowed the original basement space to be transformed

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columns chopping it up. Their solution was a large square steel frame — like a giant picture frame, enclosing all, holds up the rest of the back complicated. But as they were anyway, inserting the frames was

problem. They extended out by get away with lawful use.

the biggest headache was digging passage was too narrow to squeeze the builders had to use spades.

door neighbours we had a big heap of earth in the front drive for six or seven months," says Aurore. "Every morning the lorry would pick it up and by the end of the day it was full again. It was continuous. You can't begin to imagine how much earth we had to get rid of."

The whole process set their schedule back by six months, and put a huge dent in their budget. So when it came to adding the fittings and finish and sprucing up the rest of the house they had to be canny.

Going straight to the source for materials the limestone for the kitchen and the first-floor bathroom as Bulgaria.

as they bought direct from warehouse through dealers in the UK. "Coms & Excise," Aurore says.

ing a fancy off-the-peg kitchen but rd it. So they hired a carpenter to F with a spray-on gloss finish at a island unit is also MDF — it was swimming pool company.



The couple took a breather of a few years before converting the attic into a master bedroom with an en-suite



Clever use of under-stair storage space allowed for a quirky library area


On other features, however, they weren't prepared to compromise. The kitchen splashback is a single, seamless glass panel that spans the entire length of the work surface. The manufacturers agreed to supply it — at triple the usual rate — but refused to accept liability if it was broken during delivery.

The couple had always planned to convert the attic into a master bedroom. But out of exhaustion, lack of money and concern for their neighbours, they took a few years off before they got to it. When they did, Andy suggested doing it on the cheap. But Aurore convinced him they should go the extra mile, adding three dormer windows — the third to accommodate their en-suite bathroom.

"When it comes to the look, we have the same taste," Andy says. "But we have a very different attitude to money. Sometimes we argue like crazy. I'm the one trying to save money and Aurore's saying 'if we're going to do it, let's do it well!'"

Doing it well has meant taking five years to finish the house. But it also means they have stuck to their original vision.

Pictures by John Griffin



Pre-cut limestone was used in the sleek bathroom

GET THE LOOK

- **Architects:** Archplan Architects and Property Managers (020 8340 1747; archplan@hotmail.com; www.archplan.co.uk).
- **Glazing,** including sliding patio doors, from Finline Aluminium (01934 429922; enquiries@finelinealuminium.co.uk). Cost: £8,000.
- **Floor tiles** in the kitchen and living-room, patio tiles and first-floor bathroom fittings all from pre-cut limestone from Bulgaria, for a total cost of £10,000 (£50 a square metre).
- **Furniture:** reproduction of Eero Aarnio's bubble chair was bought over the internet; other retro pieces from Alfies Antique Market, Church Street, NW8 (020 7723 6066; www.alfiesantiques.com); kitchen stools from Purves & Purves (www.purves.co.uk).
- **The attic conversion** cost £60,000 and included three dormer windows at £7,500 each.

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