



NEW LIFE FROM OLD SHELLS

Ruth Bloomfield visits Victorian houses made fit for modern living

There is a surprise lurking behind the doors of Simon Fenwick's London mews house.

Given the exterior, visitors understandably expect a charming, cosy Victorian two up, two down. What they get is the instant wow factor of a cantilevered glass staircase (with popping orange handrail) running through the property. Upstairs, the master bedroom, complete with semi-open-plan en suite, occupies another floor that has been built atop the original mansard roof.

"People do tend to walk in, see the stairs, and say, 'Oh my goodness'," says Simon, a chartered building surveyor.

But while visual impact was one reason for installing the stairs, another was more practical. A roof light at the top of the property and see-through stairs mean the light penetrates to the kitchen in the newly dug basement.

Most owners of period homes make an attempt to stay faithful to its history when it comes to home improvements. But since we no longer eat, travel or dress in the manner of our forefathers, the question arises: "Why bother?" Increasingly architects and designers are squaring the circle between historic charm and modern convenience by marrying a period shell with a contemporary interior, to have the best of both worlds.

In Simon's case the decision was made for him. When he bought his Bayswater home for £850,000 in 2010, it was falling apart.

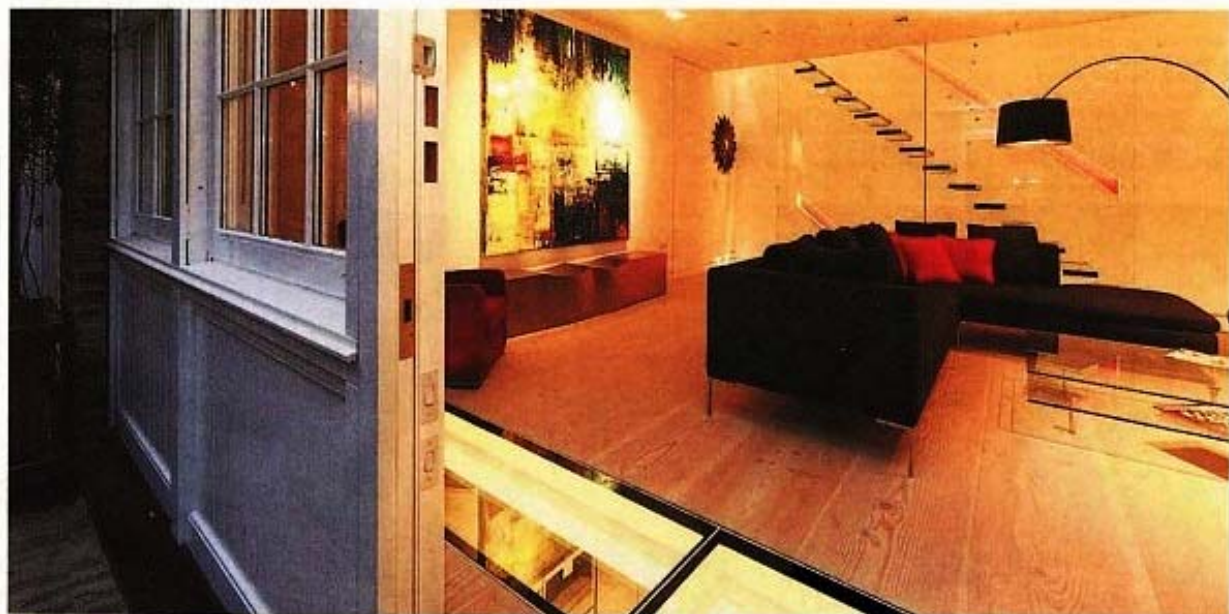
"The façade and the party walls had to stay but the roof was leaky and had to come off. All that was really left was the first floor and a few partition walls," he says.

Aesthetics aside – all crisp white walls and Dinesen wood floors – the house has been super-insulated for heat and noise, meaning it is peaceful and cheap to run. The walls have been built out to allow all services to be hidden, and the volume has increased from 1,000 to 1,600 sq ft.

The work cost £550,000, but the house is on sale for £2.95 million (dormusnova.com; 0207 727 1717) because Simon, 49, is keen to take on another project.

Unsurprisingly, it is often architects who like to push the envelope when it comes to rethinking historic homes.

John Smart (johnsmartarchitects.co.uk; 0207 633 0055) has just finished



Something new: clockwise from above, the floating staircase at Simon Fenwick's mews house; David Mikhail's split-level conversion, outside and in; Lesley Price's lovely old Marazion chapel

remodelling a Victorian former convent in Grove Park, south-east London.

The derelict rabbit warren has been split into four large town houses and Quince House, the last to go on the market, is on sale for £1.95 million through The Modern House estate agency (thomodernhouse.net; 03456 344 068). John emphasised communal living space.

"We have layered it to create lots of different types of spaces – an evening dining room, a breakfast dining room, a music room, a reading room," he says. "In a Victorian house the use of space is very prescriptive, and here there is an enormous amount of flexibility."

He invested in quality materials. "I think that there is a real yearning for craft, which is why people look to the Victorian and Georgian eras. I don't think we reached the pinnacle of our art 150 years ago, and there are far more beautiful, modern interpretations to explore."

David Mikhail of David Mikhail Architects (davidmikhail.com; 0207 608 1505) thinks the key issue

with period homes tends to be layout. "In a period house the rooms are generally too small," he says.

"They were originally designed to be a size that could quickly be heated with an open fire. That is not an issue now. What people want is lateral living, light and much more connectivity with the garden."

Typically his clients have tall, thin homes with a dark lower ground floor and an upper ground floor with no direct garden access.

His solution, in the case of a five-storey house in

Camden, north-west London, was to lower the level of the garden and cut a section

out of the ceiling between basement and ground-floor levels to create a light, bright, dramatic double-height kitchen and living room at the rear of the house.

Lack of light was not a problem for Lesley Price, another architect, when she began refurbishing the Bright Chapel in the lovely Cornish town of Marazion.

Long since deconsecrated, the Grade II listed building was being used as a builders' yard and workshop. But its

magnificent floor-to-ceiling arched windows survived.

Lesley, 61, bought the chapel in 2009 for £350,000. She converted two garages on site into a cottage and built two homes on the yard. She then turned to the 1862 chapel, which she split into two homes, the second of which is on sale for £495,000 with estate agent Stratton Creber (strattoncreber.co.uk; 01736 360 070).

Lesley is a conservation expert but went for a 21st-century interior, from the glass and steel staircase to the white bamboo floors. A whole house ventilation system now means those windows never need to be opened.

"Inside there was nothing there," she says. "It was a total blank sheet and I didn't want to insert period things artificially."

If, like Lesley, you have a blank sheet to work with, you can tear up the rule book. In 2006 Filippo Mattia bought a pretty, two-bedroom Victorian cottage in Notting Hill, north-west London. The house was semi-derelict and so Filippo, 36, was in for a refurbishment. He enlisted the architect Luke Tozer (pitmantozer.com; 0203

214 3255) who inverted the house, putting bedrooms on the darker ground floor, with an interconnected kitchen/dining room, living room and roof terrace upstairs.

The home's innards were removed, leaving only the façade standing, before it was rebuilt. Such a rebuild is zero-rated for VAT, enabling a considerable saving on a traditional refurbishment.

The project, including the house price, the renovation, and all fixtures, fittings and furnishings, cost just over £1 million, although Filippo, a banker, thinks a "conservative" value would be £1.6 million. Not that he wants to sell.

"The main problem was that there was not much light, especially in winter, hence putting everything upstairs and cutting a bit out of the roof," he says. "When we saw the plans it was pretty obvious that the bedrooms had to go downstairs. Being Italian, I was willing to sacrifice a big bedroom for entertaining space, and the whole house now works better, more smoothly. I smile every time I come home."

HOW TO DRAG A PERIOD HOME INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

● **Rethink your space** A rarely used guest room could be equipped with a flip-down bed for occasional visitors and then utilised as a teenagers' den.
● If you don't want to go fully open-plan **install folding doors** between rooms that can be opened to create one large space when needed.

● **A wall of cupboards** will give you vast amounts of storage allowing you to create a more minimal look.
● **A roof light** can brighten up gloomy houses.
● **Make your garden** as accessible as possible – use acres of plate glass so you can see your outdoor space (even if it is too wet to use it).