



For decades the grand terraces around Regent's Park were neglected. Now they're some of London's hottest pieces of property. **India Block** meets an architect who has restored one to its former glory - and then some

Regent's Park is back on the map. In the early 19th century it was the lodestone of a hubristic project, conceived by a profligate Prince Regent and John Nash (arguably London's most daring property developer) that irrevocably changed the face of London.

With one bankrolling the other, they carved a swathe through Regency London, tracking a great, grand avenue down from the Park to the Prince's home at Carlton House.

In 1820, now George IV, the fickle monarch ultimately decided to make Buckingham Palace his chief residence, demolishing the original architectural denouement to the project.

The Neoclassical terraces around the Park's perimeter remained with their striking, iconic facades, but they eventually fell out of fashion and in to disrepair.

"When I started working for another practice that did conservation work the first job I did with them was seven of the houses on Gloucester Gate. They were almost derelict internally; some of them didn't even have floors," says Shahriar Nasser, founder and director of Belsize Architects.

We are standing on the roof of one of his more recent Regent's Park endeavours. The view from the top of Kent Terrace takes in the graceful backs of Hanover Mews, the winter green lawns and lakes visible through the bare trees.

"I'm talking about nearly 30 years ago. People didn't want those houses; they were just too big, too expensive to run, they were too cold."

With improvements to architectural technology and an influx of wealth into the capital the fortunes of the Nash

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Once accommodation for visiting academics at The Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists, Kent Terrace is once again a family home

terraces are on the up again.

The square footage and grand proportions offered by these Georgian behemoths attracts wealthy buyers who have the money to invest the serious sums needed to restore and redesign these Regency legacies.

But with many left to rot or converted into office spaces, it requires an architect who can balance vision with sensitivity to the foibles of working with listed buildings.

Founded in 1995, Nasser's practice in Belsize Park combines innovative design and technical precision with a firm grounding in conservation work.

"With any listed building some of it is restoration work, which requires knowledge of the historic building. The rest of it is down to your design skills," he explains.

This particular house on Kent Terrace was once owned by The Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists. Used as accommodation for visiting professors, the floors had been split into bedsits,

with an uninspired extension tacked on the back.

Approached by the new owners to devise a scheme to reinstate the property as a family home, Nasser attacked the house from all angles.

The first challenge was to raise the roof - literally. In order to give the upstairs bedrooms some extra ceiling space Nasser petitioned the council for permission to take the roof off.

The new roof terrace is accessed via a floating mesh staircase that emerges through a glass screen that slides open like a sun roof, allowing it to lie flush against the roof.

"The stairway is completely modern, nothing to do with the historic building, which is one of the things we enjoy - combining the old and the new," he says.

The long climb up the winding stone staircase through all five floors is worth it for the view alone.

"There is something so amazingly poetic about it," agrees Nasser.

The topmost floor comprises of two

en suite bedrooms and a kitchenette. Down one flight the master suite is an exercise in jaw dropping elegance.

Confronted by the strict delineation between the two almost equal sized rooms, Nasser proposed they go bold, turning en suite into a statement. "It is a room with a bath in it, rather than a bathroom," he says.

A huge scoop bath perches on the Italian marble floor in front of the large sash window for leisurely bathing, whilst the rain head shower boasts a fearsome display of taps ("it is like being a pilot in a jet!" Nasser comments).

On the first floor Nasser has again used the existing dimensions to show off the building's bones to its best advantage, the larger living room connecting to the slightly smaller library area, the double aspect and high ceilings giving the space ample room to breathe.

Belsize Architects also provides furniture design services, and Nasser designed the wall of shelving made



Picture: Nick Kane

from reclaimed 19th century oak and stainless steel himself.

The décor is striking and playful. After a year of nosing inside properties interior designed to within an inch of their lives I've seen enough Kelly Hoppen knockoffs to last a lifetime. The house on Kent Terrace is different.

The client's mother is an artist with a keen eye for eclectic furniture, whose canvases grace the walls of most of the rooms. She worked closely with Nasser on the project, and the painterly eye is apparent in the palette of graphite greys, lemon yellow, matte gold and lipstick pinks and oranges, and in the bold, graphic strokes of the sculptural furnishings.

The new kitchen extension is practically an art installation.

With the old extension demolished, Nasser and the client decided to keep the kitchen as a separate, distinct space.

Fronde from the planted internal courtyard at basement level rise up to meet you as you cross from the old building to the new via a walkway.

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Designed to be complementary to the existing architecture, the façade is part Georgian recreation, part modern floor to ceiling glass, old and new merging seamlessly.

The surfaces are realised in black granite and powder coated steel, reinforcing the sculptural feel of the room.

Downstairs in the basement materials also play a key role in knitting together the old and the new.

Polished plaster walls complement the concrete floors and a chrome door through from the hallway into a TV room melds seamlessly into its surrounds, offset by the sliding dark wood panelled door of a guest room.

Out on the patio garden in the chill air I admire the old tree standing proud against the new extension, its branches showing latent signs of spring.

Nasser tells me the client was adamant the tree was preserved; sensitively marrying the old with new.

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The architect stayed true to the graceful proportions of the building whilst introducing the client's personality. Pictures: Nick Kane