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Bamboozled!

How this versatile plant has become the material of the day

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Material magic

Belsize Architects employed a rich array of materials including marble, walnut, leather and Perspex to turn five floors of faceless flats into a home full of character

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PHOTOGRAPHY: NICHOLAS KANE/ARCAID





THE LEATHER-CLAD FEATURE WALL LOOKS LIKE A PIECE OF MODERN ART, BUT CONCEALS A DUMB WAITER LINKING THE FORMAL DINING AREA WITH THE KITCHEN BELOW. BAR, PLASMA SCREEN AND STORAGE. ABOVE, THE GLASS TABLE IS THE DOGE TABLE BY CARLO SCARPA, WITH MARIO BELLINI'S CAB CHAIRS FROM CASSINA. THE WHITE SOFA IS ADAGIO BY B&B ITALIA; THE BIG RED CHAIR IS CASSINA'S DODO CHAIR

There are some Victorian buildings that leave an architectural legacy – elegant fireplaces, finely detailed cornicing and other gems that deserve to be retained. Other houses from the same era, however, can be almost devoid of charm.

One such property was the home of Paul and Deidre Cowan, in Cannon Place, close to Hampstead Village, London. The semi-detached, five-storey property had been converted into three flats, and any period charm had been swept away. 'It was a rather uninspiring Victorian semi,' says architect Shahriar Nasser. 'It had very little detailing, and was chunky and quite ugly.'

The couple bought the three parts to the building, totalling around 400 sq m, in stages, then approached Belsize Architects to transform it into a contemporary family home for themselves and their two children. 'They wanted something modern, without compromise,' says Nasser. 'They encouraged us not to worry about any of the original features and asked for something with a wow factor for the ground floor and lower ground floor public areas.'

The first task was to extend and deepen the lower ground floor to provide substantial family living space. Because the house was on a slope, this level is entered from the street at the front, but becomes a semi-basement below ground level at the rear. Nasser extended further under ground to create extra space, and added a sunken garden with an elegant granite slab fountain to give the area natural lighting, which also filters in through large, structural glass skylights set into the terrace area for the storey above.

Down here is the big family kitchen, living and dining





THE WALNUT-CLAD KITCHEN, WITH ITS MASSIVE COMMERCIAL EXTRACTOR, IS BACKED WITH A HUGE PANE OF GLASS, DIVIDING UP THE OPEN-PLAN SPACE. SKYLIGHTS LET NATURAL LIGHT FLOOD IN TO THIS SEMI-BASEMENT SPACE. ABOVE RIGHT, THE ORIGINAL VICTORIAN STAIRCASES WERE REMOVED TO GIVE MORE SPACE. THE NEW STAIRWAYS ARE IN FOLDED SHEET STEEL CLAD IN WALNUT

area. The space is mainly open plan, with the glass-backed kitchen area forming a natural divider. The most eye-catching feature here is the walnut-clad cabinetry, created by the contractor Kutz. Walnut cladding is also used to make a feature of the commercial extractor fan that is positioned above head height to give a feeling of space. The floors throughout this level are of 1200mm x 600mm slabs of Crema Marfil marble, while the white wall alongside the kitchen is full of hidden storage to maintain the uncluttered modern look.

Hidden storage is also the purpose of the eye-catching leather unit, which takes up most of one wall of the ground floor and arches up across the ceiling. Also constructed by Kutz, it looks like a work of art, but cleverly conceals a dumb-waiter linking the formal dining room above to the kitchen, a bar, plasma screen, storage and integral cold cathode lighting.

Across the room is the second stunning feature made by Kutz – a cantilevered staircase created from folded steel sheet and clad in walnut. Combined with a glass balustrade, it links the lower ground, ground and first floors, opening up light and space in the rooms.

Further up the house the rooms are simple and spacious. The first floor has the master bedroom, bathroom and a walk-in wardrobe area. This dressing room is lined with wardrobes in walnut and Perspex, also the work of Kutz – as is the ultra-modern gas fire in the main bedroom itself. The bathroom is lined with the same Crema Marfil marble as the basement floors and features a large walk-in-shower, separated from the basin area by a full-height glass screen

THE INDUSTRIAL-SIZED
EXTRACTOR FAN IN THE
KITCHEN AREA IS SET
ABOVE HEAD HEIGHT
TO MAKE THE SEMI-
BASEMENT SPACE SEEM
MORE AIRY





ABOVE LEFT, WALNUT AND PERSPEX WARDROBES LINE THE DRESSING ROOM. ABOVE RIGHT, UNITS IN THE MASTER BATHROOM ARE SET INTO BLACK GRANITE, AND WALLS ARE CLAD IN CREMA MARFIL. BELOW LEFT, THE FIREPLACE IN THE MASTER BEDROOM WAS CREATED BY KUTZ

with a strip of mirror in front of the vanity unit. The two floors above feature three further en-suite bedrooms and a second study.

Belsize also worked on the outside space, creating the new sunken garden accessed from the lower ground floor, but linked visually with the rest of the garden by the granite wall and fountain, designed by specialist Andrew Ewing. The terrace was landscaped, levelled a small lawn area with the floor above, and added a raised sun deck.

Overall, the project cost an estimated £880,000 – and seems to have run to everybody's satisfaction. Instead of the usual post-builder bickering, all sides are patting each other on the back. Says Nasser: 'The success of this project is the result of the good understanding and relationship between client, architect and the contractor. It was a fantastic project to be involved with.'

And the clients are so pleased with the result that they are already lining up a future project with the same architect and contractor. 'We found a good architect and gave a reasonably simple brief,' says Paul Cowan. 'We wanted a contemporary design with wow factor, and now when people walk through the door they see something they didn't expect to see – and we are very pleased with it.' **idFX**

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