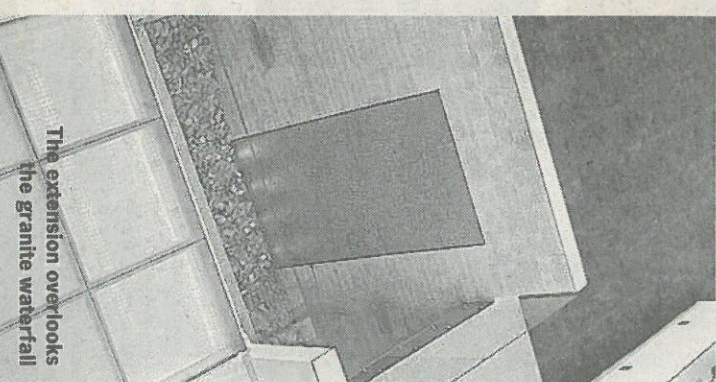


Leather storage units on the upper ground floor

Mark Bourillon



The extension overlooks the granite waterfall

Three into one

A Hampstead couple has spent more than £2.6m converting three dilapidated Victorian flats back into an ultra-contemporary family home, now worth about £4m. WENDY SLOANE reports

Don't judge a book by its cover, especially if you are admiring the facade of Hampstead businessman

Geoff Neilson's new home. From the outside, the five-storey Victorian building looks just like its semi-detached north London

neighbours. Inside, though, the house — which until recently was three flats — has been reinvented. Gone are the old-fashioned wooden doors, marble fireplaces and claw-footed bathtub. In their place is an open-plan layout with a glass ceiling on the lower ground floor, smooth American walnut covering everything from stairs to handrails to the kitchen extractor hood, and futuristic floor-to-ceiling leather storage units.

"Many houses, especially in this area, have been ruined by breaking them up into apartments. What we have done is to bring the house back together again and thoroughly modernise it," says Neilson, 44. "And if we had the choice, there wouldn't even be a classic Victorian exterior." Neilson returned to London almost two years ago after working in the home counties and abroad for more than five years. With his wife Sarah, 40, and children Joseph, 16, and Victoria, 15, in tow, he intended originally to buy a garden flat in Hampstead.

What he found was the bottom two floors of his present home, built in the 1870s. A three-bed maisonette with a lovingly tended garden and antiquated wine cellar, it was owned by an elderly widow who had moved in almost 30 years before. The only problem was that the main bedroom on the ground floor had been

transformed decades earlier into a garage, which belonged to somebody else.

"We thought we'd like to refurbish and modernise the garden flat, but then we only had one and a half floors of the house as, bizarrely, the garage belonged to the top two floors," Neilson says. "We discussed the possibility of acquiring the garage but the owners were reluctant to sell. So we offered to buy the flat with the garage, and they accepted."

Neilson intended either to sell the upper flat or rent it out as an investment property. However, now that they owned four of the five floors, the prospect of owning and refurbishing the whole house seemed too good an opportunity to miss. So he bought the middle floor from its owner, a Cambridge academic who was occupying it only one or two nights a week.

The Neilsons, who eventually spent a total of £1.6m buying the three flats, were eager to start work transforming the property into a single family home. But first they had to get planning permission. "We had a protracted dispute over our ability to extend the house," says Neilson.

"We wanted to open up and brighten the lower ground floor, with a glass terrace to the top and a huge picture window to the rear of the house. It has now become the area where we spend most of our time, and a fantastic entertaining space."

After a year of haggling, the Neilsons got the permission they needed and work began in earnest. "The top and bottom flats were in good condition but the middle flat

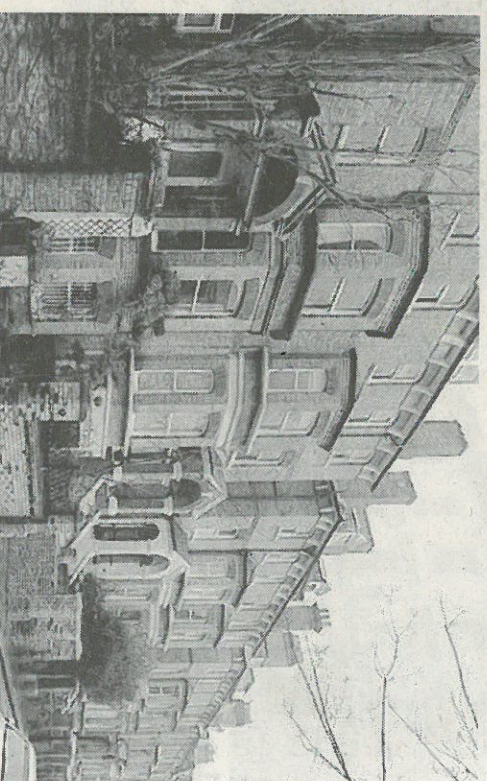
was dreadful," says Neilson. "The house was full of lead pipes and even the electrics seemed to be Victorian."

They gutted the building, stripping the walls down to the wooden frames. By this time, the architect was on board — Shahriar Nasser of Belsize Architects. "We found out about him by looking at the Riba website and then interviewing three candidates," says Neilson. "We very much liked his work, which focused on amalgamating contemporary architecture with older properties, many of which were either listed buildings or in conservation areas."

The lower ground floor is open-plan except for a cloakroom and utility room next to the refurbished garage. At one end is a glass extension by Nasser, which houses a modern living area with cube couches that look directly onto a waterfall running down a granite wall in the north-facing garden.

The glass ceiling, which serves as the floor of the terrace above, allows a natural flow of light in what would otherwise be a dark room. It's so light, in fact, that even the enormous kitchen at the other end, with its custom-made floor-to-ceiling units, stainless steel Smeg and Gaggenau appliances and Crema Marfil marble floor, also looks bright and cheerful. Light also comes from above, as a cantilevered staircase leads from the kitchen up to the ground floor with a glass balustrade allowing a view to the rooms below. "We instructed Nasser to create a space that had a 'wow' factor," says Neilson.

The centrepiece of the upper ground floor, which houses the more formal entertaining area, is what



The Victorian semi has been reinvented inside. Above, the glass extension

quickly became known as the "bus shelter". A monolithic leather wall unit, it covers part of one wall curving halfway across the ceiling, cleverly concealing hidden storage areas (including a dumbwaiter down to the kitchen). "We just sat around the table with Shahriar one day and thought about the room and its dimensions. As it's about 45ft long, we felt it needed to be broken up. So we brainstormed this idea of a structure in the middle to give it a separate, distinct area, and Shahriar and his number two, Steve Burrows, filled in the details," Neilson explains.

A more traditional wooden staircase leads to the first floor, which is the couple's private area, with a master bedroom in light, creamy colours and adjacent dressing room, office and contemporary

bathroom, featuring a shower finished in marble. Apart from a guest room, the next floor is mainly for daughter Victoria, who has her own funky bathroom, study and bedroom. And the top floor is for son Joseph, who also has a private three-room suite.

Neilson reckons that overall, renovations cost "slightly north" of £1m and that his house is now worth in excess of £4m. But that's not why he built the house of his dreams. "This is a family house, our home for the long-term," he says.

"We've moved around a bit, lived in various parts of the world and this country, and after 20 years it's probably the first house that we can really say is the one we want to stay in."

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