

A clear winner

Using glass, water and steel, architect Shahriar Nasser transformed a dark, narrow basement into a contemporary family room. By Angela Linforth

IT'S THE interiors equivalent of popping out for a pint of milk and coming back with a Prada handbag and Gucci sunspecs. When Albert Chan and his daughter Louise invited Shahriar Nasser of Belsize Architects to their Grade I listed Nash terraced house, on the edge of Regent's Park, all they wanted was a unit in which to store the hi-fi and perhaps a mural to brighten up a darkish basement room.

What they got was a complete transformation. The previously dull room, which looked out onto a small, high-walled garden, was impossibly long and narrow. Using a contemporary design combining glass, steel and water, Nasser opened up the space completely, constructing a transparent conservatory within the garden area, where an elliptical pond links inside and out, and water cascades down marble steps.

A pair of clear doors, either side of the pond, lead into a now tiny, well-lit courtyard. When you standing on the glass covering the pond inside, and peer at the fish below, it feels like being aboard a glass-bottomed boat.

"After taking a good look at the basement room, I had gone to see the Chans with two proposals," says Nasser. "The all-glass job and another much more traditional conservatory to fit in with the Regency setting. Fortunately for me, they didn't want to get involved with traditional design. As the rest of the house was traditional, they reasoned, we would be best to go for modern. It was also the alternative that would get most light into the room."

And it does. Even at dusk the conservatory is flooded with a natural glow, lighting up the L-shaped family room. What used to be uninviting and chilly as a courtyard garden has been transformed into a light, airy, attractive area.

That you should see such a contemporary

structure in the rarefied confines of a Nash-designed terrace in Regent's Park is visually surprising too. Indeed, to get the scheme through, Nasser first had to consult three statutory bodies: Camden Council, the Crown Estate, which is the freeholder, and English Heritage. After more than six months, permission was finally granted.

Nasser, who is no stranger to working on Crown Estate property — he was the project manager when the whole terrace, including the Chan's house, was renovated and restored more than a decade ago — believes that if you're going to do anything with such an old and distinguished property, then doing it with glass actually interferes less with the lines of the buildings around. You can still see through it to the houses behind.

"And I was able to leave the existing treatment of the walls, under the glass roof, almost intact," he says.

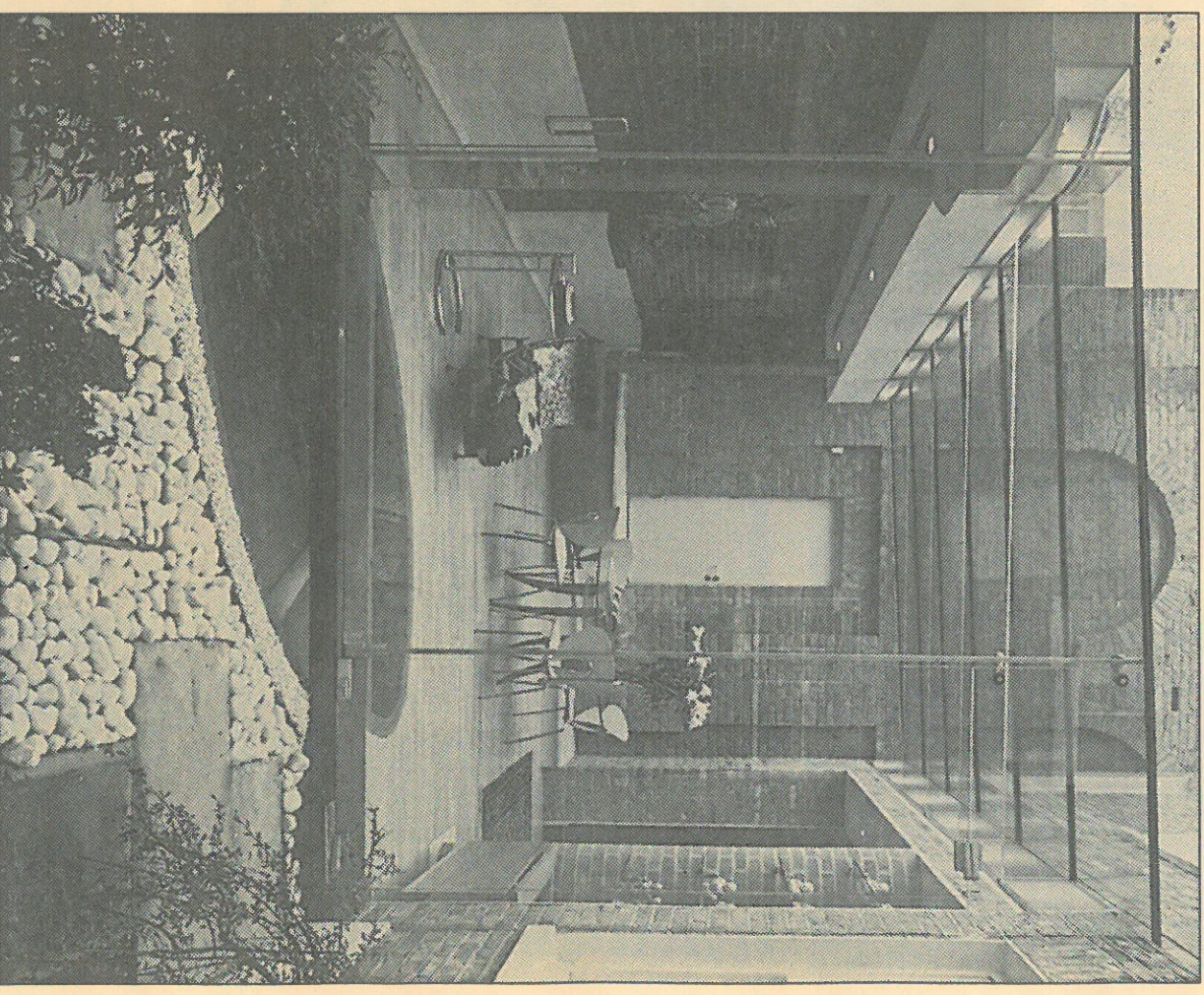
Planning wasn't the only hitch. Because the site is surrounded by walls on all four sides, access was difficult. Every scrap of earth dug up from the garden to level it out had to be taken out through a garage at a different level; and every panel of glass, structural beam, radiator and strip of beech for the floor had to be brought in the same way.

Fully air-conditioned and centrally heated, the rooms are kept at a constant temperature, and have been furnished thoughtfully, using a contemporary combination of designs by Cassina and Eileen Grey.

The hi-fi unit, the original purpose of the visit, is simple and effective, built from beech-veneered MDF. A perforated aluminium grill system holds lighting and masks the radiator covers. At £26,000, it was a big-budget project, but the results have brought pleasure all round.

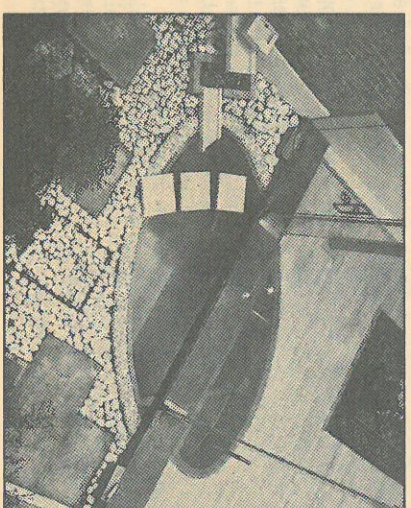
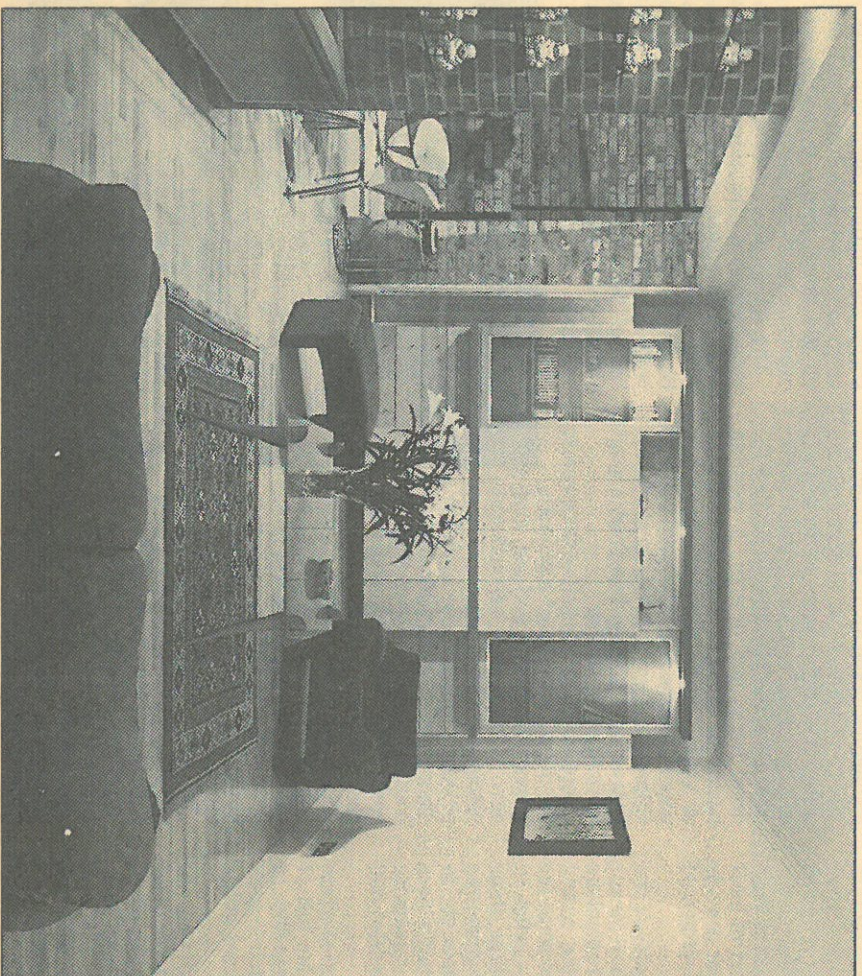
What Louise, one of a family of Chinese entrepreneurs, likes about the downstairs is

'Stand on the glass covering the pond inside and it's like being on a glass-bottomed boat'



the tremendous feeling of openness. "We never used the garden before, but now we have a light, airy family room, where we can either listen to music, enjoy our Sunday breakfast, read, or just sit and contemplate, while we watch the water cascading into the pond and look at the fish."

And it's not only a comfortable room for the Chan family and friends — the fish too, according to Nasser, seem to gravitate towards the indoors part of the pond. Shahriar Nasser can be contacted at Belsize Architects, 48 Parkhill Road, London NW3; tel. 0171 482 4420.



Main picture: a transparent conservatory was built in the garden, with an elliptical pond (left) linking inside and out, leading to the L-shaped family room (far left). An aerial view (above) shows the transformation of the narrow area

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