

Let's talk architecture

North London is a veritable treasure trove of architectural gems. From the sweeping Nash terraces of Regent's Park to the hodge podge of Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian homes of Hampstead. It must be simultaneously an architects' dream and the subject of their nightmares. Once a Hampstead homeowner has their dream home on lockdown they're unlikely to move for at least a generation, which means they soon come knocking when it comes to home improvements.

Luckily Belsize Architects have a very specific set of skills that allows them to deftly balance the needs of historical architecture with cutting edge design.

Founder Shahriar Nasser has worked on some of north London's most prestigious roads, extending and embellishing existing and often listed buildings, or creating entirely new buildings for infill sites.

Despite a passion of historic buildings, Nasser realised he didn't want to limit himself whilst working as an associate at a conservation focused practice 25 years ago. Even then he was convinced that

Belsize Architects design buildings that speak to their surroundings. **India Block** learns it's all about listening

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contemporary architecture could inform and even enhance existing buildings. "I kept asking 'why can't we do the two together?' and they told me it wasn't possible," he says.

Belsize Architects proves that it is possible. His work restoring listed buildings and introducing sensitive modern extensions has won many accolades. A recent project on Kent Terrace, restoring a piece of Nash architecture whilst adding a modern kitchen that floats free from the main building above a basement extension, has been shortlisted for the Architectural Journal's 2017 AJ Retrofit Award.

"Working with a historic building is interesting. You learn a lot from them, and you get to work with incredibly beautiful spaces," he says.

For some architects, working with a listed building can prove burdensome, particularly when it comes to receiving planning

permission to alter buildings that come with so much bureaucratic protection. But for Sharif, negotiating these restrictions is what pushes his design process to greater heights.

"There is a challenge there: what can you do with that beautiful space, and what are you adding to it that will improve it? Are you able to enhance it, and if you're not then you shouldn't be able to get planning permission for it."

Rather than play it safe with a pastiche of the existing architectural style, Shahriar and his team look to design contemporary extensions that strike their own note and chime in harmony with the listed building.

"It is interesting to see how your new design could actually start a dialogue with your creation within that building and what is there," he explains.

"That's the exciting part of working with historic buildings."

Another recent project, this time on Ferncroft Avenue, saw him remodel an Arts and Crafts house with a striking rear extension that juts into the rear landscaped

garden. Using complimentary red bricks to help it knit seamlessly into the existing architectural landscape, an angled recessed floor to ceiling glass window creates a shape that's modern without appearing anachronistic.

Taking cues from the buildings that surround his projects helps make his work sensitive to the palimpsest nature of Hampstead's architecture. For a project on Nutley Terrace he took a set of uninspiring garages and created a series of modern homes that are conversant with the existing houses on the street without being derivative.

"I don't like to see buildings as though they could have been dumped from the sky on to the site," he says. "The exciting part is seeing how you can use this context to produce something new but that could relate to the existing surrounding. That's one of the things I enjoy most, actually."

"Some architects might design a building almost like a sculpture, but I prefer to see how I can relate the new building to the area. It's to do with the materials, the form and the

height of the buildings. There are so many things that you can get inspiration from."

Ultimately, Nasser sees the work of Belsize Architects as providing as a conduit for the clients' visions. "It's always easier if you have a preconceived notion and you push the client to go with that," he tells me.

"But you have to try to put that to one side and see what it is that they want and whether you can achieve it. If you achieve it then your client is happy and you are happy, because you have managed to come up with a solution."

Whether it's designing a modern extension or finding out just what it is a client wants, Belsize Architects try to be on receive as much as send. "We had feedback from our clients and one of them said 'It's not very often that you get architects who actually listen to what the client wants and work with their imagination to produce that.'"

A conversation, after all, always needs two sides.
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Clockwise from left: Shahriar Nasser, centre, with the Belsize Architects team. Nutley Terrace, Ferncroft Avenue, Kent Terrace. Above and right: Nutley Terrace

