

HOUSE & GARDEN

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23

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**EXCLUSIVE
PREVIEW**

SUMPTUOUS NEW
FABRICS INSPIRED BY
THE ROYAL PALACES

TEXT CAROLINE CLIFTON-MOGG
PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON UPTON

GROUP DYNAMICS

The combined skills of, and understanding between, architect, decorator and client have resulted in a glamorous, light-filled duplex – with a two-floor glass extension on to a roof terrace – in what was previously a conventional Bloomsbury mansion flat



ALL PICTURES Designer Rients Bruinsma had all the furniture in the drawing room custom-made. Although the room is large, the ceiling is fairly low, so he designed low, wide tables, chairs, stools and sofas, using fabrics by Pierre Frey and Manuel Canovas. The photographic print above the fireplace (opposite) conceals the flat-screen television. The feather basket on the coffee table, by artist Dai Rees, was bought several years ago at Sotheby's



London is full of late-nineteenth-century mansion blocks, divided into flats that are usually well proportioned but rarely wildly exciting; at first sight, this conventional Bloomsbury building seems to promise more of the same. But whizz up to the fifth floor, and there is a surprise – a duplex apartment (it could never be described as a maisonette, with all the prissiness that word implies) characterised by clean, bold lines, and filled with light.

'Ah yes, light,' says Nathaniel Gee, the architect behind the conversion, 'that was my fundamental premise – there should be light everywhere and in everything.'

When the current owners first saw the space, however, the light seemed to be at the end of a

very long tunnel; the flat belonged to a Bloomsbury academic, and, with its book-lined rooms and ubiquitous pine panelling, looked like the den of a mature student. It was a collection of small rooms with a south-facing roof terrace accessed through french windows and, up a flight of stairs, two attic bedrooms and a bathroom. So far, so normal. But the new owners wanted something different, and asked Nathaniel to design an apartment that reflected their Australian background – somewhere easy to live and entertain, and with as much natural light as possible.'

The entrance into the flat was, in Nathaniel's words, 'a bit tight', so the owners negotiated with the other residents in the building to buy a





small piece of the communal hallway, which has now become part of the apartment – a foyer at right angles to the inner hall. In one direction, it leads towards the core of the apartment, and in the other direction into what one can only describe as a light box – a glass cube extension, pushed out beyond what once were masonry walls, housing a dining area, and opening on to the sunny terrace. Like all good ideas, the glass box seems so simple, once you see it, and in essence it is – so much so that it has been repeated, in even more striking circumstances, above. In the main bathroom, upstairs, the bath is placed within another, insulated, glass box. The whole experience is



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE The kitchen is by Bulthaup; a curved panelled door allows a more open view of the dining area. The furniture in the dining area was designed by Rients to match that in the drawing room. The glass box extension has a sliding door that leads out on to a sunny roof terrace. The terrace is decked, with built-in wooden benches and planters



THIS PAGE Upstairs, in the main bedroom, the mood is calm and luxurious, with a bespoke bed and chair designed by Rientz; the photographic print is by Dimitris Theocharis. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The sofa in the bedroom is the 'Onda', by Zanotta. The marble-lined main bathroom opens on to a small terrace. The bath, like the dining room downstairs, is enclosed in a glass box



about as close to alfresco ablutions as is possible in central London.

A study area with a glass wall, a glass balustrade on the new staircase, another glass extension leading off the main bedroom, and suddenly the whole space reflects light, which bounces from surface to surface.

In this new, light space, Nathaniel's task was to create a cohesive, calm flow throughout the living area without obvious visual interruption. From the efficiently designed kitchen, there are double, panelled doors, one curved and one straight, which allow whoever is cooking to see and talk to people seated in the glass dining area. The drawing room, which was formerly two separate rooms, has folding doors that open on to the hall, where the walls are etched with horizontal lines that draw the eye ever onwards. At the far end of the hall is a self-contained spare-bedroom suite – the very height of considerate hospitality.

Upstairs, on either side of the landing, are the main bedroom and bathroom. The bedroom, which was originally the attic, previously had a dormer window and sloping ceiling; Nathaniel replaced these with a glass wall, extending out as far as the chimney stack, which now seems almost part of the room.

When the architectural bones were in place,

it was time for the interior to be fleshed out by Rients Bruinsma – a London-based designer, who trained in the Netherlands and graduated by way of the perfectionist finishing schools of Peter Marino in New York and John Stefanidis in London. He was thrilled when he saw the space: 'It was such a clean and simple shell to work in, and yet it had retained its Victorian antecedents with enough classical details to give it character. That sort of space calls for quiet, calm colours and materials.'

It also required exactly the right pieces of furniture – particularly in the drawing room – so Rients decided that everything should be custom-designed for the space. 'It was a difficult room; very wide. I wanted to make two seating areas that would be informal, but would fill the room,' he explains. To persuade the owners that his ideas and the configuration were right, he taped newspaper cut-outs to the floor in the approximate shapes and sizes of the furniture, around which they could walk and comment.

The ceiling of the drawing room is not particularly high, so the pieces Rients designed for this room were luxurious, deep chairs and sofas, oversize stools, and wide, low tables. A pair of dining tables with matching upholstered benches were made – one for the drawing room and the other for the dining area – which

can be placed together when needed, and the finishing touch was a shimmering silk rug in silvery grey, which adds life and texture to the room. There is little colour as such, but contrast comes from the dark wood, the pale, pearly walls, and the textured surfaces.

The owners themselves devised a clever solution to the problem of how to conceal the flat-screen television. Instead of the common, but sometimes cumbersome, arrangement of a heavy, framed artwork, hung in front of the screen and controlled electronically to slide away, they had a photographic image blown up into a frameless, and therefore lightweight print, mounted on hinges in front of the screen, which swings aside as easily as a cupboard door.

Upstairs is peaceful and calm, a state Rients achieved with a bespoke bed and chair in neutral colours, and full, semi-sheer curtains, combined with blackout curtains.

There is an unusual cohesion and continuity to the space – the result of a harmonious understanding between client, architect and designer. As Rients puts it, 'We were a happy group who worked well together' – a fact the results make very clear □

Nathaniel Gee Architect: 020-7637 5822; www.nathanielgee.com | Rients Bruinsma: 020-7353 9892; www.rients.com

