

FREE WITH TODAY'S *Evening Standard*

Homes & Property

Wednesday, 27 July 2005

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My builder's big feat

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My builder's feat

Caroline Phillips knew she had picked the right builder for her Victorian terrace conversion when he stood on his head

HE MAY stand on his head before starting work, but Nathan Brown was just the builder we were looking for when we embarked on a radical conversion of our Victorian terrace house.

Nathan, of Brownstone Design, is one of a new breed of builder: married to a TV producer, he practises feng shui and yoga before rolling up his sleeves, and he knows the importance of finishing projects on time and within budget. In our case, he offered another convenience — he lives at the bottom of our garden (actually, his house backs on to ours).

With an uncanny ability to get things wrong, we had sold our previous house during a buyers' market and had rented before finally buying a new home on West Hampstead's borders during a sellers' market. We couldn't afford to make a mistake with our builder.

The house had belonged to an elderly Irish couple, who seemed to have spent their lives in the mock-Tudor television room and a ramshackle lean-to. Upstairs, they had created bedsits and let them to lodgers.

Few original features were left: the wooden sash windows had been replaced with plastic, the fireplaces were blocked, nylon carpets had been nailed to mosaic floors and the bannisters boxed in with chipboard.

Nathan set about designing, gutting,



Above: a quiet corner in the extension built by yoga fan Nathan Brown (right) with Caroline Phillips, children Anya and Ella, and Bouschka the dog



rebuilding and extending; he enlarged the window openings, rewired, stripped the red paint from the exterior and repointed.

The building work proved remarkable stress-free. When Nathan needed to extend the party wall, he simply asked himself. When I decided — too late for standard drainage — that we needed an extra toilet in the utility room, he magicked a Saniflo into

position. We didn't even have any planning permission nightmares — permitted development rights meant that, so long as we submitted drawings, we could extend our 2,000sq ft house by 10 per cent of the property's volume without having to worry about permission.

In no time we had created a huge modern extension where once there had been the lean-to. Inside was a

kitchen, by Alternative Plans, with a quarry's worth of limestone on the heated floor, Lutron lighting (as used in the Oval Office of the White House), a Gaggenau steam oven, drive-in Siemens fridge-freezer, wraparound Bose home-entertainment system and a wall of sliding glass doors that cost us our holidays for a decade.

Swish new fireplaces from the Platonic Fireplace Company were installed and a mosaics expert had returned the Victorian hall floor to its original splendour.

Lovely reclaimed bannisters led the way upstairs, and cornicing from Plastercraft (which does work for English Heritage) had been fitted. That was the point where we thought we might charge an entrance fee.

The master bedroom was created from two pokey rooms with low ceilings and a dark corridor. Nathan demolished the lot, removing the roof and replacing rafters and insulation, before installing a huge window as well as Velux ones for lots of light.

We have ended up with an open-plan

bedroom and bathroom with a vaulted ceiling soaring to the apex.

A cheery district surveyor ensured that Britain's quirky safety regulations were not breached. A railing had to be installed when we dropped the height of a new window, so that no one would tumble to the terrace all of 16in below, while another oversized window — in a child's room — standing menacingly above a set of glass roofs, required no railings because it wasn't new. We caged the little girl in nonetheless.

There was just one hiccup: interference on the phone line. BT paid 15 visits before the problem was diagnosed — frequency disturbance from a dimmer switch. We now have a Rako wireless lighting system in our house and celebrate St Rako's Day each year.

Nathan's team worked around the clock and in 10 months he had given us a high-spec four-bedroom family home. Oh, and we had lunch with him today — at the bottom of the garden.

Pictures by David George

'A cheery district surveyor enforced the safety rules'



All mod cons: a "drive in" Seimens fridge-freezer, steam oven from Gaggenau and a dining table from The Collection in the new kitchen



FACT BOX who did what

● Designer/builder: Nathan Brown of Brownstone Design (020 8969 1142; www.brownstone-uk.com) undertakes projects from £30,000.

SPECIALISTS

- Fire installation: Len Murphy (07930 406443)
- Electrician: Steve Devenport (07958 534397)
- Plumber: Richard Marks (07956 439148)
- Joiner: John Murray (020 7732 2932; mobile 07773 361568)
- Tiler: John Hill (07946 532991)

SUPPLIERS

- Kitchen: Alternative Plans, 160 Notting Hill Gate W11 (020 7243 9747; www.alternative-plans.co.uk).
- Furniture: Natuzzi Italian leather sofas and Ottoman (call 01322 312550 for stockists' details, or visit www.natuzzi.co.uk). Dining table from The Collection (01962 771773; www.thecollection.com).

uk.com). Soft furnishings and the extension's Painting by Numbers picture, from Maisonette, 79 Chamerlayne Road, NW10 (020 8964 8444; www.maisonette.uk.com).

● Lighting Rako wireless system controls (0870 043 3905; www.rakocontrols.com) and Lutron (0800 282107; www.lutron.com/europe) for touch-button lighting.

● Sound system: Bose Lifestyle (call for a brochure on 0800 107 4999, or visit www.bose.co.uk).

● Fireplaces: The Platonic Fireplace Company (020 8891 5904; www.platonicfireplaces.co.uk).

● Victorian floor-tile restoration: specialist Ricky Taylor of Victorian Tile (07976 937667; www.victoriantile.co.uk).

● Limestone and marble: Stone Age, Unit 3 Parsons Green Depot, Parsons Green Lane, SW6 (020 7384 9090; www.estone.co.uk).

● Windows: Velux (01592 772211; www.velux.co.uk) and Preedy Glass (020 7700 0377; www.preedyglass.com).

● Utility room: Saniflo provided the new toilet (020 8842 0033; www.saniflo.co.uk). Prices from about £250, plus VAT.

HEATING

● Radiators: Bisque Radiators, 244 Belsize Road, NW6 (020 7328 2225; www.bisque.co.uk).

PAINTS and CORNICING

● Zoffany (0870 830 0060; www.zoffany.com) and Farrow & Ball (01202 876141; www.farrow-ball.com) for all paintwork. Plasterwork from Plastercraft (020 7736 5146).

● Stripping the paint from the exterior of the house: Radford Blasting Services (01923 290600) and Power Clean to clean stone floor (01962 732126)

Light touches: flowers and pottery finish off the look in the bright new space created by Nathan Brown

