

# WHERE THE ART IS

A VICTORIAN HOME IN A LEAFY LONDON BOROUGH  
IS ENHANCED BY A GALLERY-INSPIRED EXTENSION  
WITH A SWIRLING STEEL STAIRCASE

Photography Jack Hobhouse Words Natasha Radmehr

SOME of Hackney's residents bristled when they learned that one of their neighbours was planning to extend their property. The leafy East London district is characterised by its neat Victorian terraces with ornate, Italianate features, and locals were worried that the contemporary design of the proposed addition would be incongruous with the conservation area.

"I think there were 27 objections, but fortunately the planning department were very supportive of the idea, praising it for its 'high-quality, lightweight design'," says Ben Cousins, co-founder of Cousins & Cousins, the architecture and interior design practice commissioned to undertake the project.

"And actually, in the end, there weren't any problems," adds Jelena Cousins, Ben's wife and fellow co-founder. "Sometimes people just don't like the idea of change, but once they actually live with it, it's fine. A woman hit Richard Rogers over the head with an umbrella for designing the Centre Pompidou, and now it's one of the most iconic buildings in the world!"

A space in which art is to be admired should be a vision in its own right, after all. And that factored into the thinking behind this project. The homeowners were keen art collectors and wanted to achieve a gallery-like experience with the extension, with plenty of space to hang paintings. Cousins & Cousins were mindful of this while following the brief to increase the footprint of the home in a unique and modern way.

"Previously, the house felt quite closed off and like a rabbit warren of lots of small rooms," recalls Jelena. "We wanted to completely open up the building and create something quite sculptural while bringing as much natural daylight into the house as possible."

Both the architects and the owners agreed that the two-storey extension should have its own distinct aesthetic ►



rather than be an attempt to emulate the traditional style of the main building.

“I think it’s always good to have that contrast so you can see what’s old and what’s new,” says Jelena. “You lose a bit of a home’s heritage if you try to replicate it, because you might be making changes that aren’t reflective of the choices the original owners would have made at that time. The beauty of restorations and enlargements is that they can show the evolution of design.”

The new building is cool and modular with a slim glulam timber frame; a material that was chosen because it is stronger than steel, sustainable and has an understated appearance that harmonises well with the bricks of the original building. “We had looked at different options for the construction materials and this was the best solution because it was very slender and elegant – steel would be much bulkier,” explains Ben. “I think one of the visual successes of the building comes from the refinement of that material choice.”

The judicious use of glass improves the connection between the home and nature, another priority for the owners. Soothing greenery can be seen from every bit of the extension, instilling a sense of lightness and calm. The concrete-floored open-plan kitchen and living area has sliding glass doors at the back which open out to the north-facing garden. Daylight pours into the double-height kitchen area from a glass-covered void above, which is positioned beside the study.

“Multifunctionality was important, so most of the rooms can become something else,” says Jelena. “There is a playfulness to the study – you’d never know it, but there is a pop-up bed built into the library, so it can serve as a spare bedroom. The room also has timber shutters that merge with the exterior, so it’s almost hidden from the outside. The family room downstairs also has a wall that shuts off, allowing it to be a separate space or to be part of the open living area.” ►

**[Right]** The timber frame is from Glulam Timber Engineering. On the ground level is an open-plan kitchen and living space that opens out to the garden. On the floor above, a study sits to the left, with timber shutters that blend with the exterior. The windows are from London Box Sash Windows Ltd. **[Previous pages]** The steel staircase is the centrepiece of the home and was the most challenging aspect to get right. “Finding a builder who understood the complexity of it was difficult,” says Ben. “But we got there in the end, and it looks fantastic.”







**[Above]** The kitchen cabinets were supplied by Cousins & Cousins, and are topped by White + Reid polished concrete countertops. The pendants are from independent lighting specialists, Atrium. **[Opposite]** The curved balustrade is made from thin patinated steel, sourced from Webb Yates Engineers, which was waxed and sealed. "This prevents it from having any starkness," says Jelena Cousins. "It's solid but has a very soft feel to it."

The top floor of the house was also sensitively reconfigured. Two bedrooms and bathrooms were transformed into one spacious master bedroom suite with a white marble bathroom. The architects were careful to preserve the home's original features, however. "The architraves, the doors, all of the old parts of the house have remained the same," says Ben.

Connecting the new spaces with the old is the striking centrepiece of the home: a bespoke steel-wrapped sculptural staircase that could slot into a modern art gallery with ease. It winds gracefully from the garden level up to the master bedroom on the top floor, passing by the picture window in the void space. Despite its solidity, it is not severe; the curved steel balustrade is patinated for a softer, brushed appearance than one would typically expect from this stark metal, and the spaces between the steps aid the distribution of light as it filters through the windows.

"Standing on the staircase on the upper ground ▶





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[Left] The bright and airy study has a cleverly concealed bed built in, so this space can double as a guest bedroom. “It also has a secret door that can be opened, which overlooks the kitchen downstairs.”



floor, looking down into the double-height space, provides a really special moment,” says Ben.

“As you descend the stairs, you get a really amazing view of almost all of the interventions we’ve created within the building as well as the views to the garden and nature. It’s my favourite spot in the house.”

Rather unusually, the extension is not insulated; the timber on the inside acts as an insulant as well as structurally holding up the building. “We did a lot of testing before we built it to make sure that it would act correctly and that we weren’t going to get any condensation inside. And the glass itself is very high-performance double-glazing. We found we didn’t need to triple-glaze because the space was really cosy,” says Ben.

The interior and exterior are inextricably linked, with the same pared-back collection of materials found throughout: timber, glass, concrete and steel. The neutral palette of the home reflects the sum of its parts, blending seamlessly with the materials that form its foundations. “Everything talks to each other and there’s a real feeling of coherence, which I think is helped by us providing the architecture and the interior design,” says Jelena. “Nothing jars.”

The clients were delighted with the results. “The owners loved the special staircase and having big spaces where they could hang their paintings,” says Jelena, who adds that she and Ben are “enormously proud” of the project.

And so far, nobody has hit them with an umbrella. ■

**[Left]** The en-suite in the master bedroom brings a touch of luxury to proceedings. It’s swathed in Livra marble and features a sink, mirror and copper taps from C.P. Hart. **[Right]** Gaps between the stairs allow natural light to filter through from the windows, and offer views out to the greenery in the garden

