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BIRDS *of a* FEATHER

The owner, architects and interior designer of this London house were perfectly in tune during its conversion, and worked happily together to achieve a balance between its historical character and a sophisticated yet exuberant interior scheme, with distinctly avian allusions

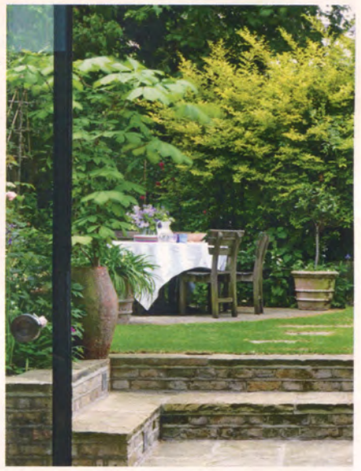
TEXT **FIONA MACLEOD** | PHOTOGRAPHS **SIMON BROWN** | LOCATIONS EDITOR **LIZ ELLIOT**

THIS PICTURE A wide doorway was knocked through to the reception rooms, to bring light to the narrow entrance hallway. OPPOSITE A Georgian walnut tallboy stands to the left of the marble chimneypiece, while a family portrait by James Sant hangs on the wall to the right

THIS PAGE The spacious ground-floor reception rooms look out over the communal gardens. OPPOSITE The ground floor has been given a traditional elegance (top left and centre), while the basement kitchen (top right) is more modern. Sliding glass doors connect the kitchen with the garden and terrace (centre right). The cabinets in the utility area are painted in '9/095' from Papers and Paints (bottom right)

In her pretty metal cage in the basement kitchen, Pushkin, the African grey parrot, has been stunned into silence by the loud babble of noise as the architects, designer and owner meet to discuss the completion of the conversion of this Victorian terrace house in Elgin Crescent, W11. 'She usually chats away and imitates everyone and everything,' explains the owner, but the level of animated interchange this afternoon is too much for even Pushkin to compete with.

It's obvious from the laughter and easy banter that the assembled team worked well together. Thomas Croft and Fabio Gonzalez-Calzada from Thomas Croft Architects were recommended to the owners by Sally Storey of John Cullen Lighting, who had worked with TCA on various projects and who lent her lighting expertise to this one. Sarah Delaney, the designer, was a friend of the owner and had previously teamed up on projects with the Notting Hill-based architects.



From the outset, collaboration ran smoothly. 'The house had been subdivided into four flats and so there were major changes to be made. Fortunately we had nine months to do the planning, while the owners were already living here,' says Thomas. 'We worked pretty much to their first concept, which was to leave the rooms on the ground floor and above traditional, while making the basement more modern, but we had plenty of time to work things through while they were in situ.'

'Living in the house for that initial period confirmed all our thoughts about retaining much of the house's historic character,' explains the owner. 'I particularly loved the beautiful old glass in the large sash windows overlooking the communal gardens at the back. We've put an upholstered window seat by the main window in the reception room on the ground floor so that we can fully appreciate this view. We'd deliberated for a long time about living partly in the country and keeping only a small base in London but in the end have tried to incorporate all that we wanted into this one house. Having a flow between house and garden was a crucial part of this and so we have added a small glass side-to-side extension to the basement kitchen, with glass sliding doors leading directly out on to the terrace.'

A modern glass-sided staircase leads down to the kitchen, where the hard-edged German design of stainless-steel Bulthaup fittings combines with softer decorative touches. A glazed, distressed-pine cabinet containing elegant coloured glassware sits between Pushkin's tall birdcage and a colourful still life of English summer flowers by Joyce Spencer. The table is a copy of an old draper's table from Rose Uniacke and the rustic wood and seagrass kitchen chairs are from The Conran Shop.

Here and there, touches of vibrant colour accent the clean minimalist lines of the room. The owner is a restorer of works of art on paper with a strongly developed sense of colour and aesthetics. Arrangements of pigment-rich ceramic and glass vessels line the shelves by the garden doors beside an upright sofa covered in a bright, leafy Skandium fabric. Utility areas are discreetly hidden away at one end of the space. 'An old-fashioned pantry and a flower room for me,' says the owner, 'which doubles as a place for my husband to pluck his game birds, one of his few stipulations.'

Upstairs, original flooring and cornicing was retained where possible, refurbished and in places added to. 'We've not only brought back to life the historical features of the architecture but also, I think, improved upon them,' explains Fabio. 'In what used to be a narrow entrance hallway on the ground floor, we've knocked through a wide entrance into the main reception rooms, which incorporates pocket doors. This brings space and light into both the hallway and the two interlinking ground-floor rooms.'

Here and there, touches of vibrant colour accent the clean minimalist lines of the basement kitchen

On this floor, an inherited Georgian walnut tallboy and a fine oil portrait by James Sant, among other antique pieces, give a sense of history to the suite of rooms. The painting depicts the owner's great-grandfather and his sister picking apples in an orchard. 'As a child, I used to gaze up at that painting in the room where we sat to have tea at my great-aunt's house every Friday,' recalls the owner. There are also contemporary portraits of the owner's children by Anthony Eyton, one of her tutors at Camberwell School of Art.

Touches of exuberance and eclecticism enrich these elegant rooms. Brightly coloured, hand-dyed velvet scatter cushions from the Suffolk workshop of ex-costumier and textiles designer Kirsten Hecktermann mix with

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT In a corner of the kitchen, a Fifties sofa is covered in 'Dragonfly White' by Jobs Handtryck from Skandium. The dining table is from Rose Uniacke while the rustic wood and seagrass chairs are from The Conran Shop. A distressed-pine cabinet contains the owner's collection of glassware. A floral still life by Joyce Spencer adds colour to the kitchen

antique Pakistani wedding cushions on the sofa and window seat. 'The owner pushed me a bit on colour, but we never fell out about it,' says Sarah. 'The influence went both ways,' adds the owner. 'Sarah loves grey and I ended up choosing it for the wall paint in these rooms.'

Ornate Baguès chandeliers from the Twenties attract the light in the airy, high-ceilinged spaces. 'I love them as they are a bit wild and quirky,' says Sarah. 'One of them has the bird motif the company used quite frequently during this period,' adds the owner. 'There's a subtle bird theme running throughout the house. It's to do with bringing nature and the country inside.'

Upstairs in the main bedroom, an exotic hand-painted de Gournay wallpaper depicting oriental birds amid trees and flowers on a silver background is combined with panelling

There's a subtle bird theme running throughout the house. It's to do with bringing nature and the country inside

salvaged from another local house refurbishment. 'I think having panelling on the lower part of the wall rather than running the paper right down to the floor makes the effect subtler and less of a statement,' says the owner. 'I spotted this paper when driving past de Gournay's showroom window and just knew I had to have it somewhere in the house.'

There have been hours of happy reminiscing between the team about this project. Everyone is delighted with the results and it's evident they all enjoyed the collaboration. As we leave the house and peace is restored, we can't help but wonder what Pushkin's version of our design-world chatter will be □

Thomas Croft Architects: 020-8962 0066; www.thomascroft.com | Sarah Delaney Design: 020-7221 2010; www.sarahdelaneydesign.co.uk Sally Storey of John Cullen Lighting: 020-7371 5400; www.johncullenlighting.co.uk

RIGHT A Twenties Baguès chandelier catches the light in the main bathroom. **FAR RIGHT** An avian theme runs throughout the house, as seen in the de Gournay wallpaper in the main bedroom (top and centre). On the top floor, the decoration of the children's bedrooms is light-hearted and comfortable (bottom left and right)