

**DETAILS**

**What** An extended and renovated Victorian villa

**Where** Bruntsfield, Edinburgh

**Architect** Helen Lucas Architects

# REAR OF THE YEAR

Two zinc-clad extensions with carefully oriented glazing have created a private haven for the owners of this Victorian villa in Edinburgh

Photography Angus Bremner Words Caroline Ednie



[Left] The first of the new extensions contains the kitchen. Its back wall, where the ovens are, has no window, ensuring privacy from the adjacent flats. The doors and windows are fitted with *shoji*, made by The Screen Room. The kitchen was designed and made by Murray & Murray, with concrete work surfaces by LowInfo. Bonnyrigg's InSitu supplied the stainless-steel countertop and extraction hood. The dining table was made by Jeremy Pitts

A perennial side effect of modernising Victorian villas is the often uncomfortable alliance it produces between old and new, with the original features frequently compromised or even subsumed by the contemporary additions. Not so with the recent renovation and extension of this handsome period property in Bruntsfield, on the south side of Edinburgh. Helen Lucas Architects came up with a solution that not only addressed the principal element of the clients' brief, namely to bring in more light, but which also gave the Victorian details space to breathe, thanks to a series of painstaking repairs.

In addition to the request for more brightness, and the desire to make the house more energy efficient, the brief also called for the creation of better links between the house and the garden. "The old conservatory was the only place you could experience any kind of relationship with the garden,"

recalls Helen Lucas. "But its position, overlooked as it was by the adjacent tenements, made it feel like being in a goldfish bowl. The first crucial move was to demolish it and place a new kitchen-dining extension down the eastern boundary. With its back turned to the block of flats, it has large west-facing areas of glazing that are completely private."

A second extension – like the first, clad in dark zinc – replaced the conservatory to house a study and gym. "The gym section is only accessible from the garden – the clients felt the walk outside would be a helpful part of their exercise routine," says Lucas. "The house has also been opened up from front to back to allow sunshine from the south-facing front of the house to flow all the way through to the north side and to give the front rooms a view of the rear garden. This opening up and maximising of the natural light, views and connection to the outside were all key elements of the brief, and crucial to the way we approached the redesign of this house."

Two separate extensions might seem extravagant – or possibly even a missed opportunity ▶

to expand the house's footprint even further by including the space between them – but the architect was keen to keep part of the existing façade and not cover the entire rear elevation with new elements. A huge window has been inserted to great effect in the wall that was left: “The generosity of this opening helps deliver natural light and connectivity to the garden right into the heart of the house,” she explains.

This job was not simply all about new additions, though. In parallel to the design and construction of the extensions was attention to the old Victorian house. Years of alterations and decoration were stripped back, and the property was extensively repaired to simplify the spaces and allow the old and new rooms to calmly connect and flow together. Externally, this saw the careful repair and replacement of roof slates and leadwork, and the removal of brick-and-render chimneys, which were reinstated in stone. There were also extensive repairs to the stonework elsewhere and the installation of energy-efficient double-glazed replacement windows. Internally, ‘future-proofing’ alterations were made to allow the house to comfortably accommodate a ▶



[Left] A detail of the sliding screens, which retract neatly into a made-to-measure ‘box’ when not in use. [Right] Another view of the kitchen, looking through to the sitting room at the front of the house. Improving the flow and increasing the amount of light entering the downstairs rooms was a major part of the brief. The skylights, by Glazing Vision and Velux, helped with the latter, as does the pale timber flooring from Russwood

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[Above] Edinburgh firm Colin Parker was responsible for much of the superb cabinet-making in the house, including this bookcase and *tokonoma*, or alcove. As well as building the extensions, Braidwood, the main contractor, did a lot of the other fine joinery work. [Right] Glazed sliding doors echo the screens while allowing light to flow. [Opposite] Despite the contemporary additions, this is still a Victorian house, and its period features, such as the curving central staircase, have all been lovingly restored



person in a wheelchair, should that become necessary.

The two original sitting rooms to the front of the house were restored and upgraded and have been opened up to the new extensions, dramatically improving flow and circulation throughout the ground floor; one connects to the kitchen and the other to the study.

Upstairs, the bedrooms were stripped back to reveal original features such as shutter panels. Lights by Glasgow-based Spatial Lighting have helped give a sense of calm to these restored rooms. A new bathroom and dressing room were formed for the master bedroom, and a Japanese cedar bath was installed.

“Unique to this project for us was the incorporation of Japanese influences and set pieces, which reflect the clients’ time and experiences of living in the Far East,” explains Lucas.

These elements are far from being merely decorative; they play a central part in the interiors scheme and required superb cabinetmaking skills from Colin Parker (to make the library corridor and *tokonoma*, or alcoves), and beautiful joinery work by Braidwood Building Contractor’s team (to construct *shoji* boxes and lay the herringbone parquet). *Shoji* – oak and rice-paper screens – are used for privacy in place of blinds on the large glazed walls of the new rooms, and they cleverly retreat into their boxes when not in use.

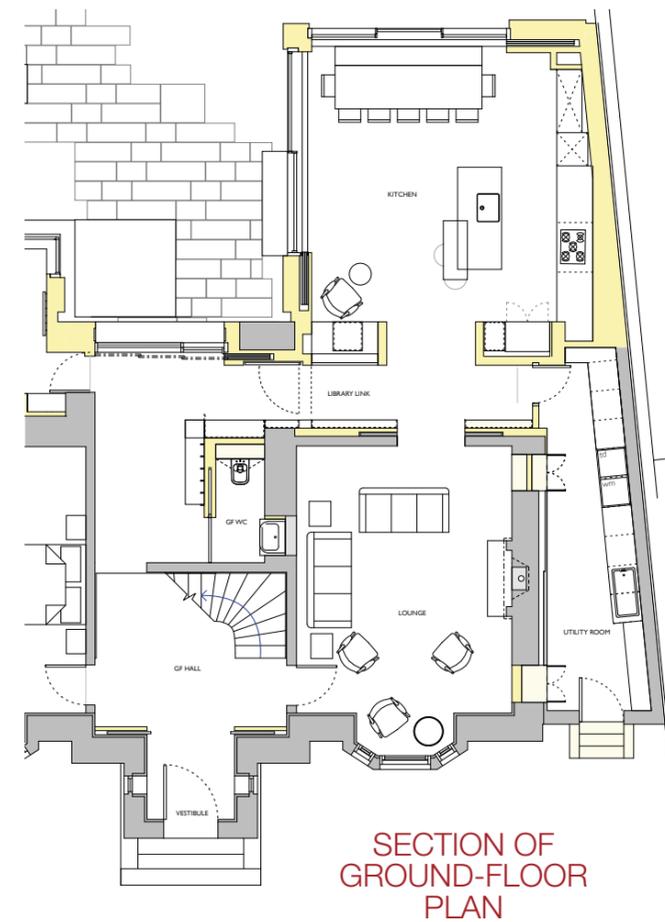
“The concealed *shoji* and the precise positioning of the *tokonoma* were a very important element of the design,” says Lucas. “There was a real sense of satisfaction when the Japanese screens, whose measurements we had sweated over, fitted perfectly. They were being made bespoke in Devon, so there was no scope for error!”

The house was completely replumbed and rewired as part of the general upgrading process and a strong focus was placed on keeping energy use as low as possible. The existing walls were insulated and an air-source heat pump was installed to provide heating and hot water. The extensions along the north elevation allowed for superinsulation of the cold side of the house.

The painstaking project took almost two years to complete. “The timescale we originally conceived was exceeded as a result of a number of factors, most of which can be attributed to the complexity of the structure and the extent of the external repairs required once a scaffold was erected,” says Lucas.

“Getting the news that a significant number of stones in the building needed to be replaced and that the roof required replacing was one of the main challenges. In hindsight, we’d probably have put up scaffolding at the earliest possible moment to establish the extent of the





[Far left] Original features in the bedrooms were repaired or upgraded – the windows, for example, were replaced with sash-and-case double glazing by Greenock firm Blairs. Spatial Lighting supplied new lights throughout the house. [Middle and below] The bathrooms were upgraded too, with a new en-suite and the addition of a Japanese ofuro bathtub, from Devon furniture-maker William Garvey. [Below left] Cherry framed fusuma screens

stonework repairs.”

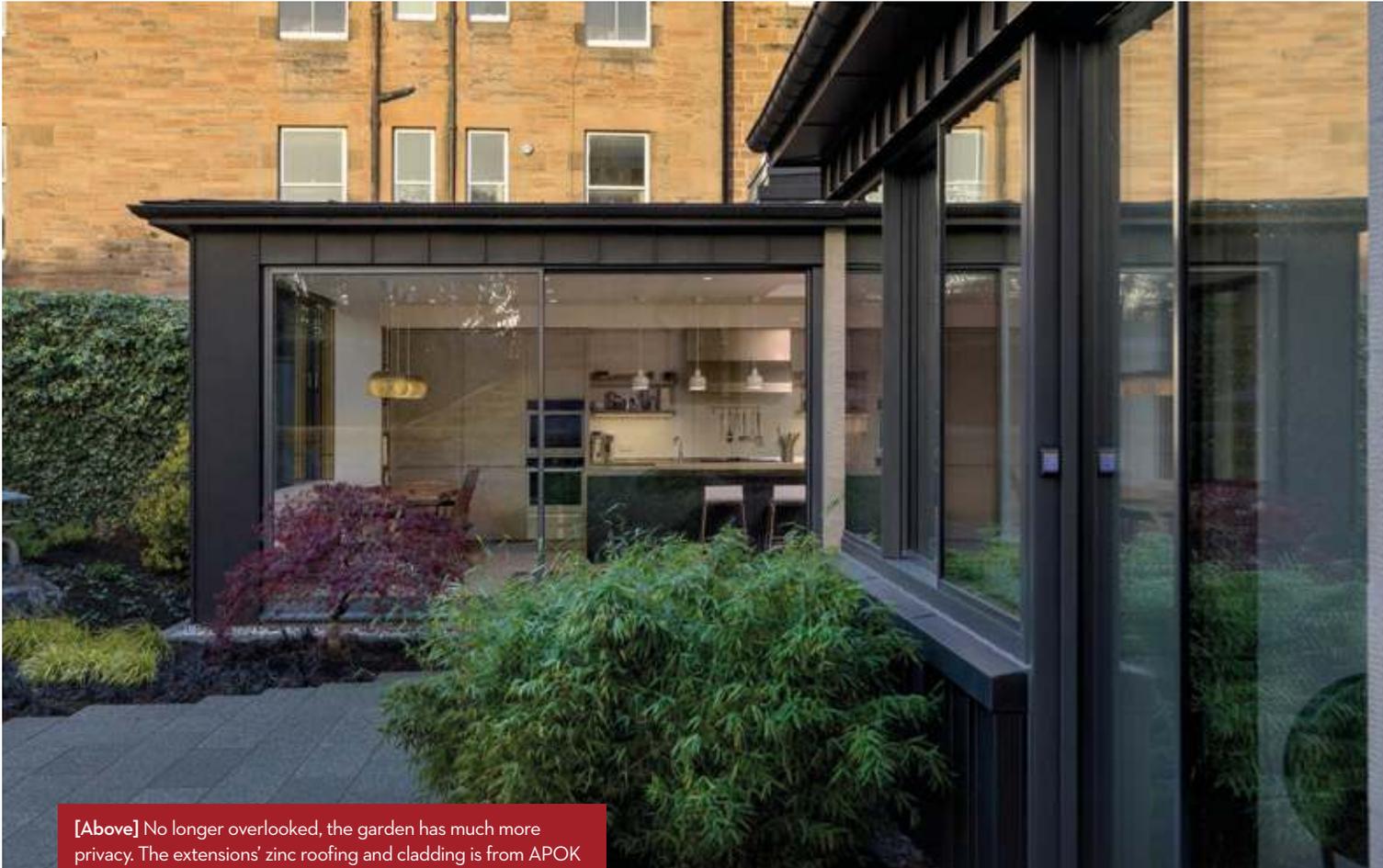
The project also had its fair share of high points, one of which, for the architect, was seeing the garden take shape. The front garden and driveway, which became the builders’ staging area, was reconfigured and replanted after the major construction works were completed. The rear garden, too, needed a lot of work – all that was left in it was a large flowering cherry tree. The clients wanted this space to have a Japanese theme, so worked with a Vermont-based landscaper, Julie Moir Messervy, who is an expert in harmonising Japanese and western garden design elements. She is also an old friend of the clients, and personally made two visits to Edinburgh, first to position a number of key elements such as large rocks (among them, ancient Lewisian gneiss from the north of Scotland) and trees and, later, to

direct the soft landscaping.

The garden’s design recreates the feeling of a traditional Japanese garden, but using local plants. Together with local landscape contractor Stephen Ogilvie, who played an important role in the project, including sourcing the rocks, Julie Moir Messervy and the owners visited nurseries in search of distinctive plant specimens that would accurately convey their ideas.

They selected cloud-pruned hollies, craggy pines, Japanese maples of varied colour, and a striking Japanese snowbell tree. Beneath these, swathes of sedges, hellebores, European gingers, ferns and Solomon’s Seal were planted. Evergreen azaleas, rhododendrons and skimmia were clustered on the ‘hills’. Bamboos were also planted in carefully contained patio beds, with mondo grass and ▶





[Above] No longer overlooked, the garden has much more privacy. The extensions' zinc roofing and cladding is from APOK Building Services, while their triple glazing is by Solarlux. [Right] Julie Moir Messervy Design Services designed the garden, with landscaping from Stephen Ogilvie. The stone came from CED in Falkirk and Tradstocks of Stirling

sedums planted as a setting for the stepping-stones. Moss is encouraged to grow under the shade of the cherry tree.

The owners also commissioned Tradstocks stone yard in Stirlingshire to create a 'water stone' feature for the garden – water flows over the top of a partially smooth, partially rough-hewn rock – in homage to artist and architect Isamu Noguchi, whose work they admire.

“One of the high points of this project has been seeing the pleasure the clients have taken from the marriage of their new garden and their newly laid-out house,” says Lucas. “Seeing the light and long views as the contractors began to take down walls was another highlight, as was achieving the long straight wall between the front and rear halls as it passes under the tightly spiralling stone staircase.” And the low point? “That was when the engineer said he didn't think we could achieve this!”

Happily for all concerned, he was wrong. ■

