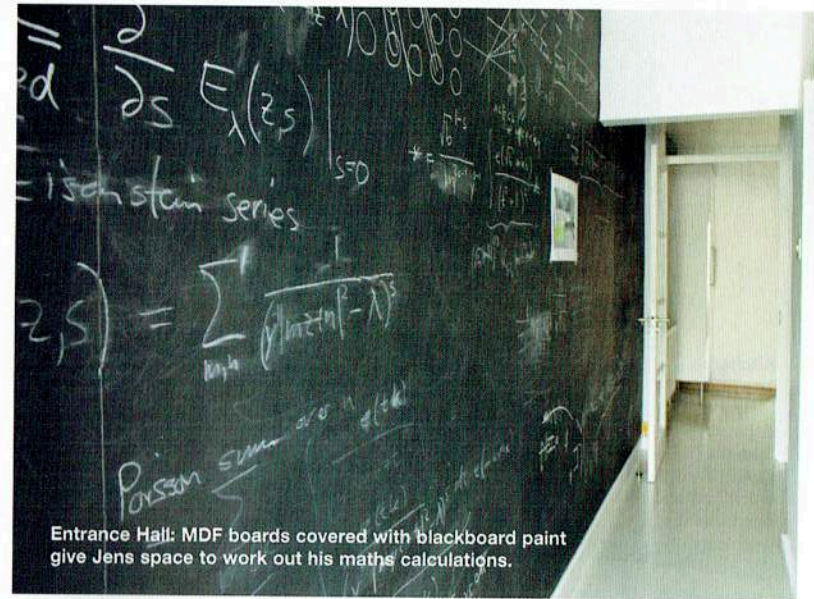




A Cosmopolitan Combination

How one couple turned their ugly duckling of a house into an airy home with an individual blend of old and new.
Words by Victoria Jenkins and photos by William Goddard



Entrance Hall: MDF boards covered with blackboard paint give Jens space to work out his maths calculations.

Italian-born Federica Vasetti met her partner, Jens Marklof, in Paris more than ten years ago. Jens was from Germany and doing research in Paris, while Federica was on an exchange programme from her university. However, by 2000 they were both in Bristol where Jens (now a professor of mathematics) had secured a job at the university and Federica was working as an architect.

But some three years later the couple decided it was time to have a home of their own. They had set their hearts on buying a plot and building a house to their own design, but after months of searching this idea became more and more hopeless. Developers were snapping up anything that came onto the market, so reluctantly the couple realised they would have to buy a place and do it up as close to how they wanted it themselves.

The Victorian terraced house they actually ended up with, however, was one of the most unattractive Federica had ever seen. Although in Bedminster, an attractive area, the 1875 house had had all its period features stripped out and was in fact so ugly that Federica christened it 'The Ugly House' and dismissed it out of hand. But eight months later the couple still hadn't found a home, which is when Federica discovered the house was still for sale. "I realised that if I could extend it by a third at the back it might be quite viable," she says. "And as it was a blank canvas anyway we could do it up exactly as we wanted."

To be on the safe side Federica sent in sketches of her planned extension to the local planning department before making an offer. They recommended that she reduce its size, which she

Kitchen: The floor is Marmoleum, the cabinets from Ikea and the stainless-steel worktops and oven backsplash were made locally



was happy to do, and thus encouraged, the couple made an offer. "It was on the low side and was turned down because this was at the time when houses were selling at their asking price like hot cakes," she says. "But the house still didn't sell and three weeks later the estate agent called me to say that if I could raise my offer a little we could have it. So we did."

Having become the proud owners of this unprepossessing little house, Federica once again sent in her modified plans and this time they were passed without problem. So in October 2004 they began renovations, joyfully ripping out all the hideous old carpets. "What we wanted was an open-plan ground floor," says Federica. "So the living area at the front of the house has now become my office, while the inner living room has become the kitchen; the old kitchen is now the dining room and the new extension at the back houses the new living area."

The couple did as much work as possible themselves so Jens' father, on a visit from Germany, found himself helping Jens in removing and replacing the old floorboards. The intrepid pair even removed the old rotten staircase and built the new one themselves. Meanwhile Federica stripped the crumbling plaster from the chimney breasts and cleaned and repointed the old brickwork with a view to leaving it exposed. "But we did have workmen to fit the bathroom and the kitchen and to update the plumbing and electrics ready for the extension."

By March 2005 the couple were able to move in, although the work was by no means finished. All they had was a table with a microwave for their kitchen and as there was no water downstairs they had to wash the dishes in the bathtub upstairs. Luckily that

lasted only for two months.

Federica decided to project manage the extension herself and work began on the foundations in June, which was meant to take three weeks but took eight. This new single-storey extension – stretching into the

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back garden – has a roof and canopy built from 200-year-old reclaimed timbers, although the structure looks just about as modern as you can get. It takes up the full width of the plot and projects an extra five



Sitting area: The bespoke leather sofas in natural dye are from Sofa Riot in Bristol. The couple wanted high but relatively shallow sofas so they can sit upright on them to read



Federica used her skills as an architect to create their home

metres into the garden, adding almost a third to the total floor area. There are full-height sliding doors leading into the garden, allowing as much natural light as possible to flood in, but what is particularly stunning is the fact that the corner of the new facade is cut at a 45-degree angle. The effect is emphasised by a massive six-metre-long elm beam that supports the external canopy and a solid oak post rescued from a local barn.

"I didn't want the extension to look too clinical, which is why I wanted the old beams – which in fact came from an old university building in Derby," she

says. "We found a carpenter called Rupert who was so brilliant that we had him lay the flooring throughout the ground floor as well as the built-in cabinets and hollow storage bench."

Just as the couple were nearing the winning post, baby daughter Lea arrived as an early prize. "We just had my office left to do and the painting and sealing." Federica chose Ikea cabinets for the kitchen with stainless-steel worktops and the paint colours throughout are in neutral tones.

"The house suits us very well; the open-plan living area is perfect for family life as we can cook or sit at the table and still keep an eye on Lea playing in the living room," says Federica. "We feel as if we have got the best of both worlds: the individuality of a house with its front door and a garden, but the space of an open-plan warehouse conversion!"

"I also love the connection with the garden and the feeling of space. Since the back gardens in this terrace are unusually long, you can see a lot of sky and trees from the living room window. People visiting are often astonished at the 'rural' feel at the back of the house, despite its central location." □

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Dining Room: The oak table is from Habitat and the temporary chairs are garden furniture. The floor is engineered oak

