

DID YOU KNOW?

Air pollution levels can be two to five times higher indoors than outdoors, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency



BuildIt



HOME IMPROVEMENT



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72 Reclaimed space

Architect Federica Vasetti took an unlovely Bristol house, added a swish extension, and now has a fabulous family home

81 Making a splash

Leave the all-white suite behind and embrace some of bathing's newest trends, including coloured baths, Zen-like wood and basic black



81



Stay on your own turf – just make it even better

There's a skill to envisioning the transformation of a house from ugly duckling to swan, and it's something that architect Federica Vasetti has in spades. Having at first dismissed her Victorian terrace as the 'Ugly House,' a second look persuaded her that, with some TLC and a modern extension, it had the makings of a stunning family home (page 72). If you, too, are looking to improve rather than move, a brand-new bathroom is a good place to start: you'll find the latest trends, from hotel-inspired chic to injections of zingy colour, all in one place (page 81).

100,000+

The number of annual complaints about cowboy builders received by the Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform



RECLAIMED SPACE



When Federica Vasetti and partner Jens Marklof started looking for a new home in the area where Bristol's famous tobacco factories had once stood, they had no idea they'd end up working on a renovation project for three years

WORDS ANNA-MARIE DESOUZA PHOTOS MIKE BLACK

After living in Bristol for three years, Federica Vasetti and her partner Jens Marklof decided it was time to get on the property ladder and find a home of their own. "All my colleagues seemed to be buying homes and I found myself dreaming of having my own place," says Federica. Initially, the couple wanted to start from scratch and use Federica's skills as an architect to design and build a new house. The couple had clear ideas about what they wanted, and were brimming over with creative concepts for the layout – all they needed was to find a suitable plot.

They began looking for a property in 2003, but after months of searching, they started to grow despondent, fearing that they would never find a plot in the area where they wanted to settle. All around them, building plots in Bristol were being snapped up in no time at all, usually by developers wanting to build higher density housing. "I bid on a couple of plots and ended up losing out to developers. It was impossible to get anything in the area," said Federica.

Nearly a year later the couple gave up, deciding to change strategy and look for the next best thing – a house

to renovate. In their search, Federica came across a house in the ideal location – Bedminster, a Victorian neighbourhood that used to house Bristol's famous tobacco factories. The house was in a great place, but in an awful condition. "I walked in and nearly walked straight out again," says Federica. "The house, a Victorian terrace, had been stripped of all its period features and was just plain ugly. In fact, for many months we nicknamed it 'Ugly House.'" Understandably, she walked away from it without a second thought, and certainly didn't consider it suitable for them to live in.

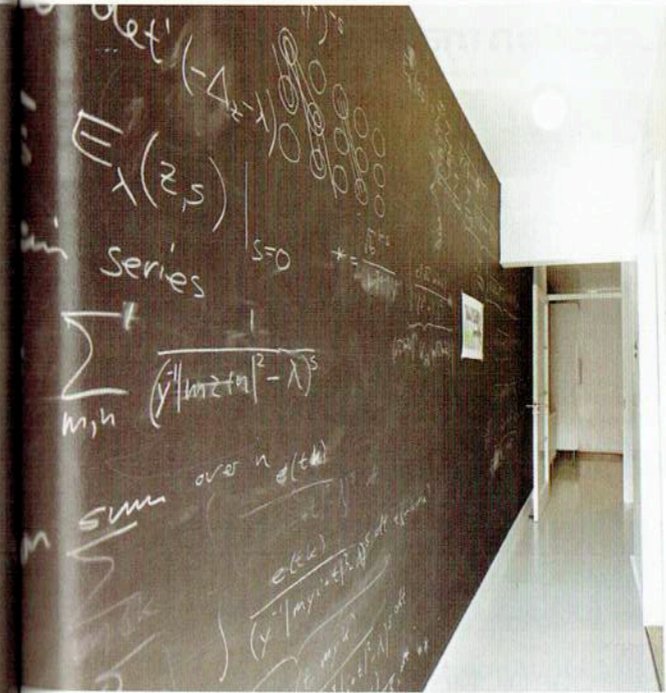
Nearly eight months later the couple still hadn't found a suitable property. Federica discovered the 'Ugly House' was still on the market and decided to revisit it. "When I went back to look round again, I had a vision of how I could extend it and make it a liveable space. So I took Jens to see it," she says. "Of course, he thought it was awful! But when I showed him some sketches of what I could do and how we could extend it, he began to show interest."

Federica had the foresight to informally send some sketches of the planned extension to the local planning



Top tips

- ⊕ Have a vision - try to see beyond the state of a home and its layout when you first view it. Appearances can be deceptive; an empty shell can be transformed into your dream home
- ⊕ When building a self-designed extension, try to manage the build yourself and employ tradesmen individually
- ⊕ Prioritise where to spend and where to save with off-the-shelf items
- ⊕ Don't skimp on window size and specification and don't overspend on bathroom fittings - layout is much more important
- ⊕ If you find a tradesman you're happy with, stick with him and see what other jobs he can do for you. Also, see if he can recommend colleagues for work he can't undertake
- ⊕ Plan carefully according to your requirements and stick to it. Even if people can't get their heads round what you have planned, soldier on



Left: Houseowner and mathematics professor Jens Marklof often writes out his calculations on this wall coated in blackboard paint leading from the front door

For the renovation the couple used a mixture of DIY and paid labour. At one point, Jens even enlisted the help of his father, who visited from Germany, to help him with removing and replacing the floorboards. "We worked together on some things, but got someone else in to do the more complicated work. I got on with stripping the plaster from the chimneybreasts and cleaning and repointing the brickwork to leave it exposed. Jens worked on the flooring and some workmen came in to do the bathroom and kitchen and update the plumbing and electrics to allow for the extension."

The couple finally moved into the house, by no means ready at this stage, in March 2005. "When we moved in all we had was a table with a microwave - we had to wash up in the bathtub. There was no water downstairs, but that only lasted for a couple of months so we could put up with it."

Growing pains

As they were not completely satisfied with the work the builders had done to the original house, Federica decided to project manage the extension herself with some help from Jens. It meant that they could hand pick subcontractors and source materials themselves.

"I hadn't planned it that way originally, but when I was initially calling round people to project manage for me they were asking me to wait nine months or more, I wanted to start straight away, so I got the subcontractors in myself," she explains.

The rear extension takes up the full width of the plot and stretches 5m beyond the original house, adding almost a third to the total floor area and providing a large living space. It features full-height sliding doors onto the garden, giving the room bounds of natural light and the appearance of an even greater space.

Work began with the foundations in June. "The workmen thought it was only going to take three weeks, but it ended up taking eight. I didn't really mind this as they were doing other jobs in between and it gave me the chance to look for some reclaimed timber for the ceiling and canopy," she says.

The roof and canopy structure of the extension is built entirely of 200-year-old reclaimed timber beams, which Federica bought from a reclamation yard that had sourced them from an old university building in Derby. The

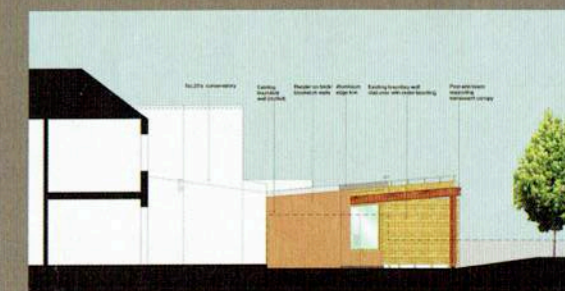
timbers were also responsible for one of the few problems the couple had with the build. "The building controls inspector was quite dubious about them. He said we couldn't use the timber, as it wasn't graded. But, when he saw it and discovered it was of exceptional quality his concerns evaporated. I wanted to use reclaimed timber, for aesthetic reasons really, as I didn't want the house to look too clinical. The sharp lines mixed with the irregular timber gives a great effect."

In October, the timbers arrived and the couple found a carpenter, Rupert, who came to work on the roofing and timberworks. "Rupert was fantastic. He was key to the whole project. If we hadn't met him it wouldn't have looked so good." The couple were so impressed with his work that they hired him to do the flooring downstairs and the internal finishings, such as the built in cabinets and the hollow storage bench.

To reduce the impact of the extension on their neighbours, the corner of the new facade is cut at a 45-degree angle, which minimises shading into the



"The corner of the new facade is cut at a 45-degree angle, which minimises shading into the adjacent garden and creates a striking contemporary finish"



The timber extension, designed by the owner, adds almost a third to the floorspace of the house. Built as an extension onto the original 1875 property, it now houses a new living room

Good idea

The reclaimed timber beams used in the roof structure have the lowest embodied energy of any building material - and they look great too

office to gauge their reaction before making an offer. Even though the office's response was not conclusive, it was by no means negative. The only real criticism was that the extension was a little big, but Federica was more than happy to redevelop her plans and came up with a cut-corner design that wouldn't overshadow the neighbours.

The couple went on to make a low offer, which was initially refused since at the time other houses in the area were literally going at asking price in a matter of hours. But after three weeks the house was still on the market and Federica received a call from the estate agent, saying that if she improved the offer slightly it could be theirs. They did, and the offer was accepted.

Room for improvement

Once the house was theirs, Federica sent over the modified designs to the planning office, and they were

approved without any trouble. "I think the planning officer took into account how run-down the house was, so they were happy to approve any kind of works that would improve it." With approval in place, she presented the plans to the neighbours, who were more than happy with the design.

So, in October 2004 the couple embarked on what proved to be a lengthy renovation process. "It was wonderful to finally make a start. We ripped out all the old carpets and felt extremely liberated in doing so," she recalls. The house, originally built in 1875 but stripped bare through numerous alterations in its lifetime, gave the couple a blank canvas to experiment with. Federica was influenced by the neighbourhood's warehouse-style conversions of the old tobacco factory into apartments, which inspired her to create an open-plan ground floor. To incorporate this, the lower level needed to be completely remodelled from kitchen to living room. The inner living room was turned into the kitchen, the former kitchen into a dining room and a new living room created in the extension where the yard once was. This meant the old living area at the front of the house could be used as a studio for Federica's practice.



Top and middle: Inside views of the timber extension showing the exposed 200-year-old timbers and the party wall, used to create a division but not separate the areas completely. **Bottom:** The kitchen leads directly into the open-plan area

Favourite feature

"I love the combination of the sharp lines of the design mixed with the irregular reclaimed timber. It gives a great effect"

adjacent garden and creates a striking contemporary finish. It is further emphasised by a massive six-metre-long elm beam that supports the external canopy and a chunky oak post salvaged from a local barn. "It was so rewarding to see the big beam put up outside. Nothing else seemed to be ready, but with the beam in place we could see it all taking shape."

Location matters



The city of Bristol does not technically fall into any UK county, but the closest country of Stratford and Avon currently has 223 properties on sale, starting at £20,000.

Facts and figures	
Cost of the property	£238,000
Plots currently available in region*	223*

*correct at time of press

See our plot listings on **page 131**

While the couple were in the final stages of the build, they welcomed the arrival of baby Lea. "When Lea arrived we only had the front room left to do and Rupert came back to give a helping hand. Luckily we only had the painting and sealing left to do with a baby in tow."

Final touches

After the extension was complete it took the couple another two years to finish the house to the standard they wanted. The internal finishings are simple but create a dramatic effect, and were used to give the home a great deal of individual character. The couple mixed bespoke items with off-the-shelf, which provided the home with a superb finish. Federica wanted the kitchen to have an industrial feel, so the worktops were covered in professional-quality stainless steel, combined with cabinets from Ikea. The palette throughout the house is kept fairly neutral, except for a wall running from the front door through to the living area covered in blackboard paint. This not only gives a bold contemporary look, but is also regularly used by Jens, a mathematics professor, for working out equations.

Looking towards the future, the couple would love to self-build again, especially after the sense of triumph they gained when finishing each room. "I hope we will build again," says Federica. "But not a renovation, it was just far too much hard work." ☺

Useful contacts



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