

**this picture** At the back of the house the windows are the original width but were elongated to form one long expanse of glass. The lowest pane is a sash window, giving access to the garden





# HOME

## House #1

### Victorian conversion

**who** Amir Sanei and Abigail Hopkins, with Zak (12), Hana (6), Nina (4), Zal (2), and another on the way

**what** A twenty-first century take on a Victorian semi-detached

**where** Canonbury, north London

**how long** A year to buy and nine months to convert

**high point** 'When the main works were finished and the builders moved out,' Amir says, 'despite the fact that they were the nicest possible builders. We were living on site so it was lovely to feel like the place was finally our home'

**low point** 'Living in the flat,' says Abigail. 'There was only one bedroom for us and all the kids. Zal was a tiny baby and had trouble sleeping'

**tip** 'Wait until you've stripped everything out of the house before getting quotes from contractors for work,' Abigail says. 'Then there won't be any surprises which could hike the cost up later'



# STYLE COUNCIL

**AMIR SANEI AND ABIGAIL HOPKINS RECTIFIED YEARS OF  
NEGLECT TO TRANSFORM THIS EX-LOCAL AUTHORITY  
BUILDING INTO A SLEEK FAMILY HOME**

WORDS JOANNA BOOTH  
PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL FRANKE



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From the street, Amir Sanei and Abigail Hopkins' four-storey Victorian home in leafy north London looks vast. You imagine the building is converted into flats; how could one family use so much space? But it was the fact that the couple wanted to turn the building into a private home that gave them the edge over the developers when buying the place from the council. The building was being used as a local authority children's home when they first spotted the 'For Sale' sign outside. Some things don't change much – with four kids and another on the way, the house is still full of children.

As well as room for their brood, it also presented the perfect compromise for the architect couple, who both had different desires when it came to the type of home they wanted. Amir is a fan of one-storey living and has always wanted to build his own house. Abigail, however, grew up in a new house and enjoys the solidity of old buildings. This house had enough internal flexibility to offer Amir

a change from the traditional layout, but the old shell pleased Abigail. They put an offer in.

Amir and Abigail's bid was popular with the council. Their plan to buy the place, divide it in two and sell the other half to another family held more appeal than the rest of the bids, from developers who wanted to convert the space into flats. Despite this, it took the family a year to complete the sale. The tender process was slowed considerably when the water main in the next street burst early one morning. 'It flowed into the street, filling up the gardens and bursting through the brick walls between them until one by one they were all flooded,' Abigail recalls. 'Sorting out the insurance from Thames Water drew out the buying process even more.'

With their names finally on the deeds, works could begin. 'The building had been completely institutionalised,' Amir explains. 'A huge corridor ran the length of the entire house, and off it the rooms had been subdivided to get lots of\_\_



#### STEP ON IT

The open plan stair is the central spine which links the house together. The stair treads are supported on a simple steel frame, painted white, which zig-zags upwards and is cast into the wall, allowing the main structure of the house to bear the load. The treads are single timber boards, left open without risers and covered in the same signature green carpet used throughout the house.

Rather than have a traditional banister, the couple chose a more unusual option. A steel trapezoidal frame stretches from the ground floor up to the second floor in the centre of the flights of steps. Stretching between the top and bottom of this frame, thick steel wires used as the rigging for yachts are positioned a few centimetres apart, allowing light from the huge windows behind to pass unhindered into the house.

Stair engineers: Patera Engineering (01782 312 277)  
Steel wiring: Sta Lok (01206 391 509; stalok.com)





**this picture** The kitchen and the living room are linked and cabinets are mirrored which allows Abigail to keep a close eye on the children  
**left** The single timber stair treads allow maximum light into the house



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**this picture** The couple have mixed and matched designer and high street pieces: these Arne Jacobsen pendant lights above the dining table are set off by the Ikea display unit in the background **opposite** The bespoke dining table is made from a steel fire door

INSTEAD OF REINSTATING THE ORIGINAL PROPORTIONS OF THE ROOMS, THEY RETAINED THE OPEN SPACE THEY'D CREATED



#### ground floor plan

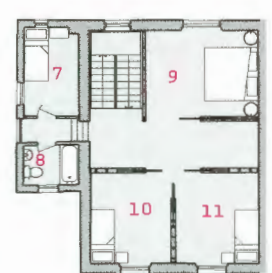
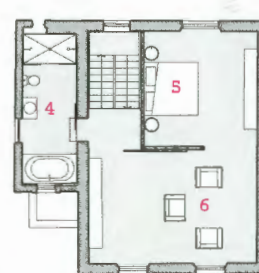
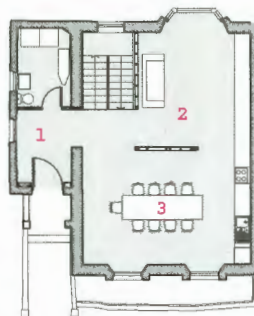
- 1 hall
- 2 living room
- 3 dining/kitchen

#### first floor plan

- 4 bathroom
- 5 main bedroom
- 6 home office/  
living room

#### second floor plan

- 7 bedroom
- 8 bathroom
- 9 bedroom
- 10 children's room
- 11 children's room







## ECO AUDIT: UPGRADING OLD HOUSES

Modern eco-values weren't a consideration in the 1800s, so old housing stock can often be improved. Here, solid walls meant that cavity wall insulation couldn't be used, but the couple insulated between the joists when they ripped the floors up. Replacement windows are double-glazed and they plan to draught shield the original windows to retain heat.

The condensing boiler is ultra efficient and the family make a point of turning lights and heating off. 'We're green by management rather than design,' Amir says.

Our green expert Adam Ritchie says: 'Managing your energy use is vital, so Amir and Abigail are on the right track. Draught-proofing the windows is the next step. Controls for the heating system, allowing it to make best use of the condensing boiler would be useful, and water saving measures could follow.'

bedrooms for the kids in. Most original features had been stripped out by the council, so there was little to save. It was a blessing in a way – we didn't feel guilty about taking everything out.'

And when Amir says everything, he means it. Apart from the shell of the house everything internal was removed, leaving only floorboards and joists behind. Out came the partition walls, the fire doors and the huge chimney breasts – the fireplaces themselves were long gone. There had been a sink in each residential room, and out they came too, with the vast steel water tank in the attic. 'It was big enough to supply the entire halls of residence,' Amir says. 'It had to be cut into pieces in situ and removed in sections.'

While the stripping out works went ahead, the family were living in anything but spacious circumstances. They quickly converted the ground floor into a one-bedroom flat, and crammed everyone into it. This tried even Abigail's unflappable reserve. 'Zal had just been born and wasn't sleeping, so it wasn't ideal,' she says. It did provide added impetus to press on with the works, and nine months later they were complete. Despite the scale of the building, the process was plain sailing – a tribute to the couple's professional expertise. The stripping out had left Amir and

Abigail with three huge open plan floors, but no stairs. The original staircase was in the half of the building they had sold off; their half had a large external fire escape at one end which they removed. Instead they put in an unusual, very open stairway which links the floors together and forms the central backbone of the house. Rather than hiding them away at one side of the building and making them a purely functional method of moving around, the couple have made them an object of beauty which links the house together both visually and acoustically, as their openness allows sound transfer between floors.

Instead of reinstating the original proportions of the rooms, they retained the open space they'd created by knocking down the institutional partitions. The children can tear around the house, and their laughter is audible in the kitchen even when they're playing on the top floor. Despite its huge size, it makes the house feel intimate, cosy, and very much a family home.

One of the most striking features of the house is its colour scheme. The walls are all plain white, but the floors are a bright green throughout. 'Our previous place was all white, but the kids wanted colour,' Amir explains. 'There's a Foster office building in Ipswich, the Willis Faber and Dumas \_\_\_\_\_



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headquarters. It's one of my all time favourites, and Abigail's father was the project architect for it. It uses this bright green rubber flooring which we both love.' The bedroom carpets were specially dyed to get the same shade of green.

On the ground floor, the kitchen and living areas are conjoined, divided only partially by an open-ended spine wall in the centre of the room. A long expanse of mirrored units runs down the entire side of both spaces, reflecting light from the large original sash windows and also allowing Abigail to keep an unobtrusive eye on the kids playing in the living room whilst she prepares dinner. Amir designed the huge dining table. 'We wanted a large steel table, so we got a blank for a fire door and had the legs attached.'

Furnishings in the house are a combination of budget and designer. The storage units and the wardrobes are basics from Ikea, with mirrors adhered to them. Arne Jacobsen pendant lights hang over the dining table, but the curvaceous lamp in the corner of the room is from a local market stall. Downstairs the sofa and tables are from Ikea but the red Eames chair is an original; upstairs in the boudoir the sofas are Le Corbusier, but Amir was able to find spherical glazed light

fittings from a local wholesaler at a fraction of the price of the Jasper Morrison designs he'd originally had his eye on.

When the couple need a respite from children's chatter they retreat to the first floor. There, the main bedroom is separated by an sliding wall from the home office and sitting room on the other side. In the evening, with the children in bed, the wall can be slid closed, blocking off the stairs and giving Abigail and Amir a private boudoir.

The top floor is for the children, and is divided by three separate sliding walls which form a T-shape. Closed, they provide rooms for the girls and Zal, and a spare room for guests and for Amir's son Zak when he lives with the family. Open, they allow the children the entire floorplan of the house to run around on rainy days.

Despite Amir's love of one-storey living, he's very happy with his tall house. 'I think we've taken an existing building and made some moves which weren't obvious, but yet weren't too contrived. We worked with the fabric to make a house that's perfect for us.' With a whole attic to be renovated and the wall to the flat below to be knocked through, even this big family shouldn't run out of space for a few years yet. ★

**right** An ingenious sliding wall allows some privacy for the main bedroom  
**below right** Sliding doors between the children's interconnecting bedrooms allow plenty of space for the children to play  
**below left** The bath is large enough for the whole family to fit in at once, but unusually the bathroom has no door







'WE'VE MADE SOME MOVES WHICH WEREN'T OBVIOUS AND WORKED WITH THE BUILDING'S FABRIC TO MAKE A HOME THAT'S PERFECT FOR OUR FAMILY'



## SUPPLIERS

### Architect

**Sanei Hopkins Architects**

(020 7704 1901;  
saneihopkins.co.uk)

### Structural engineers

**Techniker Ltd**

(020 7360 4300; techniker.ltd.uk)

### Party Wall surveyor

**Martin O'Shea**

(01359 231 270)

### Main contractor and joinery

**TASK Services London**

(020 8514 0636)

### Doors

**Hafele**

(01788 542 020; hafele.co.uk)

### Ironmongery

**Franchi & Son**

(0870 6070 8090; franchi.co.uk)

### Appliances

**Buyers & Sellers**

(0870 300 2579;  
buyersandsellersonline.co.uk)

### Green rubber flooring and carpets

**Tyndale Flooring**

(020 7473 8888;  
tyndaleflooring.co.uk)

### Mirrored Doors

**Kingsland Glass**

(020 7739 8868)

### Sanitary Ware

**Plumb Center**

(01765 690 690;  
plumbcenter.co.uk)