



Playtime

It had stood empty for two years – now bright colours, sliding doors and fun features bring to life this open-plan family house. Susie Steiner pays a visit. Photographs by Andreas Schmidt





It is one of those grand Victorian buildings, Lady-Bracknell-wide and square with ballroom-sized windows and solid front door. But peer in from the street and the scene is all architectural modernism: a “floating” staircase running up the house like a spine; sleek mirrored kitchen units; knocked-through spaces stripped of all Victoriana.

So far, so architecty. What is surprising about Abigail Hopkins and Amir Sanei’s newly finished London house are its playful touches – the bowling-green flooring that spreads across each room and up the stairs; the apartment feel to each floor, »



made flexible with sliding walls; the capacious 300-litre bath that can accommodate three young children, plus parents, all at once.

It's certainly a change from their last house – a homage to minimalism – in Dalston. “Our daughter, who was then three, said, ‘Mummy, I do like our house, but I want some colour’,” Hopkins confesses.

The couple purchased this house, in Islington, north London, in February 2004. It had been a council-run children's care home, joined to the house next door with corridors running laterally across the two. The building had stood empty for two years – a sea of institutional fittings,

excessive plumbing (basins in every room) and strange wiring. It was for sale as a commercial venture.

Hopkins and Sanei, who run their own architecture practice, bought both buildings and set about separating them back into two houses – leaving their side without a staircase. They sold the next-door property to a family with young children, and embarked on creating a basement flat where they would live while the renovation took place. They moved into this one-bedroom dwelling in June 2004.

“What was stressful was that the building work was right on top of us,” says Hopkins. “But it wasn't like

living in a building site: you shut the door and it was gone, except for the noise. If you're trying to get a baby off to sleep in the day, you can't.”

“And there was dust coming down through the light fittings,” says Sanei, though he appears nostalgic for that period, cramped though it must have been with two toddlers and a newborn. “It was a comfortable time – a very cosy flat.”

Much of the renovation time and money went into gutting the building – ripping out all those basins and removing a vast water tank from the attic, which had to be cut into pieces to get it out – and demolishing all the interior walls so only the shell

remained. “It's a lot easier if you're working with an existing building, because a lot of the decisions are made for you,” says Sanei. “There are constraints to work within. We didn't treat this house the way we'd treat a job. We had to squeeze it in between work projects. It's very much hand to mouth unless you set aside a big chunk of your time to do it.”

There was never any doubt about living open-plan. Hopkins, the daughter of distinguished architects Michael and Patti Hopkins, grew up in an open-plan house “so I'm very used to it. There's no door on the bathroom here, but we will get round to it...”



The open-plan design, they say, is a way of connecting the different parts of the house into a coherent whole. Each floor functions as a kind of apartment: the ground floor as a utilitarian kitchen and play area; the first floor as the couple's suite of adult rooms, and the top floor given over to Hana, five, Nina, three, Zal, 19 months, and Sanei's 11-year-old son, Zak, who comes to stay for weekends and holidays. The au pair lives here, too.

The palette of the house is dominated by that energetic, citrusy green, with walls of pale grey to absorb any green glow. It's a theme that will continue in the minimalist

Green floors are key to the home of Abigail Hopkins and Amir Sanei (previous pages). Orange chairs brighten the kitchen (above right) and mirrors the workspace (far left)

garden, where builders are laying a border of grey granite slabs, with a large square of lawn at its centre.

The playroom feel of the ground floor, with its rubber floors and bright orange chairs, is offset by the mirrored kitchen units. Mirroring has become something of a Sanei-Hopkins trademark. They first tried it at their Dalston home, where the roof of their extension was clad in mirror and won them plaudits. In

the Islington house, they've used it in the kitchen and to create a sleek work area in their upstairs living room. Both were fashioned using cheap Ikea units (the desk cupboards, for example, cost around £19 each), which the couple took to a Dalston glazier who clad them with mirror. The kitchen came in at £2,000. Their workspace was mirrored for around £150.

Isn't it distracting, being followed around by constant reflections of yourself? "I don't look at myself," says Hopkins. "The children dance around in front of them and if they are crying about something, they will glance over and check their

demeanour. But generally, you are not aware of them as mirrors. In our last house we used mirrors for the kitchen counter. Maybe I stopped looking because in the kitchen counter you only saw your double chin – it was too depressing."

The family moved out of their basement flat (it is now rented out) in spring 2005, just over a year after buying the place.

"When we moved up here, I did definitely relax, a lot," says Hopkins. "All of a sudden, Amir and I were getting on again..."

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