



Heart of GLASS

Karen Seward and Stephen Gummer have totally re-invented their London home – introducing glass floors, walls and ceilings to let the light in.

STORY: ELEANOR WILDE PICTURES: STEVE TAYLOR

From the front, Karen Seward and Stephen Gummer's five-storey London home appears far older than its years. The 300m² terraced property was constructed just nine years ago in the old Huguenot quarter near Liverpool Street station, but was designed to emulate neighbouring buildings – many of which date from 1685 when the Huguenots fled France, bringing their silk rearing skills to Spitalfields.

"We had been living in a Docklands penthouse which had a tiny kitchen, and we wanted more space and a larger kitchen where we could entertain," explains Karen, a lawyer. "My company recently moved its offices to Spitalfields, and I noticed that this house was for sale when I was walking around the area one day."

Surrounded by Grade II listed buildings, the new house had been built on a former bomb site and remained unlisted. Externally, the

"I love the kitchen – which is ideal for entertaining. Introducing so much glass was the key to the whole design and really does make it feel like a totally different house."

PICTURES: The house has been extended and remodelled so it is virtually unrecognisable from the original design. The front facade of the terraced house has been constructed to fit in with listed neighbouring buildings.



property resembles the traditional brick facades of its period neighbours, but the interiors were far less impressive, and had been poorly fitted out using copious amounts of MDF.

Attracted by the size, location and potential of the spacious house, Karen and Stephen bought the property in January 2008 – renting out their apartment and moving into a one bedroom flat while their new home was completely remodelled.

"It was extremely dark and enclosed," says Stephen. "The shell of the building was structurally sound, but inside we stripped everything out. In fact, the original concrete staircase was virtually all that remained."

Archplan Architects had been recommended to the couple by a friend, and worked with them to devise an imaginative layout which would bring additional natural light to the dark interiors. "Archplan recommended Premiere Building and Design, who were absolutely

fantastic," says Karen. "They completed the work in just six months – despite a few unforeseen hold-ups."

"At one stage the rear wall had been taken down, when the builders suddenly realised that part of our kitchen was actually supporting the house next-door. This dictated some serious structural work, and we did wonder what we'd done when we saw just how little of the house was actually left. There was rubble absolutely everywhere, and I don't think our neighbours were too happy."

Previously, the basement level had only been lit through pavement lights to the rear and was particularly gloomy, but this problem was solved by the addition of a small ground floor glazed extension which opens directly onto the limestone-paved rear courtyard.

Not only are the walls and roof of this new structure made from glass, but the whole floor of the extension is also glazed to allow light to





LEFT: Bespoke cabinets have been teamed with stainless steel-clad worktops in the basement kitchen.
BELOW FAR RIGHT: A monks bench can be seen through the glass floor from the kitchen below.
BELOW RIGHT: One of the two reception rooms is now a library.



This upper level was originally designed to imitate the open plan weavers' workrooms often found in local buildings, and had previously contained a bedroom and bathroom with a small roof terrace. Karen and Stephen decided to transform this storey into a relaxing, open plan 'summer' sitting room, and incorporated a concealed kitchen area which has proved invaluable.

"It means we don't need to trek down four storeys to the kitchen every time we want to make a drink," says Stephen, also a lawyer. "The roof terrace is fairly small, but there's enough space for a barbecue and it enjoys views right over central London towards the Gherkin, so it's the perfect place to sit and relax when the weather's warm."



A woodburning stove was installed in the open plan sitting room, where a glazed roof-light is shaded by motorised louvres. The corner sofa came from Harrods and the pendant lights from Liberty of London.



filter down into the basement below. As a result, people sitting at the kitchen table are able to look up and enjoy views of the sky.

"We need to cross the glass floor to reach our garden," says Karen. "Visitors often falter walking on clear glass, so we've positioned an old Arts and Crafts monks' bench on there just to be provocative. It's an invitation to pause and enjoy the experience of being able to look down through the floor."

The internal walls on the ground floor were exchanged for floor to ceiling panels of fire-resistant glass, which visually open the space to the staircase and hall. On the top floor, solid MDF balustrades have been replaced with glass panels, and the massive skylight is shaded by motorised louvres which may be opened or closed to control the light.

TOP RIGHT: A kitchen on the top floor saves walking downstairs for a cup of tea.
 RIGHT: The ground floor of the house has been extended with a small glass box to the rear, and a clear glass floor leads out to the limestone-paved courtyard.





PICTURES:
Walls have been moved on the first floor to rationalise the size of the guest bedrooms, which are decorated in green and blue.



“Reducing the number of bedrooms from five to three might seem rash but the layout works for our lifestyle, and could easily be converted back in the future.”

The second floor had previously contained two bedrooms and a disproportionately large bathroom. This level has now become the couple's master suite, with a bedroom, bathroom and a new dressing room – created in what had been a single bedroom. “Reducing the number of bedrooms from five to three might seem rash,” says Karen, “but the layout works for our lifestyle, and could easily be converted back in the future.”

One of the two reception rooms on the ground floor has been transformed into a traditional library, painted a rich shade of deep pink and lined with bookshelves, with a strip of glass flooring designed to drop light into the basement below. “The ground floor rooms felt small and dark before the internal walls were replaced with glass and the glass box extension was added,” says Karen.

Taking out a utility room has enabled the basement kitchen to be extended, creating an open plan cooking/dining area with a bespoke central island unit and glossy white cabinets which were made to order by the builders. These have been teamed with stainless steel worktops for a practical, contemporary feel.

“The kitchen had to be built before the glass floor could be fitted, because we needed to bring our large appliances down through the hole,” says Stephen. “Problems arose when the glaziers didn't deliver on time, though, and we ended up moving in while there was still tarpaulin on the back of the house, which was far from ideal.”



Time spent living and travelling in the Far East has unquestionably influenced the interior design, and the house is furnished with unusual artefacts collected by Karen and Stephen over the years. They chose strong wall colours to enliven certain areas and enjoyed giving each room a distinctive look.

“We bought a huge Buddha's head that had been dug up in a field in Java, and air-freighted it back,” says Karen. “There's a statue of the elephant-headed Indian god, Ganesha, in the top floor sitting room and a beautiful Tibetan door in the library. It's fun to mix traditional and contemporary pieces for an eclectic feel, and everything has some kind of story behind it.”

The house was almost completed when a visit to France inspired Stephen to request a last minute addition. The couple had purchased a large quantity of wine, and chose to →

Extension & REMODEL



FINAL THOUGHTS...

WHAT WAS THE HIGH POINT OF THE PROJECT?

Seeing the basement kitchen taking shape was a real high point especially as this room was one of the main reasons that we had decided to buy the house in the first place.

... AND THE LOW POINT? After one week the builders had totally stripped out the interiors and taken down walls – there was literally nothing left inside apart from the staircase, and we did panic that we'd gone too far.

WHAT WAS YOUR BEST BUY? The last minute decision to excavate a new wine cellar behind the kitchen cost £13,000, and was inspired by a trip to France.

YOUR FAVOURITE SHOP? Liberty's is very eclectic and we purchased several items of furniture from there.

DO YOU HAVE A TIP? Don't underestimate how much time you will need to devote to a project. Fortunately my office is only a three minute walk from the house, so it was easy to nip home during the day to make decisions.

ARCHITECT Archplan Architects www.archplan.co.uk

BUILDER AND KITCHEN Premiere Building and Design
07958 502193

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www.thestonecarpetcompany.co.uk

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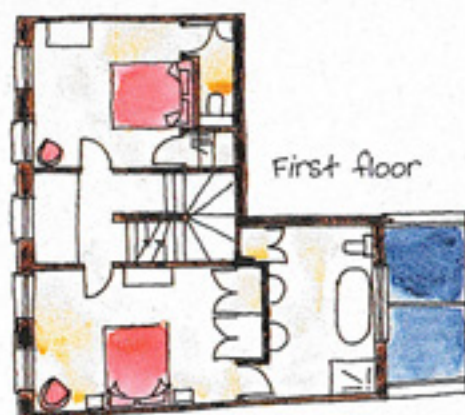
excavate a new wine cellar leading off from the basement kitchen – a decision which significantly stretched their budget.

"We've never renovated a house before, so I suppose it was quite an ambitious project, but it has given us exactly the kind of home we'd hoped for," concludes Karen.

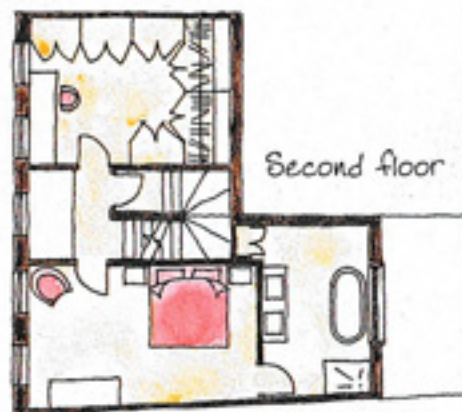
"Stephen has his library, the wine cellar and an integrated music system, and I love the kitchen – which is ideal for entertaining. Introducing so much glass was the key to the whole design and really does make it feel like a totally different house."

THE BOTTOM LINE

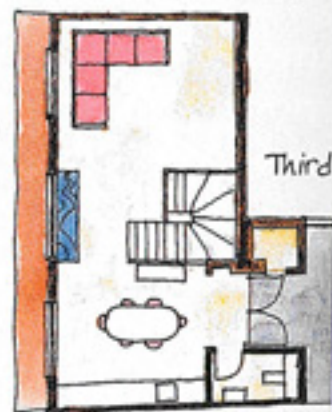
Karen and Stephen paid £1.6m for the original house and spent a further £275,000 remodelling the interiors. The property is currently valued at in excess of £2 m.



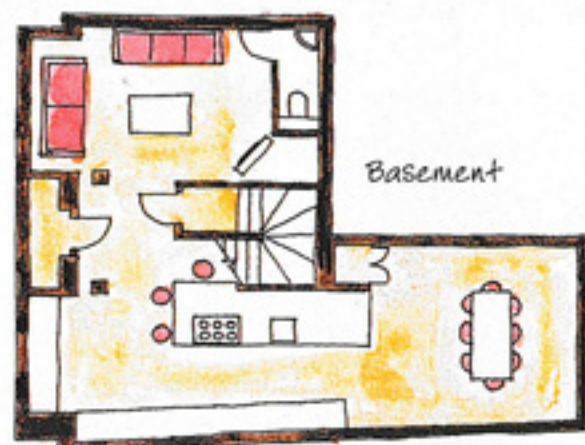
First floor



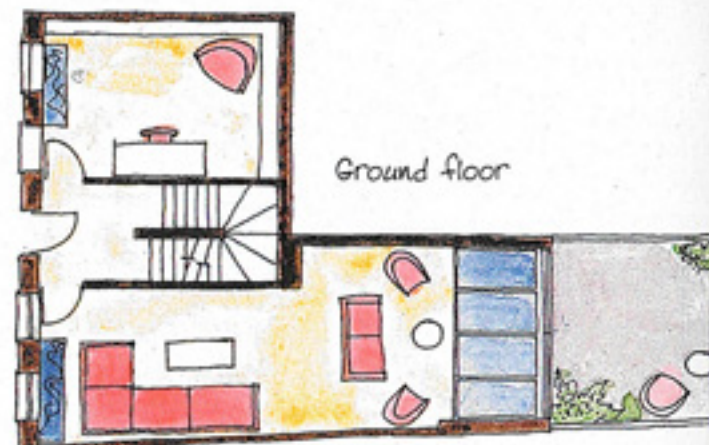
Second floor



Third



Basement



Ground floor

▲ The floor plan

A small ground floor extension was added to the original house and the number of bedrooms has been reduced from five to three to enable the couple to have a dressing room in what was previously a single bedroom, with a summer lounge on the top floor.