

LIFE & STYLE

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Thoroughly modern semi

What happens
when you marry
an architect

Words **Charlotte Abrahams**
 Photographs **Rachel Whiting**



Six years ago, architects Andy and Aurore Down sold their comfortable, family-sized house in north London and bought a smaller, darker and less interesting one down the road. It was in need of such serious renovation that it was 15 months before they could move in. Where most people would see the lack of period features, dark cellar and collapsing outside wall as reasons to steer well clear, the Downs saw

opportunities. "It was a completely featureless house with an outside back wall that needed to be demolished," says Aurore, 47, "which meant we could rip everything out and start again."

And that's exactly what they did. What was once a standard 20s suburban semi with four bedrooms, one bathroom and brick outside walls is now a stylish, six-bed, four-bathroom, 21st-century pad boasting a sunken terrace, a vast open-plan kitchen/living/dining space and a double-height glass back wall.

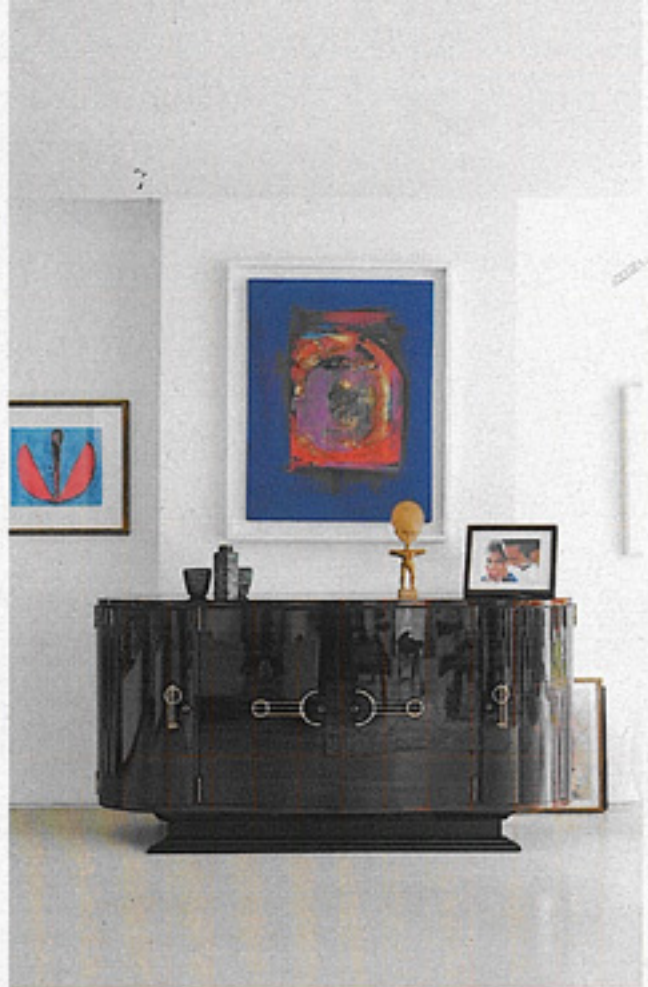
The transformation process was muddy (20 truck-loads of earth were removed from the back garden) and expensive (the build alone cost £400,000), but the couple never doubted that they had done the right thing – even when, six months into the project, they realised that the earth would have to be taken out of the back garden a spade-load at a time because there wasn't space for the digger to get through. "Being architects meant that we understood the process," says Andy, 46, "so we knew it would be all right in the end."

But the project wasn't entirely

straightforward. Although Andy and Aurore have worked together since setting up their architectural practice, Archplan, in 1992 and share a pared-down contemporary aesthetic, when it came to their own home they had very different priorities. There was the budget, for a start. Andy is cautious and, when things got tight, he suggested economising on their attic bedroom. Aurore, on the other hand, is a perfectionist and was determined to stick to the original plan of installing three dormer windows so as to give them a double-aspect bedroom and spacious

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Blue-sky thinking: (clockwise from top left) the double-height glass wall at the back of the house; light is the central theme in the open-fronted sitting room which, thanks to the all-white walls and transparent furniture such as Eero Aarnio's 1963 Bubble Chair, appears to float over the basement kitchen; the couple's ensuite bathroom reflects their love of white walls mixed with flashes of brilliant colour



◀ bathroom. She won, although it did mean waiting three years while they saved up.

Then there was the colour scheme: Andy is a pure-white-wall man whereas Aurore loves colour. "We did start off with a white palette," she says, "but I found the combination of all the white with the vast amount of light we get here very draining emotionally. I grew up in Ghana surrounded by colour so I do need some around me." Their solution was to stick to a white background but temper it with flashes of brilliant colour – a green wall running down the stairs from the ground floor to the basement, for example, a vibrant green sink in their bathroom, and lots of boldly coloured paintings and decorative objects.

Finally, and most problematic of all, there was the layout. "For Andy it was all about the drama of the building," explains Aurore, "so he wanted everything open-plan, whereas for me the house was more about our lifestyle. We have three sons, aged 15, 20 and 23, and open-plan living isn't ideal for that. It's OK

Ancient and modern: (clockwise from top left) a 1934 French rosewood veneer sideboard; the shiny white bedroom is softened by vintage accessories such as the Moroccan rug and bedspread; design classics such as Achille Castiglioni's Arco light and 1956 Norman Cherner chairs give the kitchen-dining space timeless chic



when you have very small children, but once they become teenagers you need rooms." Their compromise was to create two sitting rooms on the ground floor, one with solid walls and a door for the kids to use, the other an open-fronted room built above their office which takes up the back half of the basement.

Neither Andy nor Aurore is totally happy with the sitting room – there's not enough privacy for Aurore and Andy feels they don't use it enough. Nevertheless, they consider the house to be a success. The plan was to create a spacious, light-filled house that seamlessly merged inside and outside space, and that's exactly what they have done. But they have also managed to create a house that ticks all the contemporary design boxes (lots of white, lots of glass, lots of hard, shiny materials) and is comfortable to live in. Andy and Aurore have, through good planning, painful disagreement and healthy compromise, managed to make a house that has softness as well as contemporary cool.★

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How to buy... Andy and Aurore's style

▲ Giant curved floor lamp with metal shade £149, Dwell (0845 675 9090)

▼ Paola Navone black and white rug £199, Habitat (08444 991 111)



◀ Cherner chair £635, by Norman Cherner, from Aram Store (020 7557 7557)



▲ Maharani wooden coffee table with drawers £386, John Lewis (08456 049 049)



◀ Arkin large mosaic vase £55, Habitat (08444 991 111)