



Tradition's the mission: Chris Dyson in the first-floor panelled back dining room



Talking point: the urn, a theatrical prop, isn't as heavy as it looks, but was too wide for the fernery doors, so stayed upstairs



"Period perfection": passers-by would never guess the property's frontage is new

Restoration drama

The Dysons, desperate for a family home, found a ruin to restore – and a fine 18th-century house got a new lease of life, says **Philippa Stockley**

SPITALFIELDS in east London, populated with artists, actors and eccentrics, looks like – and often serves as – a film set, recently for ITV's *Mr Selfridge*, while increasingly being hemmed in by glassy City towers.

In the early 18th century, many of its houses were constructed by speculative builders on small parcels of land, sometimes in pairs, which was a modest but effective economy of scale. In a Spitalfields street, one such early developer, Samuel Worral, built numbers 22 and 24, twin five-storey houses. In the 20th century, No 24 was cheaply remodelled as a grey, rendered box with metal windows, its inside butchered. It had numerous tenants, including a maker of leather coats in the basement and a printmaker in the attic, while its still-untouched neighbour decayed gradually.

In 1996, Chris Dyson – a young architect working for Terry Farrell – his wife Sarah, a teacher, and their two children, Ollie, then five, and Issy, three, were living nearby in a tiny house with one room to each floor. "The children were at each other's throats," says Dyson, "so I was looking for a bigger house."

"I went to the Land Registry to see who owned the houses nearby, and wrote to four or five people, and one answered." After negotiation, this man sold them No 24. "The whole place was going to ruin," Dyson says, "with water pouring through from top to bottom."

First, he did necessary repairs. Concrete tiles were ripped off the rotting mansard roof and replaced with lead, new windows went in, and it was rewired and

replumbed. But it was still a patch-up. As Dyson got to know his neighbour, he wondered how he could restore the house to look as it once had, and the neighbour invited him to make measured drawings of every feature of No 22.

In 2008, now running his own practice from his attic, Dyson took the plunge. But instead of costly party wall agreements, he agreed to restore his neighbour's tired frontage alongside his own. Hoardings went up and the horrible grey front of No 24 was ripped off like a doll's house.

The basement held a pile of mouldy leather jackets and stank of tanning chemicals, while a roof had been slapped right across the back yard to make more factory space. When Dyson took it down it left a steelwork skeleton, so he used that framework to hold perforated industrial decking – "as cheap a willoway as you can make" – with iron stairs down to the small yard, which was eventually turned into a fernery. Georgian-style pivoting metal doors from the basement, designed by Dyson, opened up the back, which was faced in lapped timber.

The inside of the house became 18th century again, but with a light touch. Old things were interspersed with fabulous Matthew Hilton chairs and modern lamps, while the basement kitchen is modern, with a rubber floor, a kitchen island designed by Dyson, and a glossy

Old and new, side by side: from left, a new bathtub with an antique cupboard; a new basement kitchen enlivened by a glossy ceiling and rubber floor... but with 18th-century china next to the breakfast table at the other end of the room



white ceiling – "a trick I learned from the basements of grand Chelsea houses."

Reclaimed oak floorboards were laid and old panelling and fireplaces were tracked down. At Lasso's Three Pigeons architectural antiques centre in Oxfordshire, Dyson bought two 18th-century timber pilasters, a fine fireplace and an arched, shelved reveal and installed them in the drawing room, with a matching reveal made by a local joiner. Room by room, the Dysons put back panelling and added showstoppers such as a nickel-plated copper bath in the master bathroom, and a 6ft-high urn Sarah spotted in Columbia Road. Made of Ferracotta, a sort of cement, it is a theatrical prop.

Main picture: the Dysons found ingenious ways to hide bookcases behind concealed "jib" doors, using every inch of space

Above: a simple four-poster bed from Ikea lends a light, modern touch to the attic bedroom, while the sofa adds storage

DESPITE the house's now lovely innards, the exterior is the greatest triumph. Dyson measured up and had patterns done in purplish brick offset with Suffolk reds. "The gauged brick arches over the windows were made by a brick cutter who makes model trains for a living but cuts arches for pleasure," he says. He found another original timber pilaster and had the site joiner copy it in pine, which was then oak grained, while the front door became positively majestic with faux burr-walnut graining. False graining was common in the 18th century.

The house and its primed twin now sit happily in the ancient street. But how did the neighbour put up with six months of dust and hammering? "He enjoyed the whole process," says Dyson. "Building doesn't have to be difficult when you have sensible neighbours."

GETTING THE LOOK
 Architect: chrisdyson.co.uk
 Reclaimed bricks: lbrm.com
 Steel door fabricator: sjh-metalwork.com
 Cast-iron downpipes: from longbottomfoundry.co.uk
 Joiner for windows: North Kent Joinery (njk.co.uk)
 Specialist reclaimed floorboards: vindaSaax.com (07988 252867)
 Lasso's Three Pigeons: lasso.co.uk
 Wood grainer: lanharper.com
 Modern chandelier in first-floor drawing room: lestroisgarcons.com
 Chairs at kitchen table, and first-floor drawing room armchairs: matthewhilton.com
 Bateau bath: williamholland.com
 Garden design: by Luis Buitrago – email:lmbuitrago4@aol.com

Photographs: Alex James