

In 2009, the London-based architect Chris Dyson was asked to restore an early 18th-century former merchant's house in Whites Row, Spitalfields, London (Fig 114). The house had been badly neglected during its previous use as offices, clearly lacking the care and attention of a residential occupant, and poor planning decisions had blighted the rear aspect of the property, causing the garden at the lower-floor level to feel overshadowed and forlorn.

Situated in the former Tenter Ground Estate, this fine merchant's house was built between 1724 and 1743. The house is double-fronted, containing a semi-basement, three storeys and a roof garret. The plan is simple, with a staircase compartment between two rooms of equal size, each with a small closet projecting at the back (Fig 115). The aim externally was to strip away white



Fig 114
The front elevation of the former merchant's house in Whites Row, Spitalfields, London. [Chris Dyson Architect]

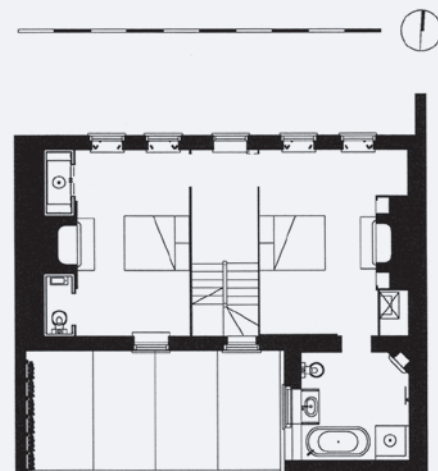


Fig 115
The second-floor plan. [Chris Dyson Architect]

paint to the brick frontage, repair and restore the masonry and timber windows, and place pleached limes and yew to the front area, bringing greenery to the street and increasing the domestic privacy of the house.

The rear aspect was dismal, and it was proposed to improve this through the addition of a green wall on the east-facing rear party wall, disguising a blank, unfashionable, 1980s brick elevation and providing greenery on all sides of the wall, thus giving improved views both into and out of the house. In the semi-basement, light now floods into the newly glazed courtyard, bringing air into the lower levels of the house, which had previously been dark, dank and depressing (Fig 116).

Early on in the design process it was decided to make a grand conservatory, two storeys in height, that would create a significant focus for family life in the house, replacing the absence of a garden and its associated amenities.

Four pieces of glass, two of which are fixed and two retractable, allow the dining room to be exposed to the elements on brighter days and enclosed when required. This, in turn, is complemented by a huge green wall, both inside and out of the glazing, drawing the eye up towards the sky. The success of this modern conservatory lies in the simplicity and elegance of the all-glass architectural detailing (Fig 117).

Historic England and the conservation department at the London Borough of Tower Hamlets were very supportive of the approach to restore this fine merchant's house, and restoration has inspired a new square opposite, within the former fruit and wool exchange redevelopment. This is an excellent example of how conservation of heritage assets, and care and attention to architectural fabric, can inspire modern redevelopment.

Fig 116 (below)
The interior of the new glazed courtyard. [Chris Dyson Architect]

Fig 117 (below right)
The interior of the new glazed courtyard. [Peter Landers]

