

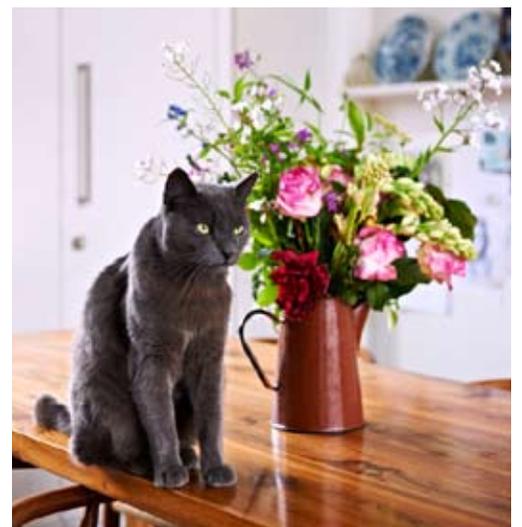




## BY GEORGIAN

In an architect's thoughtfully adapted heritage home, the charm of the past is preserved for the present day.

By **Talib Choudhry**. Photographs by **Ingrid Rasmussen**



**The living room** Bookshelves concealed behind panelled walls provide storage. The artworks on the walls are changed regularly, creating a gallery-like feel. The spindles on the pendant light are, in fact, Christmas decorations left over from last year. **Chris Dyson** in the kitchen of his east-London home.

**The dining area** Dyson's cat Truman sits on the dining table



**T**he architect Chris Dyson has a talent for spotting the potential of unloved old buildings and transforming them into stylish yet comfortable homes. As much as his design eye, it is his willingness to undertake renovation projects that few others would get involved in that reaps rewards; to find a diamond in the dirt, you have to be willing to get your hands grubby.

Dyson bought his first home in the now-gentrified Spitalfields area of east London in 1996, when it was still somewhere avoided even by squatters. Unperturbed, he turned an abandoned leather factory into a handsome five-storey family home over the course of a year, after persuading the owner to sell it to him. Not that it was for sale: Dyson contacted the Land Registry to find out who owned the boarded-up building and made an offer – a trick he has pulled off twice since. He is now ensconced in a four-storey Georgian property nearby.

‘What drew me to the area was the size [of the properties] and proximity to central London for

‘We change the art regularly – otherwise it becomes something that you don’t really register or look at; it recedes into the background’

**The stairwell** The cantilevered solid-oak staircase was made to Dyson’s design by Camden Boxframe ([camdenboxframe.co.uk](http://camdenboxframe.co.uk)). **The balcony** Dyson’s favourite place to relax is the top-floor rear balcony. ‘I enjoy looking out over the rooftops in the sunlight,’ he says. **The dining area** The dining table is the hub of the house. Wishbone chairs and rubber flooring provide a modern touch. Shelves display Dyson’s collection of willow-pattern china.

**The living room** The gold candelabrum was salvaged from a project in Chelsea. The reclaimed sofa, originally from Vienna, was bought through Dorotheum ([dorotheum.com](http://dorotheum.com)), and the artwork hanging above it is by Matthew Harris



the price,' he says. 'I like the sense of proportion and the flexibility of the space.'

Dyson has worked on scores of historic listed buildings, many in the conservation areas around Spitalfields, and loves Georgian architecture. 'The intimacy and scale work with human proportions,' he explains. 'Some architects like acres of space and think that's more important than having walls you can display art on or usable areas. I'm drawn to the sort of architecture that works to make spaces for specific activities and times of day.'

Dyson shares the house with his wife, Sarah, a teacher; daughter, Isabella, 22, an artist; and son, Oliver, 24, who is studying architecture at the Glasgow School of Art. The couple bought the property in 2006 and the renovation work took about a year. Dyson is now adding a building in the garden to act as his workspace, which he hopes will be finished this summer.

Although there are advantages to working on a project for himself - 'Being master of your own destiny is easier. Working for a client you can get conflicting points of view' - there are downsides, too: 'I never give myself enough time to think about things properly,' he explains. 'For other people you rationalise more and have meetings and plan things. When I build for myself it evolves more as a knee-jerk reaction and a gut response to things.'



'Some architects think having acres of space is more important than having walls you can

**The first-floor landing** has a view of a classical bust that sits on the wall outside. **The bedroom** Surprisingly, the four-poster bed frame is from Ikea (ikea.com). The bed linens are from Merci in Paris (merci-merci.com). The tongue-and-groove walls are a reinstated period feature. **The bathroom** also instinct Dyson's knack for mixing old and new

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For Dyson, the lines between design and decoration are blurred, and he has used the architecture of the street as inspiration for his home's interior, layering antique finds (many from Spitalfields market), artworks and more contemporary furniture against muted panelled walls that are in keeping with the era of the building. It makes for a timeless haven away from the busy city streets.

'I wanted to use calm, earthy colours,' he says. 'I am very inspired by [the Belgian interior designer] Axel Vervoordt and his approach to decoration. It's very elemental and simple. I'm not big on soft furnishing and fussy details.'

To keep clutter to a minimum, Dyson has used panelling creatively, adding storage by bringing walls forward imperceptibly to create concealed cupboards, which 'cut down on the visual noise of having open bookshelves'.

That is not to say that the house is devoid of decorative objects. Dyson continually creates interesting vistas and plays with proportion: for example, a classical bust has been placed on a wall outside the house, creating a striking vignette when viewed from the first-floor landing.

'I like displaying my artefacts,' he says. 'I think it makes the place feel bigger, more interesting and full of surprises. We change the art within the space regularly - otherwise it becomes something

that you don't really register or look at; it recedes into the background.'

A stairwell at the top of the house has become something of a gallery space, hung with paintings by Isabella, among others, kinetic artworks and intricate plaster mouldings. Below it, a new cantilevered solid-oak staircase snakes its way up to the newly added floor housing the kitchen and dining area. In contrast to the rest of the house, the space is bright and modern, with a practical rubber floor. There are contemporary takes on the traditional, such as windows with narrow timber frames that pivot, allowing air to circulate and the family's two cats, Truman and Stella, to get in and out. The windows look out on to two richly planted balconies.

'It's a new level so it felt natural to decorate it in a contemporary way, rather than doing something more traditional,' Dyson says. 'Since the Second World War there's been a very strong heritage movement in the UK, perhaps with a little too much emphasis on preservation rather than imaginative use of traditional buildings, but we are now achieving a good balance.'

Dyson is in the vanguard of this emerging equilibrium: with his respect for heritage buildings and knack for renovating them to suit contemporary life, he is providing a tasteful blueprint for 21st-century urban living. *chrisdyson.co.uk*

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