Room to breathe

Behind the ordinary front door of her mews house in central London, Sophie Paterson has created an extraordinary home, bringing light and air to every cramped corner and unpromising space.

Words Anna Burnside  Photography Patrick Butler Madden
Houses-hunting in London is nobody’s idea of a good time. When you are an interior designer by trade, looking for a home with your new husband, the pressure is on. Add in a still-crazy housing market – this is 2006 we’re talking about – and Sophie Paterson had some job on her hands.

She and husband Kevin trailed around lots of flats but they were just not ticking her boxes. “I knew I wanted my own front door,” she recalls. “I had this image of a welcoming entrance with planters with topiary and a wreath at Christmas. A flat with a shared entrance didn’t fit into that vision.”

Finally she stumbled upon a mews house in South Kensington. The property, on a pretty Victorian terrace, had been rebuilt to match the rest of the street in the 1970s. Inside, however, the poky 19th-century rooms had been replaced, on the ground floor, with an open-plan living space. There was even, to her huge joy, a patio garden. Upstairs had two bedrooms with en-suites, as well as a study.

It had all the features her designer’s heart desired, and then some. “I loved the proportions of the rooms. Lots of London properties are tall and skinny, so to have a large lateral space with a generous-sized lounge and a garden was a real find.”

Once she had stopped punching the air and moved in, however, the house’s flaws became apparent. The plumbing was not fit for purpose. And the décor was not what an aspiring interior designer (she set up her own company in 2008, when a developer saw and fell in love with her own home) wanted to see when she came home from the office.

Over 18 months in residence, she came up with a conversion plan, which started off modestly and then grew arms and legs. “We lived with it for more than a year, so we could be certain we were making the right changes for how we liked to live. The kitchen and bathrooms were the most urgent parts of the renovation: the existing kitchen was literally falling apart and the layout of the master en-suite meant that sharing this bathroom was difficult.” Not ideal, even when you’re a newlywed.

While they squatted together over the basin, Sophie got to work on the kitchen. It was, she says, the biggest challenge of the project, opening up a small galley space to create an open-plan area with room to eat.

[Left] In the bedroom, an Hermès box and bold pieces of jewellery are far too pretty to hide in a drawer.

[Above] The living room opens on to the patio garden. Sophie maximised the light by enlarging the French windows, using lamps and uplighters, and keeping the colour palette neutral. A huge Patsy McArthur charcoal drawing, done to Sophie’s specification, finishes off the space.
and the installation of pocket doors. Sophie designed the layout, then brought in a structural engineer to check them over and draw up the final plans. “As I knew precisely what I wanted from a space-planning point of view, this was an easy cost saving to make. That said, I wouldn’t recommend it if you don’t have the experience and aren’t 100% sure you know what you want.”

The heavy lifting was subcontracted to tradesmen and craftsmen she knew from earlier projects, with Sophie taking on the role of project manager for the three-month job.

Doorways can only be widened so much and, with the structural work in place, it was time for the project manager to take off her dusty boots and the designer...
To take over, choosing a colour palette and fabrics to maximise the space and light.

The open-plan living area, with its limited natural light, was crying out for neutral walls. "I increased the light from the French doors by ensuring that the curtains were set back from the window and wouldn’t block out any light. Even the art I added, glass-fronted charcoal drawings, were part of this plan. Their glass bounces light off the wall."

To give nature a gentle push, "I made sure we had lots of different light sources, not just downlighters but floor lamps and table lamps too for a softer, warmer light in the room."

With plenty of space to play with, Sophie could create a relaxed, friendly area with lots of seating all around the room. Much of the furniture came from Kevin’s bachelor pad and while it’s not what she would have chosen from the catalogue, Sophie knew how to tweak it for its new environment.

“We both have quite masculine taste but I softened lots of Kevin’s furniture by adding neutral soft furnishings such as the taupe rug and curtains in the lounge that tone well with his black Minotti pony skin armchair and leather coffee table. The Minotti is a beautiful piece and I knew I could make it work.”

Kevin has an enviable art collection and brought several charcoal drawings of male figures by fellow Scot Patsy McArthur with him. “I really wanted to add to this collection and to have a huge piece for above the sofa,” says Sophie. “I also wanted some female figures to balance out all the testosterone in our art collection. I contacted Patsy with a loose brief and allowed her the freedom to create whatever she wanted. It was so exciting to open the drawing having no idea what it would be like. Of course I absolutely loved it, and it finishes off the lounge perfectly.”

There’s not a lot of pattern around, with Sophie preferring to add interest with textures, mixing up silk, linen and velvet with an Andrew Martin geometric print. But no material, no matter how sumptuous, makes it into the house without taking over, choosing a colour palette and fabrics to maximise the space and light.

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undergoing a rigorous auditioning process. If the thread count is below 4000, it’s out. She checks each candidate’s own rub test, then conducts her own, “rubbing small fabric samples on my cocker spaniel, Bo, to make sure that her hairs would not show up after she had jumped all over the furniture.”

Having an outside space is a huge luxury in the centre of the city and Sophie has made the most of it. “It is such a peaceful little corner of London, perfect for al fresco dining.” Lack of light was a problem outside as well as in: “I wanted to make sure it didn’t feel dingy. It doesn’t get a huge amount of sunlight and has very tall walls, so I added the planting and dusty blue trellis to break up the large expanse of wall.

“We eat dinner here almost every night in the summer. It’s like being on holiday when the doors are open, the music is on and I have a glass of rioja in my hand.”

To make this small spot sing, Sophie treats it as an outside room. “The accessories are very important to dress the space. As flowers don’t tend to last long in this garden, I almost always have a vase of flowers on the table. It sounds like a waste but actually as we can see them through the French doors it’s the best place for a vase of flowers. I often buy thistles as a little touch of Scotland for Kevin who, like all Scots abroad, gets homesick occasionally. A bunch can last up to seven weeks.”

Upstairs, with two bedrooms and bathrooms to play with, Sophie decided to let the mood of each of the bedrooms dictate the décor in their en-suites. “I had a blank slate and indulged my fantasy for a soft, feminine master bedroom with upholstered faux suede walls and textured wallpaper plus

“I had a blank slate and indulged my fantasy for a soft, feminine master bedroom with upholstered faux suede walls and textured wallpaper plus lots of mirrored furniture”
lots of mirrored furniture for a touch of glamour. " Built-in storage soaks up plenty of shoes and folded clothes, while Sophie makes a feature of pretty jewellery and accessories, displaying the jewels and their boxes in lavish heaps.

After 18 months of sharing a cramped bathroom, both Sophie and Kevin were ready for something with more generous proportions. "I wanted a bathroom that would work hard in terms of the small space to provide sufficient storage for two people with a product addiction and allow us to use the bathroom at the same time."

Precious inches were stolen back with a pocket door that saves floor space and a heated mirror that does the job of a radiator, leaving plenty of room for those essential Space NK purchases. The marble follows on from the cosy taupes of the master bedroom, and creates a flow between the two rooms.

The grey bedroom – a monochrome haven, all Zoffany silk wallpaper, architectural prints and Andrew Martin cushions – inherited a more traditional bathroom suite. While Kevin was all for chucking it in the skip, Sophie held him back. "It seemed a waste when it was such a great space already. I made the room more contemporary and masculine by painting the magnolia walls and bath grey, and adding some accessories and artwork to make it feel more in tune with the rest of our décor."

Not only do the couple now have an enviable home, they also have the perfect showcase for Sophie’s talents. "I always loved interior design," she says. “When I was a little girl I was constantly rearranging my own room. I’d also have a go at my cousins’ and friends’ bedrooms whenever I went round their house.”

After studying Spanish, then flirting with other industries, she had returned to interiors in the mid-2000s, her big break came when she was recruited to design the interior of a totally refurbished townhouse in Chelsea.

"A developer came to our house, loved what I’d done and asked me to design his latest project. This gave me confidence and opened the door for me to take on other private and commercial projects, slowly building up my contacts, experience and portfolio," Sophie set up her own company in 2008 and has had a steady flow of clients ever since.

By merging their personal tastes and furniture collections, the couple now have a design for life that works. "The whole property perfectly reflects Kevin and me and how we like to live."