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**Good mixer:** Maurizio Pellizzoni created an open living area**The only way is up:** an open staircase leads to a new loft space

IT'S WHAT YOU DO WITH SPACE THAT MATTERS

A tiny Lewisham flat was all Maurizio Pellizzoni could afford – but he had loft space and a wealth of good ideas, says **Ruth Bloomfield**



Boys' toys: a local steelmaker helped Maurizio to reproduce a designer-classic coffee table he admired, for a fifth of its £15,000 showroom price

Photographs: **David Butler**

MAURIZIO Pellizzoni was a 24-year-old graphic designer living on the shores of Lake Como when he decided to leave Italy for a rather less glamorous life in a dingy shared flat in Earl's Court and a job at McDonald's while he learned English.

When his command of the language was good enough, he found work on the shop floor at H&M, then with Calvin Klein, and eventually landed a job as a window dresser in the flagship Ralph Lauren shop in Bond Street. It often meant working through the night so that he could study by day for a degree in interior design and architecture.

With the degree under his belt he was offered promotion and took charge of Ralph Lauren's homeware collection in shops across Europe.

For three years he jetted around the world in search of product ideas – then came a big setback. In 2007 he fell seriously ill and was diagnosed with a brain infection that almost paralysed him.

His illness gave him time to think. When he recovered he was ready to change direction and to create his own company, Maurizio Pellizzoni Design. Far from standing in his way, Ralph

Lauren gave him encouragement, recommending potential clients and helping him secure commissions.

Now 38, in the past five years Maurizio has helped create homes for some of the wealthiest men and women in Britain. His client list includes Premiership footballers (he helped Joe and Carly Cole redo their Chelsea townhouse), leading bankers and lawyers, as well as a crop of Russian squillionaires.

He is also now the proud owner of a very glamorous duplex apartment – a far cry from those Earl's Court days. However, by moving through a series of rented flats, via New Cross Gate, Poplar and then to Finchley Road, he learned a great deal about how he wanted to live.

"Back then, the mortgage situation was a lot better than it is now," he says. "I calculated that I could spend up to about £100,000."

He decided to concentrate his search in south-east London, and Lewisham in particular, because it was affordable and he had friends in the area. There would also be fast trains to central London (Charing Cross in only 20 minutes).

After viewing 20 properties, he spent £80,000 on a one-bedroom flat at the top of a Victorian house. The flat was grotty, but it had an untapped resource – the loft





space. Maurizio immediately realised he could dramatically increase the size of the flat (it was a compact 50 square metres) if he could use the loft.

His first task was to charm his new downstairs neighbours into agreeing to club together to buy the freehold of the building. Their landlord originally demanded £20,000 – but after protracted negotiations reduced this to £1,000 per flat.

Owning a share of the freehold freed Maurizio to apply to Lewisham council for permission to extend into the loft. Since other homeowners on the street had already done the same, his application sailed through.

He then set to work on reconfiguring the flat. “It took me years but was finished six months ago. I didn’t have the money or the time to do it all at once.”

His first project was to divide the existing bedroom into a smaller guest room and separate bathroom. To save money he painstakingly applied the midnight blue mosaic tiles himself, learning valuable practical skills along the way.

Then he designed a black-painted steel spiral staircase to give access to the loft, and turned the space into a second bed-

Restful: Maurizio gave a distinct Ralph Lauren feel to the master bedroom

room with dressing room. Finally he opened out the kitchen and living room into an open-plan room. The project cost £30,000 to £40,000 – a price Maurizio kept down by doing as much of the work as possible himself.

The flat needed a touch of Italian luxury, but here was a man who now knew how to enhance cheap basics with glamorous accessories. Thus the textured brown wallpaper in the living room is by Ralph Lauren and a chair is covered in Missoni fabric. And while the kitchen carcass is Ikea, the doors are walnut veneer.

The steel-and-glass coffee table looks fabulous and is modelled on a designer piece Maurizio admired but, at around £15,000, could not afford. Instead he got a local steelmaker to replicate the brushed steel base. He had a thick piece of glass cut to sit upon it, giving him a very similar style for a fifth of the price. The steelmaker, South East Steel Fabrications, also made his stairs and is contactable at sesteelfab.1@hotmail.co.uk

Glass is a favourite material – an alcove in the living room has been fitted with glass shelves – and the furniture is a mix of periods and styles. Maurizio’s plain wooden table was picked up from an antiques shop in the Holloway Road, and

Clockwise from above: a screen divides the kitchen and dining area from the open-plan living space; theatrical flourishes give the new rooms character and interest; sliding glass doors lead to vital extra storage in the master bedroom; Maurizio kept costs down by tiling the bathroom himself

he later invested in a gold Philippe Starck stool for the hall, plus an original poster for the movie *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane*. Ralph Lauren crocodile-pattern brown paper covers the bedroom walls, and it’s a complete accident that the shade exactly matches the shiny coat of Maurizio’s five-year-old chocolate labrador, Arthur.

The flat, which Maurizio shares with his boyfriend, has increased in size to 70sq m – and the property was recently valued at £210,000 – but space is still tight. So he fitted a sliding door to the bathroom and added a wall of cupboards in the living room, while sliding glass doors lead to more storage in the eaves of the master bedroom. But, as an avid traveller who loves to shop, he know he will have to move before long.

He says: “My next challenge is a flat in a more central location – and a holiday home beside Lake Como.”