

Out of darkness, into the light



Touch of glass: Houses like La Concha benefit from early morning light

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Dramatic glazing can rescue dark corners and turn an everyday home into a talking point. Sonia Purnell investigates the bright and the beautiful

[In pictures: Bright homes \(javascript:newWindow\('/core/Slideshow/slideshowContentFrameFragXL.jhtml?xml=/property/slideshows/pixdark/pixdark.xml&site=News','Slideshow','height=570,width=750,resizable'\);\)](#)

When Joanne Aboulin and her family moved into a Victorian terrace in west London, the basement kitchen was so dark and cut off from the rest of the house that she called it the "bunker". It had just two small windows cut into the top of the back wall, and some murky pinpricks of light from tiny, old-fashioned square pavement lights above.

The walls were painted a dark red. Now, even on a dull February morning, thanks to the clever use of great sheets of glass and many pots of white paint, it shimmers with an ethereal glow and the need for electric light during the day has gone.

Joanne, an interior designer, and her French husband Bruno, have transformed what was once a dingy old office into a chic, lightfilled family house where the ground floor living room looks over a sleek glass balustrade to the kitchen below.

Part of the garden has been dug out and a two-storey glass box inserted into the back of the house, flooding the basement with light and linking the two floors of living space. The old pavement lights have been torn out and replaced with single sheets of opaque, sandblasted glass that transmit shafts of light to the side of the kitchen furthest from the glass box.

Overall, what was once like a bunker now – due in part to the aqua-tinted resin floor – has almost the feel of a

well-lit indoor swimming pool. Joanne's deft restructuring of her house is just one example of a growing trend to let in the light.

Near-miracles can be worked in the most unlikely of dark spots, whether in a modern or traditional building. Jamie Falla, a London and Guernsey-based architect (MooArc architects 020-7354 1729; www.mooarc.com (<http://www.mooarc.com>)), has carved out a name for himself as Mr Light, using glass in an array of exciting yet cost-effective ways to convert unpromising dark buildings into dreamy light ones.

He started with his own converted granite barn on Guernsey, using large glazed doors at the ends and glass panels along the peak of the roof to bring in light. There is also a glazed mezzanine floor over the large family space, where adults can retreat with a good book while keeping an eye on goings on below. Glass panels close off areas on the ground floor, giving privacy and sound insulation, but they still allow the passage of light.

But perhaps his most remarkable project is a new-build in Peckham, south London, where a house has been squeezed on a tiny plot between two high walls of neighbouring Victorian villas. The site meant that there was little scope for windows on many of the walls, and precious little in the way of views. But a retractable rooflight over the living area not only floods it with light, but gives the couple who live there ever-changing views of the sky.

"They don't need to paint their walls interesting colours or anything, as the sky constantly changes how they look, and there's always something interesting going on, from planes to storms," says Jamie. "Glass also allows you to build in awkward spaces, and can be relatively easy to deal with. People are increasingly obsessed with light, and technology is always moving on, meaning that we can give it to them."

One doctor client in Southwark, south London, wanted to be able to leave her retractable roof open in the rain. "It was over her living room, so we put concrete on the walls and floor so that it didn't matter if they got wet," he explains.

"You also get a much better light from above. A rooflight will give you 70 per cent more light than the same size window." Jamie himself had a retractable roof over the dining table in his former London house.

"It was four metres square, and a pitched roof. The whole thing slid off completely to the side."

Glass may have the biggest impact in north-facing houses. Although notoriously dark, they also offer the most scope for glazing as there are fewer worries about over-heating in the summer. One otherwise well-appointed five-bedroom redbrick house in Surrey, for instance, was let down by its north-facing kitchen at the back that was both dark and poky. The owners ripped off the back wall, extended out another 10ft and glazed the whole lot, walls and roof.

Now the kitchen is both spacious and filled with light all year round. From being a disadvantage, the new design has given the house a selling point. Agents put its value at £150,000 or more above neighbouring properties.

Similar treatment was given to another redbrick house, a Victorian terrace house in Oxford currently on the market for £850,000 through John D Wood (01865 311522, www.johndwood.co.uk (<http://www.johndwood.co.uk>)).

Entirely unseen from the street, the back of the house, which leads down to the river, is now blessed with a spacious two-storey glass extension comprising a big openplan kitchen leading up a spiral staircase to a good-sized office above.

Both rooms are flooded with light and have extended the house considerably, without making any of it dark. No

wonder then that its asking price is almost double the £450,000-£550,000 more typical for the street.

"The floorspace has been increased significantly and what was a jumble of rooms has been transformed into a large, light space," says agent Will Kirkland. "That brings in a completely different sort of buyer and the value reflects that."

Glazed extensions do not come cheap, however. Mrs Aboulin is expecting to have paid around £80,000 for the structural works once complete, with the pavement lights alone costing £5,000. But there are also cheaper, less disruptive ways of letting in the light, such as sunpipes.

Typically costing £250 each plus installation (from Monodraught, 001494 897700, www.sunpipe.co.uk (<http://www.sunpipe.co.uk>)), these superreflective metal tubes bring light down from a hole in the roof. They are relatively easy to install and highly effective, with the biggest pipes lighting an area of up to 230sq ft, the size of a large room.

"They are essentially mirrors that can turn corners," explains Jamie, "and they produce a lot of light even on a dull day."

He favours them for spaces such as windowless halls and landings but they are equally useful over worktops in kitchens, internal bathrooms or basements (where they can direct light down from openings in front gardens). A simple, new solution for an old problem.

Add a touch of class with walls of glass

Metaphorical glass ceilings may deserve a bad press, but real ones have their advantages.

Living beneath one for the past 10 years, Tom Politowicz has realised: "Pigeons won't sit on it. And where they don't sit, they don't ... err ..."

Well, you get the idea. It also lets in a lot of light. When Tom moved into his six-bedroom house in St Margaret's, Richmond, nothing had been done for decades.

Built in 1855, it had accumulated a tumble of Victorian outhouses that even hid an original Thomas Crapper loo. Beside these, the back rooms, facing north, were pokey and dark. Tom, an architect with Foster and Partners for 23 years, spotted the solution immediately.

"I demolished the whole of the back of the house." A modern glass extension on a fine Victorian building would twitch the antennae of any council. But having worked on projects as varied as the Hong Kong Airport and London's Tower Place, Tom dealt expertly with opposition.

"The planners were quite sensitive, but I took a model along to show them. I pointed out that we were exposing the original Victorian structure."

He then took his plans to the Austrian company, Wagner Biro. "I knew them because they'd built for us in the past. They're very good and very efficient. The frame and glass were up in three to four days."

At five metres high, and nine metres by nine metres, the extension has more than tripled the size of the kitchen, making it an ideal family room.

"There's so much light," says Tom. "We've painted the walls white, with a grey floor of big stone tiles."

These continue into the garden, extending the feeling of space. A keener gardener might make the transition even more seamless by arraying large plants both inside and outside the glass. Nor is overheating a problem.

"Orientation is important. If it's north-facing, you're not bringing in loads of heat."

And Tom agrees that, from this direction, light is softer and diffused, which can make a room easier to live in. New visitors are amazed.

"They can't quite make it out, such a huge glass space, very unusual, not a traditional conservatory."

It is this impact, along with the extensive renovations and improvements necessary in a house that was still lit by gas only 12 years ago, which made the council designate it a Building of Townscape Merit. It's on the market for £1.795 million with Jackson-Stops and Staff (020 8940 6789).

But you don't need 45sq m of glass to make a big splash. Jon Wall and his wife, Georgina, moved into their three-bedroom Victorian terrace in East Dulwich in 2002. The kitchen already had a side extension – "a hideous 1970s construction, a mish-mash of windows."

The glass, wire-meshed and opaque, let very little light into the 5m-long kitchen but it did provide an idea. Jon replaced it, floor to ceiling, with a sheet of doubleglazed glass, toughened for security.

"The neighbours really approved: it was such an eyesore before." The small garden has been made into a courtyard for outside dining.

"The kitchen looks on to bay and olive trees. The light floods in and it's as if we're outside."

At the same time, he took the idea upstairs to the bedroom (which sits directly above the kitchen), again replacing small opaque windows with two walls of glass. Ventilation comes from a separate small, latched window. The room measures just under 3m by 3m and Jon admits that it gets "slightly warm", catching some of the sun.

"But we use it much more than we did. It would make a great office for working from home."

For Chris Preston of the estate agent Haart (020 8299 3728), which is selling it for £515,000, it's a terrific feature. "We've had lots of compliments on the amount of light coming in. It's the favourite part of the house for viewers, really well done."