



Show-stopper: an impressive, large front door and Juliet balcony give the property a classy look



Family ties: George and Helen spend some quality time at home with baby Ilaria

Goodbye to the Stokey horror show

YOU MAY well have heard the expression, "get the house, get the girl". Well, in architect George Bradley's case, he didn't expect the magic to work quite so fast. Helen, the girl he first dated in 2006 – on the very day he moved into his new, "horrid" little house in Stoke Newington – became his wife, and is now mother of their 13-week-old baby, Ilaria.

But that "horrid" house today looks completely different, and there is quite a story to tell, not only of making something out of very little, but of taking what some might call a foolhardy leap into the unknown.

In 2003, before Helen arrived on the scene, two architectural students, George, now 35, and Dutch-Belgian Ewald Van Der Straeten, 32, became friends and kept in touch after Ewald took a job in Norway.

Three years later, George went house hunting in Stoke Newington. Every agent laughed at his small budget. Then one showed him a picture of a 670sq ft property that had been poorly converted from an old workshop into a cramped house over three floors. He only went to look out of desperation. "The moment I saw it, as an architect I knew it was a steal," says George. He agreed to pay the £275,000 price on the spot.

With its tiny footprint and no outside space, except a charming granite-settled carriage way, the brick building had two rooms squeezed on to each of the two lower floors, with an extra bedroom

George Bradley and a fellow architect worked magic on a 'horrid house' in Stoke Newington using plywood and imaginative design.

By **Philippa Stockley**

lurking under the roofing eaves. There were doors everywhere, and an awkward spiral staircase in a corner. It was cramped, dark, over-divided and running with condensation – as well as mice. Even the French windows on the first-floor Juliet balcony were rotten.

CALLING CARD

After a while, Helen moved in and, despite the state of the house, the couple lived there happily for three years, during which they hatched a plot. George would gut and totally rework the space, with Ewald as his partner.

Both George and Ewald were fed-up of working for big companies and never meeting their clients, so they threw in their current jobs, set up an architectural practice and "went for it". To save

Tall story: a once-dark space now makes dramatic use of available natural light



Gold fever: plywood gives the house a feeling of warmth, above. George's friend and business partner, Ewald Van Der Straeten, checks out the balcony, left

money, they decided to do all the work themselves, knowing that a hands-on project would teach them building skills, and make a terrific calling card for their new practice.

However, this is where it got risky. To make ends meet, Helen and George ran a food stall called Pomodoro in Brick Lane and St Katharine Docks, while Ewald, who had moved back to London, rented a room and worked in a bar.

They drew up and submitted plans. And then the bomb fell. To their horror, they were told that the property wasn't registered as residential. "That was a scary moment," says Ewald with understatement. Unfazed, however, George proved to the planners that it had been residential for the four years, and they agreed to a change of use. But that took six months.

Finally, in 2011, they were able to start work. After such a long wait they demolished the whole interior in two weeks, discovering along the way that the condensation problem had been caused by poor insulation and a lack of air bricks.

Then building work started – Helen wisely staying out of the maelstrom. They decided to clad the whole interior in plywood. The warm, gold wood was deemed to be not only attractive, but

Intelligent space: the top bedroom even includes a baby-changing cupboard

had great sound insulation qualities. They had a terrific idea to build a detailed plywood staircase rising up through the centre, and all rooms were connected by floor-to-ceiling pocket doors that could be left open, instantly creating an open-plan, airy feel. For a harmonious look they used engineered oak on the floors, with external-grade solid timber outside. They changed the ordinary front door for a big, tall opaque-glazed door – a relatively simple thing that makes everything feel grander and lighter.

CONVEYOR BELT

Endless deliveries of different grades of plywood started arriving with alarming regularity and, as Ewald points out, everything had to be cut to "within a millimetre".

Often working seven days a week, they used only the tools they could buy from regular DIY shops. "We didn't even have a work bench," laughs George, "we used an old picnic table."

They also made the kitchen and the bathroom. Some things they could not make but, perhaps because they were architects, they would not accept anything as second best. When a cheap plastic shower tray arrived they took one look at it and bought an expensive ceramic one. In the kitchen, though, all the cupboards were simple ply-covered carcasses, the top a good-quality Corian-type composite that resembled Carrara

marble. And, when it came to covering over the thousands of screw holes in the ply, instead of using wood filler, they hand-cut plywood plugs.



On the map: tall ceilings give a feeling of grandeur without being wasted



Tasteful: while the house was built to a budget, quality fittings were used

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"It was a conveyor belt," says Ewald. "George was cutting them, I was fitting and sanding. It took two weeks."

Two weeks? Yes, two weeks. But attention to detail is what makes all the difference here because in such a small space you can't waste an inch, or bodge anything. There are cupboards everywhere – there's even a small loft space for duvets, and cellar space for the plumbing. Not a jot is wasted. Ilaria even has her own personal baby-changing cupboard in the top bedroom. And every single cupboard is perfectly cut, sprung and finished.

WHAT'S particularly nice about this house is that, at the end of the job, when mere mortals would be utterly exhausted, the two architects found they had fallen in love with architecture again.

After a year-and-a-half, George and Helen moved back in and carried on finishing odds and ends for another year after that. So a job like this isn't something you do on a whim, but the result – quirky, hand-made to the last detail and utterly bespoke – really is rather special.