

Homes & Property Our home

Home-made: Nick Leith-Smith, pictured with his son, Leonardo, designed a 10-seater table from Portuguese chestnut and a striking polished copper floating cupboard unit



A house with good bones

Architect Nick Leith-Smith found a dilapidated dream house in south London. All he had to do was bring it slowly back to life, discovers **Philippa Stockley**

KNOWING what you want really helps when buying a house. Architect Nick Leith-Smith – who designs stores for luxury shoemaker Manolo Blahnik – and his Portuguese-Brazilian wife Susana, 37, a banker, had their hearts set on a specific type of house in a particular area... and it didn't take them long to find it.

The couple were searching for a place to raise a family and decided they wanted a Georgian house in a particular area of Stockwell, south London. Fortunately there are still plenty that the Second World War bombs missed,

though many people are only now waking up to the charms of this part of town. The house they bought, in 2011, was on Susana's cycle route from her Clapham flat to her office, and was the third they looked at.

Though it was in poor condition, and the carpets were virtually jumping with moths, Leith-Smith, 40, could see "the bones were incredibly good". It faced east-west, which guarantees the best light, and had a mature 40-foot garden, including two trees as old as the house.

"If you buy an old house," he adds, "be prepared to replace all the wiring and plumbing, and probably a lot more, so

budget for it." The slate roof had to be renewed, too, but it created an opportunity to add insulation. And those carpets have now been replaced with dark oak floorboards.

This four-storey, 1820s house had a Nineties extension on the back, that, while basic, the couple were happy to keep. Lit by skylights, the kitchen/diner contained country-look units with an Aga, concrete flagstones, and cheap old white aluminium doors, which they upgraded with Crittall ones. Sensibly, they parked themselves in that part of the house while works were done above, and while their first child, Olympia, now three-and-a-half, was born.

Leith-Smith explains that if you buy a Grade II-listed house in a conservation area, you have to accept that you don't own it, you're just "borrowing" it. Planners don't take kindly to any changes that appear to be mere whims, and tend only to pass things that maintain or improve the property.

UPSTAIRS, Leith-Smith saw that two original bedrooms, with their outdated bathroom and small separate loo, could be improved by moving a door opening to create a much better flow on the entire floor. "Moving that door just 50 centimetres was probably the most difficult thing I have ever got through planning, in 15 years as an architect," he laughs. But the proof that he was right is that you don't even notice – what you do see is a glamorous front-to-back master-bedroom and dressing room with floor-to-ceiling wardrobes he designed. There is a bathroom with a floating basin console he designed in bold Arabescato marble, a claw-foot bath and posh taps. The bespoke walk-in shower has cobalt-blue micro tiles, and the loo



has a thick, sand-blasted door. The unstuffy elegance continues with a padded peacock bed, yellow Designers Guild curtains, and geometric wallpaper.

The couple, who met on holiday in Ibiza, like counterpointing the old house with new décor. They took care to replace missing bits of cornice, restored the beautiful mahogany handrail on the stairs, and love spending weekends hunting for great furniture. Their old/new glamour continues in the first-floor drawing room. Unusually, this sunny room goes right

Open house: the front-to-back master bedroom and dressing room have solid oak floors, as well as bespoke floor-to-ceiling wardrobes

Photographs:
Charles Hosea

The best seat in the house

visit us at arloandjacob.com
call us on 03331 309 346
or pop by our Fulham Showroom

Arlo & Jacob
Sofas for life

A range of styles starting from £735

Our home **Homes & Property****Country comforts:** the kitchen has an Aga and a flagged floor**LEITH-SMITH'S TIPS FOR BUYING AN OLD HOUSE**

- If you buy a listed house, be prepared for a long planning process.
- Unless there are major structural faults, most problems can be fixed.
- Get a full structural survey and have a chat with a sympathetic architect before committing.
- Lighting is very important. I put in an extra line of

cornice and dropped LED lights behind that. I used a Rako system that has a radio-wave dimmer system, so you need much less wiring.

WHAT THE PROJECT COST

House when bought in November 2011: £1.2 million
Refurbishment cost: (without architects' or any other fees) £250,000-£300,000
Value now: about £1.95 million

AYRTON

WINDOWS & DOORS

www.ayrtonbespoke.com

Silence is golden

Replacing beautiful timber windows and doors, beautifully

Call 020 8877 8920 now to claim **10% off** orders placed by end of October (Quote ESAD). Or visit Ayrton showroom at 406 Merton Road, London SW18 5AD



Striking contrast: with his wife, Susana, Nick, above, hunts for furniture that works as a counterpoint to the house's Georgian features

Cool move: the bathroom has a claw-foot bath and a stunning floating basin console made from Arabescato marble

Where to get the look

- **Architect and furniture designer:** Nick Leith-Smith (nickleithsmith.com)
- **Joiner:** Charles Dee at vavonajoinery.com
- **Crittall windows** from fabcosanctuary.com
- **Dimmable lighting** from Rako Controls (rakocontrols.com)
- **Bronze switch plates** from the Wandsworth Group (wandsworthgroup.com)
- **Black oak engineered flooring** from Havwoods (havwoods.co.uk)
- **Glass mosaic tiles** in shower from bisazza.com
- **Claw-foot bath** from CP Hart (cphart.co.uk)
- **Bathroom taps** from lefroybrooks.co.uk
- **Glass shower enclosure** bespoke from glass-design.net
- **Geometric metallic wallpaper** from Cole & Son (cole-and-son.com)
- **Velvet bed** from The Sofa & Chair Company (thesofaandchair.co.uk)
- **Yellow curtain material** in master bedroom from designersguild.com

across the full width at the back, because the staircase sits near the front door, which is a real space-saver and allows for the generous drawing room with original French windows.

Here, Leith-Smith designed a mirrored alcove using joined pieces of antiqued glass, giving a French effect. He also made a cocktail cabinet from Portuguese chestnut that they shipped back.

"Susana's parents had built a house near Porto and there were some planks left," he says. In addition, he used the

wood to make a 10-seater table for the basement dining area downstairs.

He loves designing interiors. As well as the Blahnik stores, he is shortlisted to design a bar in Mayfair, so doing furniture, such as his latest piece – a copper-clad floating cupboard unit – comes naturally. Raised in Hong Kong where his father was a pilot, he loved drawing, and his vocation came quickly: "The minute I realised you could make a living designing houses and furniture – when I was about seven – that was it."