



Original features: the studio's fine sash windows had survived

HERE is always an element of risk in buying a property and most first-time buyers want, understandably, to play it as safe as possible. Not Ben Ridley and Susanne Ghonouie, who bid for their home at auction, tackled the planning quagmire of modernising a listed building, camped out for months in the resulting building site – and still came up smiling.

On a shoestring budget, the couple transformed their sad little studio in Barnsbury, north-west London, into a glorious one-bedroom apartment with an impressive high-spec finish.

Part of the reason Ben and Susanne were willing to take on such a project was that Ben, 29, is a partner at Architecture for London (architectureforlondon.co.uk) and specialises in renovating period and historic buildings. Susanne, 33, who runs events company The Dig, lived a life of stark contrasts during the project. At work she orchestrated high-end parties and weddings. At home she boiled breakfast eggs in a kettle for want of a hob.

“Considering we had never lived together before it proved quite a good test,” she says. “If we could cope with all that, we would find living somewhere normal easy.”

When the couple decided to buy a property they were each renting with friends in Hackney. They began house



OUR £27,000 MINI MARVEL

These first-time buyers took a risk at auction then, on a shoestring budget, transformed a dark studio flat into a bright and spacious new home, says **Ruth Bloomfield**

hunting in 2012 and after a couple of potential homes fell through they decided to try their luck at auction.

The flat they settled on was within a splendid 1892 terrace and was laid out as a studio with a bedroom/living room, a compact bathroom and a small kitchen.

Ben says: “It was in quite a bad state. It had lino floors and quite a serious asbestos problem in the bathroom, and all the rooms were painted in three different colours. Most of the original features had been stripped out, the fireplaces were bricked up and there were cheap modern doors.”

On the plus side the location was excellent, some original features – notably fine sash windows – had survived, and at 387 square feet the flat was just about large enough for Ben to believe it could be turned into a workable one-bedroom apartment.

Buying at auction can be full of stresses. They only had a week to get their surveys done, consider the results, and decide to bid. They also had to get their mortgage agreed, though it had been approved in principle in advance.

Once the hammer fell the flat was theirs – the process is quicker than buying in the conventional way. “And we thought there was a better choice of run-down and weary properties at auction that were possibly being sold below market value,” adds Ben.

They paid £290,000 for the flat in October 2012 and moved straight in because they had no money left over to

pay rent and a mortgage while funding a refurbishment. “The property was dirty, and we didn’t have an oven or a fridge,” says Ben. “We had an electric kettle and kept food fresh by leaving it outside.”

“It was our first place together and we came with nothing. To say it was an adjustment to have to live like that is an understatement.”

Another problem was that the property was Grade II-listed, though Ben and Susanne believe that may have been an advantage in the auction room. “There were only two of us bidding,” says Ben. “None of the developers there were interested because they knew they wouldn’t be able to get a quick turnover with a listed building.”

The couple didn’t mind playing a long game and in spring last year, after lengthy pre-application negotiations with Islington council, they lodged their request for consent to make alterations. Ben’s plan was to swap the rooms around, installing a kitchen/living room where the studio room was originally, leaving the bathroom in place, and using the small kitchen as a bedroom.

The council was keen that every aspect of the project, from the door handles to the flooring, was in keeping with the age of the building. This meant the couple had to inspect neighbours’ original doors and cornicing so they could commission replicas. They also planned to unbrick the fireplaces and the council wanted the replacement fire surrounds to be in an appropriate period style.

Though the negotiations were time-consuming the necessary Listed Building Consent was granted in May. Ben estimates the process cost about £500, not including the hours of time he spent on it. Work began on the 10-week project, at a cost of £27,000. But while the budget wasn’t vast, the couple didn’t want to skimp completely on luxury. Thus their kitchen, designed by Ben, combines cabinets made of MDF sprayed white, and Carrera marble work surfaces.

Practical, with a touch of luxury: Ben and Susanne in their kitchen/living room, with MDF cabinetry sprayed white and Carrera marble worktops

up.” In the bathroom they opted for a roll top bath but disliked its “fancy” feet and replaced them with simple wooden supports, painted yellow. The room’s real talking point, however, is the tiling. Rather than conventional squares they bought strips of slate which their builders painstakingly arranged into a

herringbone design. The bathroom is small but the roll top, lifted off the floor, makes it appear bigger. To avoid the need for a radiator they invested in heated mirrors, which have the advantage of never fogging up, and even inserted the bath slightly into the wall to win back space. The flat’s large water

tank was replaced with a smaller combi-boiler, also to save space.

In the bedroom, Ben and Susanne ignored conventional wisdom about decorating small rooms in light colours. The walls, ceilings, skirting, window frames, radiator, shutters and even the window box are painted in Farrow &

Lights out: Ben and Susanne used Farrow & Ball Off-Black in the bedroom, right. “I love it and I’ve never slept so well,” says Ben



Listed building restrictions: the council insisted on fire surrounds of appropriate period style, and that the original floorboards must be retained



Ball’s Off-Black, while a wall of built-in wardrobes is clad in grey-tinted mirror. Only the bedspread and a green chair add a couple of pops of colour in the room.

“I love it and I don’t think I’ve ever slept so well,” says Ben. “It feels really cosy and at night you have no idea where the room ends. You can’t tell it’s a small

room at all.” Today the apartment is worth an estimated £400,000, which Ben puts down partly to local property price rises, and partly to the fact that it is now a one-bedroom home rather than a studio.

“That has made a big difference,” he says. “It is so liveable-in.”



Talking point: herringbone tiling and a bath set into the wall

MARBLE can be expensive but after extensive research, Ben and Susanne bought theirs from Marble Granite Craftsmen (marblegranitecraftsmen.co.uk), which also supplied the stone for the fire surrounds. The couple took advantage of the high ceilings to design extra-high cabinets for storage.

Islington council insisted the original floorboards be retained, so they were sanded down and treated with Swedish floor soap, giving a bleached effect. Replica doors came from M Bespoke Joinery (mbespokejoinery.co.uk).

Because the flat was small, Ben and Susanne did not want clutter but they did want a cluster light and after shopping around found a great design from a firm in China. Priced at £260 it was around half the price of similar fittings for sale in the UK.

“It was a bit of a risk,” warned Ben. “Ours was fine but a client ordered one from the same firm and it didn’t show

Photographs: **SIMON MAXWELL**








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