

Outside in: Cordula Weisser, husband Philip Borel and their son Caspar, five, right, seated at the pivoted window-door to the garden at home in Hackney



Making light of family life

Faced with narrow, dark Victorian rooms, architect and mum Cordula Weisser used glass, timber and dramatic black and white to add space and create a modern family home, says **Philippa Stockley**

HACKNEY once had lots of pilastered Victorian villas set in streets with grand names to match – such as Carlton and Leopold. The area was steeped in Pooterish respectability, until Hitler's bombs obliterated east London in swathes.

"Victorian houses used to be wasted on me," German-born architect Cordula Weisser, says cheerfully, in the sunny new larch-lined extension she designed for the rear of her Victorian house – a survivor of the blitz – off Victoria Park. "Now," she concedes, "I love them. But while most architects tend to open everything up, I like to keep a lot of original elements."

The new room takes up the width of the plot, going right across where the side return used to be. A big, pivoted window-door opens to the garden, making it very bright. The room is divided into cooking and dining areas by a long, teak-topped island that holds cooker, sink, and drawer-dishwasher.

There's a nice relaxed, contemporary feel: you instantly know that the family practically lives in this room. "It's brilliant being able to cook and chat to your friends at the same time," Cordula says.

IN LOVE WITH LONDON

Cordula, 43, came to England to study architecture at UCL. She meant to go back home, "but I fell in love with London." Then she met her future husband, Philip Borel, a student at LSE; now an editor at financial publishing company PEI. They bought a house in London Fields, but soon after the birth of their son, Caspar, now five, realised they needed a larger home.

"We looked at this one eight times," Cordula says. "It took three months to



Island girl: Cordula found the top for her kitchen island, left, complete with butler sink, in a Brighton skip. Now it divides her generous new room perfectly into cooking and eating spaces

Having it larch: the extension's white-oiled tongue-and-groove larch lining continues outside as black-stained and varnished cladding, right



Nifty space-saving measures: the wardrobes are built into the wall in the master bedroom, right



Functional but fun: the black-and-white brilliance continues in Caspar's playroom

decide. A family had lived here for 20 years and had done nothing. There was a narrow, dark kitchen sticking out from the back, next to a narrow side return. Victorian houses are long, deep and dark. That was my main concern: could I bring light and width into it? Finally, two years ago, we bought it for £850,000."

Next, Cordula, who admits to agonising over detail before making preliminary drawings, submitted a plan for an extension. The planners rejected it as too long and too high. After she scaled it back, it went through.

Cordula's subtle, thoughtful skills as an architect show in this house. Since it is her own home, she has experimented, too. The white front room, with its crisp cornice and wooden floors, still feels like a classic Victorian drawing room. But in fact, layers of beige wallpaper were stripped off and the smothered cornice painstakingly chipped away at. Meanwhile, the floor was lifted, insulation put beneath, the boards repaired and closed up, and a lye wash put on by hand, giving a pale white sheen. Pure lye is caustic, but a thin wash, oiled after, is fine.

Behind this, the old back room is now sleek in Farrow & Ball black, with long MDF bookshelves cantilevered along the wall. The original house ends here in a shuttered French door that once led to

A shuttered door marks the boundary between old and new, a bit like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

the garden but now opens into the extension. Cordula kept it to mark the boundary between old and new – like something out of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

The new section looks very modern. "I designed the profile of the tongue-and-groove larch and had it made in the West Country, then put white oil on it," Cordula explains. "So that the room didn't end up looking like a sauna."

It doesn't. The larch continues outside as cladding, only stained black, then protected with regular Ronseal varnish.

WHOLE NEW TAKE ON TEAK

The extension's fashionable concrete floor turns out to be just the structural slab of the new-build, with underfloor heating. And the kitchen island has its own story. "We saw the teak on a skip in Brighton, thrown out by a geology lab," Cordula says. "We gaffer-taped it to the top of the car. It still had a butler sink attached, and was so heavy that

passers-by had to help us load it. But it determined how the kitchen would look." Under it, she designed purple cupboards, all economically cut and sprayed by one company. The doors on the opposite side open with your foot: very useful if you are busy cooking. Caspar, unimpressed by this cleverness, just uses his hands.

THERE are intelligent changes throughout the rest of the family home – such as building the master-bedroom wardrobes into the wall, making a doorway through from there into the principal bathroom, and hiding the big solar-gain boiler in the wall between hall and bathroom, so you don't even notice it. Or, drawing light right up through the house from a glazed panel over the new kitchen – it's a glass floor on the landing above – right up to a Velux window in the roof, so light cascades down the core of the building.

But the main work is the ground floor. "This new part gave me most pleasure," Cordula says. "Philip couldn't imagine any of it from the drawings, but when it was done he was, like, 'My God this is amazing'."

"All we've actually added is eight square meters, but it has completely transformed the house."

Photographs: Charles Hosea

For more pictures of this home, visit homesandproperty.co.uk/hackneyhouse

CORDULA'S TOP TIPS FOR STYLE AND MONEY-SAVING:

- Always use an architect, it saves money – and you get fresh ideas
- Put the job out to tender and get two or more quotes from prospective builders
- Insulate floorboards and put underfloor heating for a cosy feel
- In small rooms put one good thing (for example, handmade tiles in the second bathroom).
- Kitchen cupboards sprung to open by foot are a boon when cooking
- Use cheap socket plates, but get smart-looking ones

HOW TO GET A SIMILAR LOOK

- Architect: Cordula Weisser at ZCD Architects (zcdarchitects.co.uk)
- General builder: PG Construction (07815931873)
- Ronseal varnish: ronseal.co.uk

Big pivoted window/door by Culmax (culmax.co.uk)

- Blue-and-white bathroom tiles by made a mano (madeamano.com)
- Micro-tiles in main bathroom by Waxman (waxmanceramics.co.uk)
- Larch timber cut by Vincent Timber Mill (vincenttimber.co.uk)
- Larch timber oiled with white oil by Osmo (osmouk.com)
- Cupboards made by a specialist spraying company (ashleysmithfurniture.com)
- Smart black nickel socket plates by screwfix.com
- Drawer dishwasher by Fisher & Paykel (fisherpaykel.com/uk)

NEED TO KNOW:

- Cost of the house when bought in 2011: £850,000
- Spend: an estimated £210,000 (including architect's fee)
- Value of the family's house now: estimated at £1.4 million

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