

We turned a central London office into our stylish new home

Architect Barbara Weiss and her husband designed every last detail of the Westminster home they have carved from run-down offices. **Ros Byam Shaw** takes a tour



Elegant: beneath Edwardian pendant lamps, Thonet armchairs preside at either end of a table with Corbusier legs. The sweep of white banister is topped by a bronze rail

VISUALISE a house where form and function combine perfectly, where everything you use and everything you love has its place. Architect Barbara Weiss, and her husband, property developer Alan Leibowitz, live in such a house, a beautiful, tall, light home which they have designed to suit themselves, down to bespoke compartments for specific utensils in their kitchen drawers. "We managed just about everything on our wish list, including family pieces and pictures," says Weiss. "We worked it out meticulously."

Their search began in 2004. "I was brought up in Milan, in the centre," says Weiss, who is American-Italian, and still speaks Italian to her three grown-up children. "When Alan and I first met we did up a house in Islington, where we lived for 25 years. I loved it, but wanted to be back at the heart of things."

"We began hunting for an unusual property that could be improved, south of Marylebone, to north of the river, west of Bloomsbury and east of Holland Park. House hunters scooted around taking pictures of run-down buildings. When they came back with pictures of this, we discovered the owners might be willing to sell."

The building, in Westminster, was big, central, and on the corner of two quiet streets. Built as a pub in 1927, it had subsequently been used as offices. Granite cladding and replacement windows disfigured the façade and the interior was a mess of false ceilings and carpet tiles. It wasn't listed but purchase depended on whether they would be allowed to add another storey. "We realised the only way to occupy the building was upside down," says Weiss. "We wanted living space rather than bedrooms at the top where we could get the extra height."

Her elegant plans won the day, and the couple were allowed to stretch the top floor to create an area with a double-height ceiling, plus an enclosed roof terrace, a music room and a balcony office. They were also allowed to replace

the original multi-pane windows with more streamlined Crittall frames. The floor below the combined living room, dining room, and adjacent kitchen is Weiss and Leibowitz's private space: bedroom, dressing rooms, bathroom, and shared office. Down another flight are three bedrooms and bathrooms for visiting children. Down again to the ground floor, a guest suite has been designed for Leibowitz's father, who pays extended visits from Australia.

A top-floor kitchen needed a lift, though you might instead choose to savour the curves of the staircase which hugs the back wall, its pure white sweep of solid banister topped by a snaking bronze rail. The inside of the lift is lined with timo ("poor man's rosewood" says Weiss) and cherry wood, set with leather panels that envelop you in their expensive aroma.

"The materials I use are as important to me as light," says Weiss, who has played with mixing and matching different woods including walnut, elm, cedar, wenge and oak for the bespoke fitted furniture that is one of her trademarks. "The detailing of this house took forever," she adds. "It is detailed to the umpteenth degree."

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Pictures: Rachael A Smith

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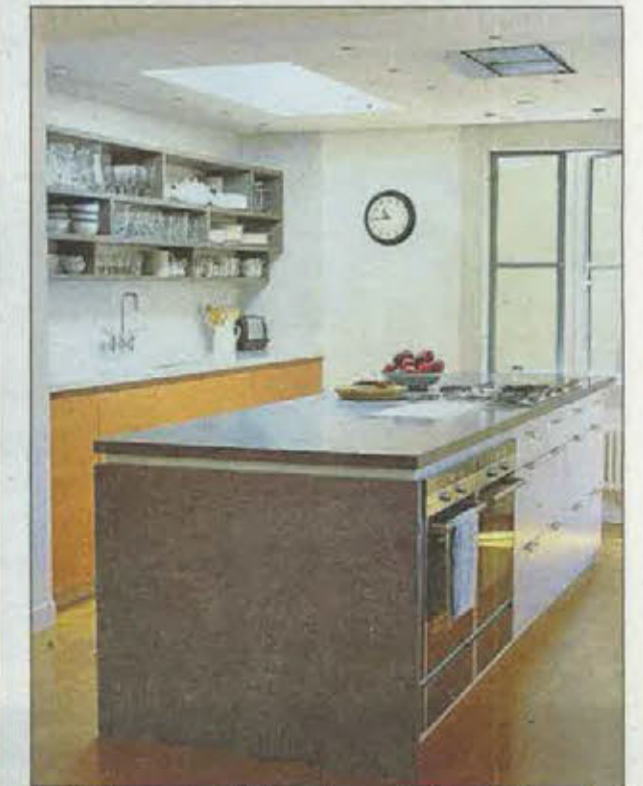
High style: the top-floor open terrace frames the sky with lavender, wisteria and roses



Traditional feel: Crittall windows, Farrow & Ball Charlotte's Locks on the alcove wall and Biedermeier furniture, which Barbara Weiss inherited from her grandparents



Bright's right: colourful chairs contrast with pure white walls



Weighty issue: a specialist engineer solved the problem of supporting kitchen shelves made of basaltina, a volcanic rock