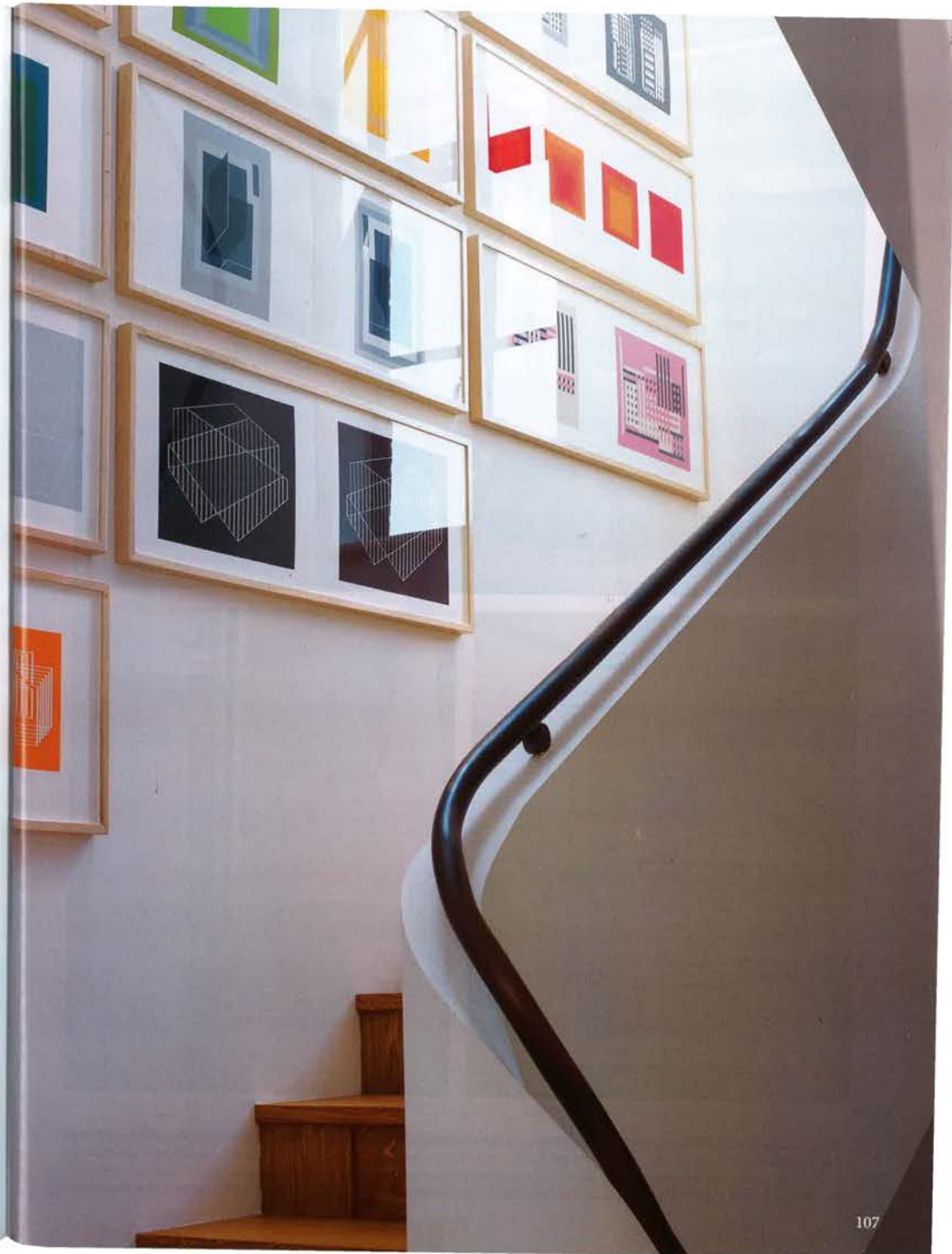




PRIDE OF PLACE

Specifically designed for items such as handbags and cufflinks, bespoke drawers and cubby-holes abound in this converted family home in London. Focus on the fine details has not stopped architect Barbara Weiss from adding an extra storey (and a roof garden) to the plans she drafted with her husband, property developer Alan Leibowitz. With the six-year project

complete, we're 'basking in the huge privilege' of living here, she tells Ros Byam Shaw. Photography: Rachael A. Smith



Previous pages: beneath Edwardian pendant lamps, Thonet armchairs preside at either end of the table, with its Corbusier legs. Top: Barbara inherited the Biedermeier furniture from her grandparents. The orange paint in the alcove is 'Charlotte's Locks' by Farrow & Ball. Above left: the problem of invisibly supporting the kitchen shelves made of basaltina – a volcanic rock – was solved by a specialist engineer. Above right: Barbara recovered their old Cappellini sofa in orange, a favourite colour for interiors. Opposite: patinated by Antique Bronze, the serpentine banister is 'a quotation from Corbusier'



Top: the extra storey allowed space for an enclosed roof terrace, planted by Sammy from Hardy and Perennial, where lavender, wisteria and roses frame an oblong of sky. Sliding doors open onto this private sun-trap from the top-floor music room, and another door opposite leads into a balcony study, which overlooks the living room. Above left: lining the staircase wall are some of a boxed set of lithographs by Josef Albers that Alan bought after they failed to sell at auction. Above right: from the top-floor landing, one can see the bronze rail of the staircase twisting down past four floors

Top: from the balcony study, with its walnut desk and bronze handrail, there is a view through to the roof terrace and the music room beyond, and down into the living room. Barbara describes herself as "obsessed with sunshine", perhaps as a result of growing up in Italy. Above left: folding oak doors across one end of the roof terrace hide a 'Napoleon' barbecue and mini-kitchen. Barbara says they use this space all summer long, soothed by the buzz of bees feeding on the lavender on the roof. Above right: facing a wall of books, an alcove houses the ladder required to reach those on higher shelves



Top: to the right of the Poliform bed, covered with a Kate Bleo blanket, is a cupboard just for handbags. Above left: another Beistemeier table sits in the shared study. The large drawing to the left of the window is by one of Barbara's design heroes, Eileen Gray. Above right: Gareth Davies sourced all the stone and marble in the house, while Arden Hodges lit all the oak floors. 'Aeroplane lights', for nocturnal visits, surround the mirrors. Opposite: in Alan's dressing-room area, an elsewhere, storage in bespoke - it includes drawers for cufflinks and a cubby-hole for the contents of emptied pockets





IMAGINE A HOUSE where form and function combine perfectly. A house with a walnut-wood shelf of precisely the right width and depth for your favourite storage jars, and an elegant alcove into which your grandmother's secretaire slots like a bottle of scent into its expensive packaging. A house where everything you use and everything you love has its place, where the entrance hall has three coat cupboards with enough hooks for every coat, and where there is one cupboard just for handbags, and another for suitcases. In a house like this you could be tidy. You would never waste time looking for a lost anorak. You would always know where to find the corkscrew.

Architect Barbara Weiss, and her husband, property developer Alan Leibowitz, live in such a house, a beautiful, tall, light house, with a clean, contemporary interior which they have designed to suit themselves and their possessions, down to bespoke compartments for specific utensils in their kitchen drawers, and a dressing room for Alan with a cubby-hole into which he can empty his jacket pockets. 'I think we managed just about everything on our wish list, and we found a place for almost all our furniture, including family pieces and pictures,' says Barbara. 'There was a long, long wait between buying in 2007 and moving in nine months ago. We had more than enough time to think about exactly where to put things. We worked it out meticulously, measuring everything to get the storage just right.'

Their search for a new house began in 2004. 'I was brought up in Milan, where we lived right in the centre of the city,' says Barbara, 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, and that is where we lived for 25 years. I loved it, but one morning I emerged from the tube at Green Park and felt I was missing the best of London. Alan had been brought up in South Africa, in a big house in the suburbs, so he was happy, but I wanted to be back at the heart of things. We began hunting but eventually we had to hire professionals. Our brief was for an un-

sual property that could be improved, and the target area was from south of Marylebone, to north of the river, west of Bloomsbury and east of Holland Park. The house hunters scooted around on motorbikes, taking pictures of run-down buildings. When they came back with pictures of this one, Alan looked it up on the land registry and we discovered the owners might be willing to sell.'

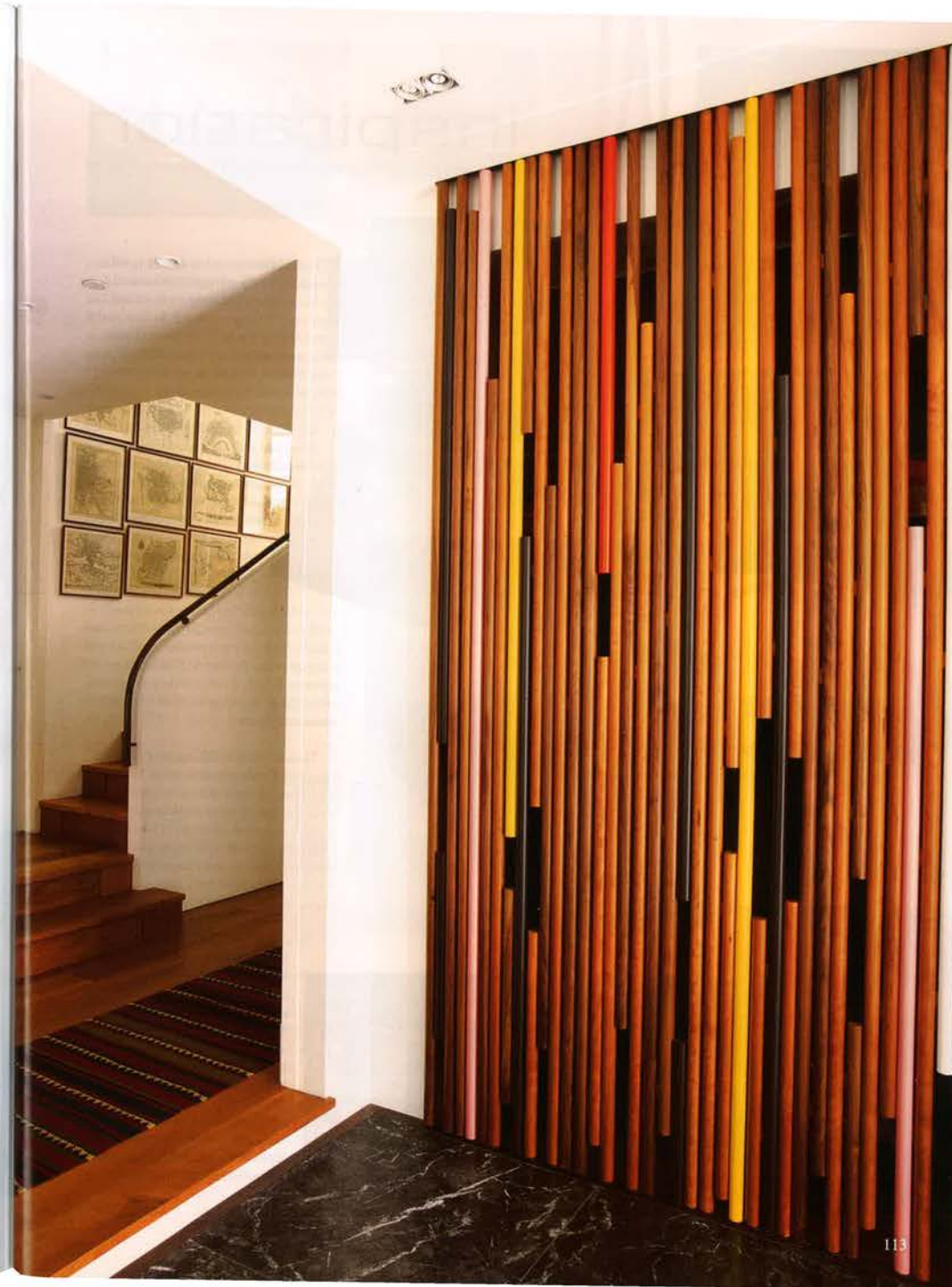
The building was no obvious beauty, but it was big, definitively central and in a commanding position on the corner of two quiet streets. Built as a pub in 1927, it had subsequently been used as offices. Granite cladding and replacement windows disfigured the façade at ground-floor level, and the interior was a mess of false ceilings and carpet tiles. It wasn't listed but purchase depended on change of use and, more crucially, whether they would be allowed to add another storey on top of the existing four. 'We realised the only way to occupy the building was upside down,' says Barbara. 'In our Victorian terraced house in Islington, we were forever bypassing the drawing room. Here, we had the opportunity to live on two adjacent floors, and we wanted living space rather than bedrooms at the top where we could get the extra height.'

Barbara's elegant plans won the day, and they 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 which looks down into the main living room. 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 Barbara and Alan's private space: bedroom, dressing rooms, bathroom and shared office. Down another flight of stairs are three bedrooms and bathrooms for visiting children. Down again to the ground floor, and a guest suite has been designed for Alan's father, who pays extended visits from Australia. This is the floor of the entrance hall and multiple coat cupboards, one of which has decorative sliding doors by their friend, designer Kate Blew, who also advised on colour for the interior design. You have to go down a further flight of stairs to the 'children's den and kitchen' to find the suitcase cupboard, plus a gym, a laundry room, a wine cellar, another bathroom and a small square patio planted with ferns and climbers that will one day cloak the light with greenery.

A top-floor kitchen prompted the design of a lift, although instead you might choose to savour the curves of the staircase that hugs the back wall; its pure white sweep of solid banister is topped by a snaking bronze rail, 'a quotation from Corbusier', who, along with Eileen Gray, is one of Barbara's design heroes. The inside of the lift is lined with etimo ('poor man's rosewood', says Barbara) 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 Barbara, who has played with mixing and matching different woods including walnut, elm, cedar and oak for the bespoke fitted furniture that is a trademark. 'The detailing of this house took forever,' she says. 'It is detailed to the umpteenth degree.'

Nine months in, after all the planning and imagining, the work and the waiting, is there any small sense of anticlimax, like the slump after Boxing Day when you wonder what all the fuss was about? 'No. Absolutely not. The truth is that we love it, and are basking in what a huge privilege it is to live here. It has changed our lives.' Although I am sure they were always tidy ■

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This page: the children's den. Opposite: in the hallway, the screen, by family friend Kate Blew, was inspired by Ugandan scaffolding and hides one of three coat cupboards. The prints hanging on the staircase walls are city plans dating from 1820, published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge