

# RETURN TO GRACE

Chris and Milla Gough-Willetts have achieved a fine balance between restoring period charm and maximising space in their Victorian home

**Details** Ground floor apartment renovation, London  
**Project Cost** £68,000 (£680/m<sup>2</sup>)  
**Designer** Studio Azzurro



Words: Clive Fewins Photography: Winfried Heinz/Judith Wilson, C/O Studio Azzurro

For an architect who specialises in ripping the innards out of flats and small townhouses, and reconstructing sleek, free-flowing interiors, Chris Gough-Willetts has been remarkably restrained in his own ground floor apartment within a large, late-Victorian semi-detached house in Chelsea.

Chris and his wife Milla, who is also an architect, were lucky to chance upon the 100m<sup>2</sup> one bedroom property after a year-long search. "We were very fortunate. It was just what we had been looking for," says Chris. "We had been living locally near our practice in Chelsea and had outgrown our previous small flat. We heard about this run-down apartment from an estate agent we knew and snapped it up for £585,000 as soon as it went on the market."



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**1: A neutral backdrop** Light walls help showcase period features, such as the fire surround, and the timeless furnishings the couple have invested in, including a pair of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chairs (originally designed for the King and Queen of Spain)

**2: Period features** Original shutters, some of which were uncovered from behind plasterboard, together with the bespoke period plaster corning, have been restored to their former glory

**CHRIS AND MILLA'S RENOVATION**

**Construction** Masonry  
**Size** 100m<sup>2</sup>  
**Build Time** Four months  
**Build Route** Self-managed, with main contractor  
**House Cost** £585,000  
**Build Cost** £68,000  
**Value on Completion** £750,000



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**3: A practical step** Extending from the bay window in the master bedroom, the 250mm step adds interest while also providing a place to read. More practically, it conceals a soil pipe — a vital link which enabled a bathroom to be fitted at the rear of the flat

**4: Small but functional kitchen** The new galley kitchen is positioned between the front reception room and rear master bedroom. High ceilings and recessed lighting make the space feel bigger. Accents of bold colour, used throughout the house, continue in here

tank above, but now the full original height of the room and window has been restored.

The other alterations include the removal of 2.2m from the interior wall of the large master bedroom, and the creation of a stud wall to enable a bright modern galley kitchen to be positioned between the front reception room and rear master bedroom.

“It has still left a pretty large bedroom,” Chris says. “It is interesting to reflect that before there was one very large bedroom and two WCs. Now, after some careful refurbishment, we have two bedrooms and, in effect, two full bathrooms.”

The second bathroom is a wetroom that leads off the hall, and also boasts a WC and smart teak basin. The interesting thing is that the couple have managed to pack all this into a space that was previously only occupied by a WC — it is certainly a lesson in how to maximise the potential of small spaces. It has been achieved because the room stands on the site of a staircase that — before the property was converted into four apartments in the 1950s — linked the ground floor and the basement. This allowed scope for the couple to step down the shower tray.

While the work was taking place, Chris and Milla lived in a furnished apartment nearby, allowing Chris

“The project overran... our daughter was born the week after we moved in”

“Similar properties in this part of Chelsea go for £650,000 to £675,000 and have often been butchered: their best internal features are frequently stripped out and replaced with something very ordinary,” says Milla. “We were lucky because the flat was unmodernised. Most of the interior period details were intact, if run down.”

These details included the fine plaster cornices and shutters. “The shutters at the front had been screwed back and covered in places with plasterboard, but they were in perfectly good condition when we uncovered them,” recalls Milla.

As the building is unlisted, the couple’s first thoughts turned to removing the dividing wall between the large reception and dining room at the south-west-facing front, and the even larger bedroom at the rear. “We decided against it for the main reason that it would have run contrary to the style and proportions of the property, particularly as the plaster cornices were, as far as we could see, bespoke designs and not out of a Victorian pattern book — and in rather good condition,” remarks Chris.

Against their usual policy, which is to go for something entirely contemporary, Chris and Milla decided to stick with the large front room and use it very much the way it had been used before.

At the rear, only the plain white walls and modern furnishings give a hint of the radical changes. However, it has been all change here. The existing cramped bathroom and adjacent tiny kitchen have been transformed into a large second bedroom. Previously there was a suspended ceiling with a water

**5: Deceptively small** Mirrors reflect light back into the interiors, while the white walls work hard to make this 100m<sup>2</sup> flat feel much larger than it actually is

**6: Fine finishes** The couple have invested in quality sanitaryware – such as the Helio teak basin from William Garvey – which brings presence to the Victorian interiors. A shower is positioned above a mirrored splashback, which hides the fitting while giving an illusion of space

**7: Natural materials continue** A Carrara marble basin rests easy upon the timber shelf within the main bathroom. Alcoves are an ideal space-saving solution



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to act as project manager and visit the site daily. “In a sense we got it all wrong,” says Chris. “After the experience of renovating our two previous small flats – both of which were more complicated jobs than this one – we always tell our domestic private clients that planning and coordination is the key to refurbishment projects; but we found ourselves in the thick of the work with Milla in the late stages of pregnancy. Needless to say, the project overran by three weeks and Georgina was born a week after we moved in. It was all rather hairy as we were just finishing off two other major projects at the time.”

The cost, excluding decoration and furnishings, worked out at £680/m<sup>2</sup> — remarkable for this area of London. Although the Gough-Willetts were able to obtain a lot of materials at trade price and saved approximately £10,000 in design costs, it shows that even with an expensive home in a highly desirable area, it is still possible to renovate to a high specification, obtain good value for money and add substantially to the value of the property — especially

if you have an eye to spot the potential for reworking tight spaces to maximum effect.

This is the third project Chris and Milla have undertaken for themselves, but certainly not the last. Ideally their next move

would be to buy the basement flat beneath and turn the two floors back into one house with a double-height space at the rear. “At present that does not look likely to happen,” says Chris. “But if it does, we shall be pulling apart a lot of our previous carefully designed and executed work!” 🏠

*“We were lucky this flat was unmodernised... the period details were intact”*

USEFUL CONTACTS: Architects Studio **Azzurro**: 020 7349 7082 Main contractor **E&P and Sons**: 01375 677000 Structural engineer **The Elliott Partnership**: 01922 504700 Stone flooring **Paris Ceramics**: 020 7371 7778 Sanitaryware **Ideal Standard**: 01482 346461; **Czech and Speake**: 0800 919 728; **William Garvey**: 01404 841626 Electric underfloor heating **Enerfoil**: 01887 830638