



DETAILS

Architect WT Architecture,
www.wtarchitecture.com

What Conversion of a former workshop studio and vaulted cellar into a two-bedroom maisonette

Where Edinburgh's New Town

Contractor Inscape Joinery,
www.inscape-joinery.co.uk


Construction time Eight months
(completed 2009)

UNLOCKING THE VAULTS

A mews workshop and the disused cellar below it have been cleverly combined to create a cool, contemporary pad in the heart of Edinburgh's New Town

Words **Caroline Ednie** Photography **Andrew Lee**

Tricky build projects are something of a speciality for Lesley and Brian Knox. Their home in Edinburgh's New Town started life as a small, awkward, trapezoid-shaped gap site, which the couple, with the help of architect Richard Murphy (and following an arduous journey through planning), transformed into an award-winning contemporary mews. Their most recent project may have enjoyed a swifter passage through the planning department, but it was no less of a Herculean task: conjuring a bijou and beautifully imagined two-bedroom ▶



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A lot of glass and mirrored surfaces have been used to ensure that this essentially small space does not feel cramped. The beautiful oak floor (inset with glazed panels) and smooth white walls are a striking contrast with the exposed brickwork of the original cellar arches



maisonette from two completely unrelated (and separately owned) spaces – an abandoned studio room and the subterranean vaulted cellar below it.

The project emerged out of a need for the couple's 16-year-old daughter Ella to have more space. As the family were spending less time in their London base and more in Edinburgh, "Ella decided that her friends in Edinburgh seemed to enjoy their school more than she enjoyed hers in London, so she decided she wanted to come and live here," explains Lesley. "But that meant either we had to listen to Ella and her friends or they had to listen to us. Loud TV and music in an open-plan house just doesn't work!"

Just at the right moment, a 'For Rent' sign popped up across from the family home. Lesley and Brian seized the opportunity and rented the B-listed property (a former silversmith's workshop which was essentially one large room with a loo in the corner), painted it and let Ella move in. Just as they were happily reclaiming their home for themselves again, the owner of the studio decided to sell.

"It was a killer – Ella had been in it just long enough for us all to realise what a great place it was. So we ended up buying it," says Lesley. "There was a cellar directly underneath which belonged to the neighbour. Although ownership issues made it complicated, we bought the cellar too, which is actually bigger than the room above."

The next step, she says, was "to find an architect who would be interested in

doing something fun and challenging with this small project". On the recommendation of Richard Murphy, the Knoxes enlisted the services of Wil Tunnell of South Queensferry-based practice WT Architecture.

"Finding a solution was a heck of a conundrum," says Wil. "Lesley was looking to maximise the potential of the two disjointed floors in order to create a stand-alone property – what you would expect from a small house, really. The idea was to connect the mews workshop and vault below into an intricate maisonette with living spaces on the ground floor and two bedrooms underneath. In order to achieve this, we had to make a series of deep cuts into the vault to gain access and allow light and air into the subterranean spaces.

"This was a real physical and spatial challenge because stone vaults don't lend themselves to being cut into," he continues. "But this was the only option if we wanted to keep the vaults – which, of course, we did. They have value and beauty and we wanted to celebrate the nature of the cellar as a subterranean space. From an architectural point of view, we relished the opportunity, and we had confidence in the contractor, Inscape – they were superb."

The vaults had to be propped up before any excavations could take place above. The brickwork was then removed from the parts of the cellar that would be opened up (mainly a large slot for the stairs), while steel frames propped the stone arches.

"Given the extremely tight dimen-

BEST BIT

"Inscape Joinery did an extremely good job in building on such a small site. We trusted them to cause the minimum of chaos, and they contributed a great deal to solutions"



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Old and new rub shoulders in the simple, functional bathroom, which is sandwiched between the two bedrooms on the lower floor

sions of the space and the restrictions imposed by the existing structural components, it was no small task," continues Wil. "There were no windows at the back of the house and we had to rely on a small opening (a former coal chute, in fact) at pavement level for all our light and air, as well as for access. We've since cut in another window that mirrors the original coal chute and glazed both these openings. They allow light to enter the subterranean space."

The basement now has two bedrooms, with a bathroom in the centre. Natural light filters down to the bathroom via slots between the floor plates, glazed with etched and clear glass. Wall sections and balustrades are also glazed to draw light deeper into the building.

The major structural question of where to position the stairs was cleverly resolved. "Wil came up with the critical idea that the stairs should go right through the middle," says Brian. "They are placed so that the light from the basement is coming at you as you go down the stairs – that way, you don't feel as if you're disappearing into the dark."

The ground-floor level, with a kitchen, dining and living area, is a masterclass in conjuring interconnected space out of a fairly small area. This has been achieved via stepped platforms connecting half-levels, with translucent glazed slots between the platforms to create a feeling of openness.

"One challenge was to ensure the house didn't feel cluttered,"

explains Wil. "We used a lot of glass as we didn't want much separation between the spaces. We also used a lot of mirrors and visual connections. The services and storage have been hidden and the cupboards are tucked away quietly. The architecture is the whole building, not just the structure. There is a lot of interior architecture. For example, in the living area, the floor level changes at seat height, meaning we've effectively created a seating ledge. It's a lot of effort to strip things down and make them as simple as possible."

Nevertheless, this 'complex simplicity' has been achieved beautifully, to the delight of the Knox family, who have since enlivened the space with pieces from their art collection. Key among these are an oil painting by Barbara Rae (who lives in the same street) above the sofa, Cornelia Parker's *Meteorite Lands on London* series on the staircase wall, and Lesley's collection of Islamic pottery and African artefacts.

"My mum's got good taste, so I really like the way the house looks," says Ella, who can now happily make as much noise as she likes with a TV and music system in the basement. She does, however, admit that it was surprising to see the new family bolthole when it first emerged from its reconstruction: "When the building work first started, I could never have imagined it would end up like this. I never thought the space would feel as big as this." ■

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