



I LOVE THE IDEA OF THE KITCHEN BEING THE HEART OF THE HOME but we've barely got room to squeeze around the table.

Q
A
SIDE RETURN
EXTENSION: £55,000

Photographs by Graham Wood



Amanda Varma and family in their newly extended kitchen. Although they only gained a 5ft corridor along what was the external side return, it has totally changed the way the room is used.

THERE'S A VERY EXPENSIVE SOFA sitting along one wall of cardiologist Amanda Varma's west London kitchen. She estimates that it's cost her and her journalist husband Anthony about £30,000. "That was the ultimate starting point for the extension," she says. "I've always liked the idea of the kitchen being the focus of the home, somewhere we can all spend our time together, where the children can play and friends can hang out while I'm cooking lunch or dinner. And being able to fit a sofa in here somehow came to represent all that we wanted to achieve." At first they thought they would just try to reconfigure the existing layout, shifting the boiler into the utility room and replacing the country pine units. But it soon became clear that major work was needed for Amanda's dream to be realised. Like many Victorian terraces, ▶

"a fantastic space"
"it completely changed the way we use the house"
"...extra space, storage and light."

◀ the house had an under-used passageway between their kitchen and the neighbour's party wall, which had become a storage area for sandpits, bikes and other paraphernalia of the couple's two children, Oliver, four, and two-year-old Isabella. Although it was only about 5ft wide, this would provide enough extra room to transform the

lateral wall and putting in some very expensive beam work. "It would probably have cost half as much to just open up sections of the side wall and put up a conservatory type roof, but then it would end up feeling like a very expensive corridor."

Tizer suggesting putting the kitchen down one wall to maximise the play area and putting in a flat glass roof, something he'd done very successfully on several commercial jobs. "This detail was critical," he says, "as it ties the roof into the same rectangular geometry of the rest of the design. A more standard pitched roof might have been easier to build but it would have detracted

from the sense of the new space being a continuation of the rest of the room, and like most other rear extensions of this type it would probably have looked more like a tacked-on afterthought. In a similar way, the

recessed shelf in the side wall mirrors the space between the low and high-level kitchen cabinets. No matter how small the job, as an architect you should always give careful consideration to issues of form, scale, proportion and space. The final detail was full-height folding doors to open on to the garden and again to let in as much light as possible. ▶



The boiler made the sofa out of MDF for £3,000. The Conservatory was £10,000. A window £1,000 to make it look like a window. It cost £55,000 in total.

'The kitchen's north-facing and we always had to have the lights on even in the height of summer'

long, but narrow kitchen into a good family-sized space. So with the help of architect William Tover, Amanda and Anthony set about drawing up plans. Like most jobs such as this, the brief was to create extra space, storage and light. The kitchen's north-facing and we always had to have the lights on, even in the height of summer," says Amanda, "so we wanted to end it up as much as possible." This meant taking out the full length of the



View from the sitting room: the flat glass roof had to be insulated with argon to meet building regulations



says Amanda over the noise of Oliver and Isabella jumping excitedly on the sofa. In fact, she says, it's all surprisingly low maintenance. For example, the limestone worktop turns out to be no such thing, but a man-made stone composite called Caesarstone. "Because limestone is porous, it's a nightmare for staining, but with this stuff you leave Ribena on it all night and clean it off in the morning," she says. Similarly, the satin finish on the units wipes down easily, and when the walls look too grubby, she'll just get the roller out.

'When it rains the water casts great shadows and ripples across the room'

◀ This being London, there was the usual problem finding builders to take on the work. "The first one quoted £140,000," Amanda says with disbelief. "I just looked at him and said, 'That's Alice in Wonderland.' Although we were doing this for ourselves and not to make a profit, local estate agents told us we'd probably put about £50,000 on the value of the house, so we didn't want to stray too far from that. Fortunately friends recommended a local firm, Stella Rossa Builders, who quoted £42,000 for the building work and £5,000 for the purpose-built MDF kitchen, and even offered £7,000 interest-free credit. With architects', surveyors' and engineers' fees, that would take the whole cost to about £55,000. Having obtained party wall agreement (no planning permission was needed as the extension is less than 15 per cent of ground floor area), Stella Rossa put a temporary kitchen in the Varma's sitting room and set to with a sledgehammer.

"At times we felt like we were camping," says Amanda, "but it was good to be on site to keep an eye on things." For example, when they discovered the lay of drains meant the access panel couldn't be moved, the district surveyor insisted that they had an ugly access hatch in their oak floor. But they found that Kahrs make a wooden floor that clicks together without glue. They say you can take it with you when you move. I'm not sure we'd quite want to do that, but it

does mean we can get access to the manhole if needs be – and the main thing is the surveyor's happy." Twelve weeks later, they were able to move back in. Despite the children, they've gone for a sleek, white, minimal look. "Well, you can't give in to them totally, can you?"



In the meantime the whole family is enjoying the extra space. "It's completely changed the way we use the house," says Amanda. "We spend most of our day in here now, especially with summer coming, and I no longer have to worry about what the children are getting up to in the sitting room next door. Even when it's raining it's a fantastic space, with the water casting these great shadows and ripples across the room. It was definitely worth all the effort." ●