i-Build

FEBRUARY 21 - ISSUE 79

www.crossplatformmedia.co.uk

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After 12 years of living in their late-Victorian East Dulwich home, Paul and Lindsay Davies were forced to admit that their kitchen was no longer fit for purpose

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Cooking up a storm

After 12 years of living in their late-Victorian East Dulwich home, husband and wife Paul and Lindsay Davies were forced to admit that their kitchen was no longer fit for purpose. With little room to appreciate the heart of their home and difficult spaces in general, the pair turned to Plus Rooms for help.

As a specialist in improving and enlarging residential properties, Plus Rooms has addressed the Davies' spatial and aesthetic issues, improving the natural flow of the ground floor and increasing sought-after daylighting with an extension that complements the character of the original house with an eye-catching, striking design. Here, i-Build Editor, Rebecca Kemp, talks to Lindsay about the stunning transformation and finds out more about the space the couple lived in for over a decade before deciding to take the home improvement route.

RK: **Tell us why you decided to take on this project?**

LD: All our cupboards were full to bursting, we had no work surface space, and the garden entrance was poky and awkward. The side return had become a dumping ground and was being used as a collective litter tray by all the neighbourhood's cats! To top it off, every kitchen appliance seemed to break at once, so we had to replace them all anyway. It felt like a sign.

RK: **How did you combine the original building's style with the extension?**

LD: Externally, we kept the same style of brickwork, using modern 'aged' reproductions of old London stock bricks which look virtually indistinguishable from the originals. Inside, we wanted to open up the back part of our living room so that it flowed through to the kitchen. We extended the floorboards and stained them, so it looked seamless.

RK: **What was your vision and inspiration?**

LD: We had a Pinterest board that changed over time – we started off wanting to replicate our original kitchen (which had quite a 'cottagey' vibe), but we kept finding ourselves drawn to more dramatic, darker colours. We found a black freestanding cabinet we liked, and the rest of the kitchen's look followed on from that. ▸

RK: **How long did it take to gain planning permission?**

LD: It did take a while, though I don't remember exactly how long. Plus Rooms guided us through the whole process.

RK: **Were there any challenging aspects to the project and build?**

LD: The most challenging thing was living and working at home while it was all going on. I'm a Book Editor, and I work from home most of the time, so there was no getting away from the noise and chaos. The builders did a good job trying to protect the rest of the house. However, it was still very challenging spending three months cooking on a little two-ring electric stove balanced on top of a makeshift work surface in our living room, with all of our stored food covered in a layer of dust!

In terms of the actual build, the hardest thing was getting the huge steel beams through the house. I thought the builders were going to have to saw our bannisters off at one point or dismantle our original Victorian sash window in the living room (over my dead body!). Luckily, they managed to get them in, but that was a hugely stressful moment.

RK: **Why did you choose to work with Plus Rooms?**

LD: Two of our friends had done kitchen extensions with Plus Rooms, so we knew they were good. Both friends had used a particular build team, so we requested to have the exact same one – we waited until they were free as we wanted to go with a team that had been personally recommended. We liked the fact that Plus Rooms assigned a project co-ordinator to oversee the project, so we had someone with technical knowledge we could go to if we had any problems.

RK: **How long did the project take?**

LD: The main build was pretty much completed to timeframe – eight or nine weeks if I remember rightly. We started on 1st April 2019, and we were in by July. But there's always a 'long tail' of little jobs at the

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end of any build, so I think we still had people coming in to finish bits and pieces in August and even September.

RK: **Did you remain within the original budget?**

LD: We deliberately overbudgeted for everything and had a contingency built in, so we were technically within budget. Still, we spent an eyewatering amount! The basic build was what we were initially quoted (£43,800), but there were lots of extras, e.g. £2k for removing a chimney breast, £3800 to raise the steels into the ceiling, £7k for the doors/windows etc. The main building costs, including a party wall surveyor, fees, plumbing and electrics, new boiler etc. came to just over £75k. Then there was the cost of the finishing team and all the fixtures and fittings on top.

RK: **How does the extension respond to the landscape?**

LD: I'm thrilled that we've managed to make accessing the back garden much easier. It's a cliche, but it really has opened it up and brought the outside inside. I've had so much pleasure sitting and looking out over the garden over the last year.

RK: **Is the finished space everything that you hoped it would be?**

LD: Yes. It's quite a pressure to design your 'dream kitchen' from scratch, having never done it before, but we'd spent a lot of time planning it, and in the end, it was exactly what we wanted. I don't think there's anything I would change.

RK: **Have you found a change in the way you use your kitchen?**

LD: We all spend so much more time in it. It's a much more sociable space. And it's been a lifesaver during lockdown as my husband has been using it as his base to work from home. ▸

RK: What do you love most about it?

LD: Sitting on the sofa in the morning with a coffee, looking out at the garden and having a few minutes of quiet before the day starts. That was the image in my mind that kept me going throughout the difficult times in the build. You literally couldn't see the garden from our old kitchen unless you were standing at the sink; now it's always in our sight-line, and I get so much pleasure from it.

RK: Is there anything that you would have done differently?

LD: We spent a lot of time discussing the height of the floor with the builders, but somehow we still managed to get it wrong, and they had to cut down some doors in the hall as a result. I still don't quite understand how that happened. But it wasn't the end of the world.

RK: Would you do the whole thing again?

LD: Not in any hurry, thank you! I'm very happy to take some time to enjoy what we've got. That said, I'm delighted we did it, so no regrets on that score.

RK: What advice would you offer to anyone looking to renovate?

LD: Go with people who are recommended to you personally. Having a good build team and project manager made all the difference to us. Also, it's worth micro-planning how you're going to use your kitchen. We spent ages figuring out exactly how we wanted to arrange the cupboards, where we would stand when emptying the dishwasher, what our view would be when we were sitting on the sofa etc. and drawing out different configurations of how the kitchen would be laid out until we got it right. Where will the cling film go? Where will the cat's food bowl live? Is there enough space to get past easily if the dishwasher is open? It's all that attention to detail that's paid off in how we use the kitchen now. ●

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