

THIS PAGE The striking 'Convex Globe' lantern from Jamb provides a focal point in the entrance hall, while the rug is one of several in the house from Robert Stephenson. OPPOSITE At the back of the house, a paved terrace adjoins the lower-ground floor and there is a glass-walled balcony that extends from outside the kitchen around to the drawing room, plus a terrace outside the main bedroom above. The garden was designed by Colin Nicholson for Leveson Landscape



# *open to all*

An unpromising cluster of trade-union offices and bedsits in south London has been transformed by Cindy Leveson into spacious rooms, which are elegant but practical for a young family

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Some people, including the owners of this house in south London, are blessed with incredible vision. When they first viewed it, it was a jumble of trade-union offices and bedsits, with an ugly basement gym and a car park at the back. Nonetheless, it took them just two minutes to decide that it was exactly what they had been looking for. Perhaps a sense of desperation also inspired their decisiveness. The couple's fourth child had just arrived and their mews house a short walk away was beginning to feel cramped.

When they asked interior designer Cindy Leveson to help them transform the muddle of tiny rooms into the spacious and elegant family house it is today, they discovered she wasn't too short on vision either. 'As I walked through the front door into a small room with a poky staircase ahead of me, my first thought was, if they do nothing else, they should take out the walls the whole way up the stairs,' Cindy explains. 'I think the owners' brave decision to do so has really made the house.' This single change instantly allowed huge amounts of light into the space and added drama to what is now a show-stopping entrance hall that is perfect for parties.

Cindy then turned her attention to the rest of the 8,300-square-foot property which overlooks a leafy square. 'What Cindy appreciated early on was that we wanted a family home that wasn't too precious,' explains the owner. 'I didn't want a show house, but something classic and also functional. Nowhere was to be off limits and the children should be able to bounce on the sofas.' Today the property has the feel of a country house despite being just a short walk from a Tube station.

They were lucky that the house was one of the few in the square that was not listed. The small rooms were untangled to create generously proportioned spaces that have been enhanced by simple details. One of Cindy's main tasks was to put the character back into the building. Cornicing and skirting boards were replaced, while new architraves were designed and installed. Only the shutters in the dining room are original. With the reordering completed, the house began to take shape.

In the newly enlarged entrance hall, doors lead to the dining room at the front of the house and the drawing room at the back, which overlooks the garden. While this is a fairly standard configuration for a house of its period, earlier works have provided an unusual twist. Both of these rooms adjoin the kitchen, which runs alongside them and spans one side of the house. This extra-wide layout is the result of the kitchen being in what was originally part of the next door property. Two windows were added on either side of the cooker to add extra light to the room, which also has access to a balcony, ideal for summer dining.

There are five bedrooms on the two upper floors, each decorated in light colours and pretty textiles – a de Le Cuona paisley in the master bedroom and an airy Colefax and Fowler leaf print in another. Antique rugs add to the comfortable, lived-in feel. In the basement, there is space for a playroom, utility room, an office and – surely to the envy of their London friends – a flower room. There is also a self-contained flat for the children's nanny in the former coach houses.

Apart from a few pieces brought here from their previous house, the owners started from scratch with furniture.



OPPOSITE FROM TOP A painting by Tim Kent hangs above a Forties sideboard in the dining room. The ikat curtains in the drawing room complement the Claremont 'Cunard' fabric on the sofa. THIS PAGE FROM TOP The former coach houses are now a garage, shed and flat for the nanny. Cindy designed the kitchen, which was built by Holloways of Ludlow





**THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE**  
**FROM TOP** The main staircase was built by Excel Stairs. In the main bedroom, an antique dressing table from Guy Drenner is paired with a Hepplewhite stool. The fabric on an antique chair from The French House picks out the pinky hues of the marble bath surround in the main bathroom. **OPPOSITE** Colefax and Fowler's 'Fernwood' wallpaper is used in a child's bedroom

Fortunately for Cindy, the couple knew what they liked and were very decisive. 'We were quite like-minded in our tastes, so I would often put together things I might choose if it was my house and find that we agreed,' she says. 'It works for them now, and I don't think the design will date.'

It wasn't all plain sailing, though. The ikat curtains in the drawing room are inspired by a fabric by Robert Kime. Sadly, he couldn't provide enough fabric to make them so, having already started decorating the room, Cindy found a man called Aziz in Uzbekistan who promised he could make something very similar. Samples went back and forth, never quite matching the original.

'He sent through one that looked very pretty – though different – and so the order went in,' says Cindy. 'Because ikat is made of very narrow widths, we needed 98 metres to make these curtains. The fabric was shipped straight to the curtain maker who rang me to say she had good and bad news. I opted for the bad, as I felt that it couldn't get any worse and I had already had months of sleepless nights over it. She said that the fabric was a completely different colour to the sample, but the good news was that it was ten times better.'

Since the family moved in three years ago, they have used every room in the house, though there is little evidence to suggest that an army of small children races through it on a daily basis. What is obvious is that Cindy has achieved exactly what they were hoping for. As the owner simply puts it, 'It's perfect' □

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