

CONFIDENTIAL KITCHEN

London's Threefold Architects transforms a Highbury kitchen from backroom relic to centre of the social scene.

Words **Jennifer Croll** Images **Charles Hosea**

In North London, the only sight more prevalent than kebab shops is row houses. The hilly residential streets are lined with thousands of these nearly-identical red-brick beauties, which are long and narrow with, frequently, two or more storeys. Built for an era when hired help was cheap and servants often lived in the family home, the layout for every row house was similar: bedrooms on top (for the sake of propriety), washroom outdoors (well, it was really an outhouse), kitchen tucked away in the basement or the back (cooking was for servants, and not to be observed), and tranquil reception rooms for entertaining guests on the main floor. Steep stairs created a proper division of space, and presumably gave the hired help a good workout.

Since these days most people don't have the benefit of servants, but couldn't do without conveniences like plumbing and electricity, many row houses have been

updated for modern realities. But they still bear the limitations of their original plans. Backroom kitchens have been taken over by hungry and self-sufficient residents, and washrooms have moved indoors, often in cramped and slightly awkward configurations. Grassy back yards, no longer home to outhouses, stretch out lazily behind homes. The servants' quarters have been adapted for other uses, such as storage, and those dauntingly precipitous stairs render gym passes unnecessary for many homeowners.

David Nicholls and his young family recently moved into one of these 19th-century gems in Highbury, North London. And while most of the century-old house worked well for them with only subtle restorations, there was one room that just didn't serve their needs: the kitchen. The modern kitchen is the

complete antithesis of what the Victorians wanted from their cooking space. While Victorians tucked the kitchen away to spare refined guests the smells and sights of cooking, the Nicholls (like most of us, nowadays) consider the kitchen a social nexus. Preparing food and consuming it is a social ritual, one that can involve both family and friends, so long as they fit into the room. Which can be difficult in a kitchen designed to be inconspicuous and as far removed from the living spaces of a home as possible. And so the Nicholls brought in up-and-coming architecture firm Threefold to transform the space. There had already been an attempt to update the kitchen in the 60s, an extension running to a garden room, all of which had fallen into sad disrepair. "The kitchen was essentially in the corridor running from the house to the garden room," explains Threefold's Matt Driscoll. "The connection into the back of the existing house created a very dark, uninviting dining room. The extension was poorly insulated, and with leaks in the roof and widening cracks in the external structure, good only for demolition."

Threefold's solution was dramatic without being aesthetically shocking. They didn't just renovate the Nicholls' kitchen: they completely blew the doors off it. The old, 60s solution is gone, and in its place is a statement-making extension. "They wanted it to be simple, clean, functional, unprecious, but beautiful," explains Driscoll. Jutting out into the back yard along the border of the old garden wall, the new kitchen is a long, bright gallery with huge windows and vaulted skylights that both let in the milky London sunlight and draw outsiders to come inside and enjoy this culinary enclave. The inside space is all simplicity

in an eye-opening white. A long polished concrete counter sweeps down one side of the room ("The perfect surface for pastry," observes Driscoll) while open ceiling-mounted cupboards display a seductively colourful variety of culinary tools and miscellaneous edibles, all designed to tempt us into cooking, and make it easy for us to enjoy it. And, this being a family kitchen, there's enough room for children to "whizz about on the trikes," says Driscoll. "The space becomes a big playroom for them. The floor is from robust asphaltic tiles from Germany, easy to clean, and the underfloor is heated, so great for the kids to crawl around on." And, once the little ones have scampered off to bed, the long wooden dining table below the vaulted skylight is a perfect place for moonlit formal entertaining.

The new kitchen may be gorgeous and modern, but it's not at all jarring within the historical context of the home. The simple steel walls are clad in reclaimed London stock bricks, matching the bright new space to the original row house exterior. The pitch of the new roof flatteringly mimics that of the main building. The long arm of the kitchen reaches out into the backyard, making the garden more dynamic and integrated with the home's living space. And the natural light from the kitchen spills into the front rooms of the house, brightening them and inviting residents to do something very un-Victorian: move freely between reception rooms and cooking space. The final proof of the kitchen's integration with the home may be the way those mouth-watering cooking smells waft from room to room, beguiling everyone with an appetite to come gather and talk and eat in a room that is, gladly, no longer a secret.

