

Property

A HOME THAT STOPS THE TRAFFIC!

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The modern section of Willowbank, Chorlton.

‘People have been driving past our house, reversing, and getting out to take pictures!’ laughs Sonia Pabla-Thomas. Passers-by have been intrigued to see the futuristic-looking section of the Victorian house – the juxtaposition of old and new is striking.

Originally built in 1886, the property on Manchester Road was occupied for decades by an eccentric householder who filled the garden with items such as a cannon, Greek statues, a Buddha, and several vintage cars.

‘They’ve been asking us what we’ve been doing with the ‘cannon house’,’ says Sonia, who adds that its quirkiness was one of the factors that drew her to it.

As it was derelict for several years, after the former owner died, Sonia, an architect, and husband Neil Thomas, an engineer, had to gut and rebuild the old house, while also adding a large, modern extension.

‘The roof was crumbling and the floors were all up and down, and some of the internal beams weren’t properly attached,’ says Sonia.

‘But we’ve saved what we could and brought it up to modern standards.’ As you view the house from the road, the white new section makes it stand out from the other properties around it.

There’s a large detached red-brick pub at one end of the road, a church at the other, and a few red-brick houses between. A nursing home stands opposite.

The property itself is like a tale of two halves: a renovated Victorian villa stands next to a modernist construction with a cantilevered balcony which Sonia describes as espousing ‘gravity-defying structural gymnastics’.

The Victorian house has white rendered walls, modestly-sized windows and two double chimney pots, while the new section has huge windows.

Entering the plot via iron-work gates and a cobbled driveway, a restored gas lamp hugs one corner of the old section.

A Victorian black and white tiled porch gives way to a reception area with relaid authentic parquet flooring.

And the dining room has a lovely old iron and stone hearth, while stained glass panels top some of the windows.

Perhaps the crowning glory in the old part of the house is the bathroom.

With a high ceiling and large white tiles on the floor, an egg-shaped bath stands in the middle.

A huge glass panel stands behind it to create a wet-room shower area. Unusually, an antique wooden table holds a modern sink, while a large ornate mirror and glass chandelier add some opulence. It looks like the sort of room you wouldn't dare make a mark in for fear of spoiling the effect.

Sonia and Neil bought the property, which is in Chorlton's conservation area, two years ago for £490,000.

After gaining planning permission, they have spent eight months and around £400,000 on construction.

Although there are still some finishing touches to be done and the garden to landscape, they have had it valued at £1m.

They have called the house Willowbank and have pooled their skills in creating a home suitable for their three children aged under six, and Neil's 19-year-old son from a previous relationship.

Sonia, 38, worked for a number of architect firms before setting up her own practice in Didsbury three years ago, called Space A+P.

Neil runs a company called Atelier One which creates huge moveable staging for acts such as Take That, U2 and Madonna, and has recently constructed a multi-million-pound botanical garden in Singapore.

He is also a lecturer at the Yale School of Architecture in the USA.

To contrast the painstaking work in securing the old house while rebuilding it, the modern extension went up in eight days. Prefabricated wooden panels with a steel structure are added to with large windows, including one which is nearly six metres high.

Its bold, square design includes a cantilevered balcony and a grass-roof play area.

A large white kitchen has an island with corian worktops; there are three sinks, two integrated

ovens and microwave along with a plate warmer.

The kitchen and living room have a seamless white resin floor with under-floor heating.

There are five bedrooms and a separate playroom across the two sections of house, and environmentally friendly aspects are a recurring theme in the home.

Insulation on the outside of the house goes further than building regulations require; there are solar panels; a heat recovery system which redistributes residual heat; and highly efficiency glazing.

Juggling motherhood with running a business and overseeing the renovation, has not been easy, Sonia admits.

“It’s been hard work, but we’ve had a great team around us.

“This was a beautiful old house but needed a lot doing to it.

“ It would have been cheaper to demolish it and build a new one, but we wanted to save it.

“We see it as giving the story of this house a new chapter.”

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