

BACK FROM THE DEAD

A remarkable restoration project has given a near-collapsing Georgian townhouse a new lease of life

Photography Sean Begley Words Judy Diamond

Estate agents love to talk about 'kerb appeal' – the idea that potential buyers can be won over by a house's appearance before they've even crossed the threshold. But not every property makes a good first impression. In fact, when Mary-Anne and Riccardo Gallo first saw their Edinburgh home, you'd have forgiven them for hurrying past and not looking back. "You could tell before you'd even set foot in it that the property had been neglected for decades," remembers Mary-Anne.

If the exterior of this B-listed Georgian townhouse was bad, the inside was a whole lot worse. Mary-Anne's description of it as "a complete wreck" hardly does it justice: "It had rising damp, beetle infestation and woodworm. There was evidence of water ingress throughout. The ceilings were falling down and there was dry rot in the roof joists. Some of the fireplaces were boarded up. The floorboards in the back bedroom were completely rotten. The whole house was quite literally falling apart."

Rather than making a sharp exit, the pair looked closer. They'd been searching for a home with period features and classical proportions, and this house, under the mildew and cobwebs, oozed such qualities. "We knew that we could do something special with it," says Mary-Anne.

She and Riccardo both worked in IT, as an analyst and a business architect respectively, but they shared a passion for property renovation. They had worked on a couple of projects together but were looking ▶



DETAILS

What A three-storey townhouse
Where Grove Street, Edinburgh





for something they could live in themselves with their growing family. This three-storey wreck on the fringes of the West End, so dilapidated that it was on the Buildings At Risk Register, and described bluntly as ‘uninhabitable’ by the Home Report, was – somehow – going to be their dream home. “We were excited and terrified in equal measure,” she laughs.

In order to fund the project, they first of all had to sell their small two-bedroom house and rent a flat for themselves and their toddler daughter. The couple took on the management of the whole build and the design. Mary-Anne was responsible for design, costs, fixtures and finishings. Riccardo was more involved in the execution of the development. “He is an absolute perfectionist,” says his wife, “whereas I enjoy the overall vision of the project. We found that our project-

management experience in IT was totally transferrable to the challenges of the renovation – it felt very natural to us.”

The year-long renovation got underway in 2012, starting with a complete rip-out. As their funds began to dry up, though, Riccardo had to spend every evening and weekend working alongside the tradesmen. His wife was now heavily pregnant with their second child, but that didn’t stop her visiting every day, in her role as project manager, to inspect the site and make sure everything was progressing to plan.

She was also busy working out what their new home would look like, trying to come up with a layout that would suit family life while still being sympathetic to the building’s history. “I worked closely with Listed Building Consent on the architectural detail so that it was accurate and sympathetic ▶

[This page and opposite] The basement level has been given over to a large, open-plan kitchen-dining-living area. Mary-Anne designed the kitchen using units from Oceans Kitchens. White quartz worktops and a pale tiled floor make use of the light that filters in from the garden. Built-in seating at the window and around the dining table serves as extra storage. The furnishings are a mix of high-street pieces (John Lewis glass table, Laura Ashley chandelier and Ikea stools) and hand-finished upholstery, such as the Romo cushions and the dark Clarke & Clarke linen that covers the built-in seats





[Below] The lower-level hallway is illuminated in part by a huge plate-glass window into the kitchen. **[Top left]** Mary-Anne added LED strips to her bespoke shelving. **[Above]** The cupola has been beautifully restored. **[Opposite]** The family spend most of their time in the basement living area, so this corner had to be comfortable. The tweed chair, from Time & Tide in North Berwick, with its Romo cushion, is a favourite place to sit by the Stovax wood-burner



to the property's heritage," she says. "For a long time it took over my life and was all I could think about."

Getting the aesthetics right was one thing; but, with a three-year-old and a baby on the way, Mary-Anne knew her design had to be practical and comfortable as well. Everything, she decided, had to have a function. Insulation, double-glazing and a highly efficient Stonecraft gas fire were all specified early on. The basement was transformed from a cold, dark series of poky rooms into a large open-plan kitchen-living space, with a utility room, WC and cloakroom. This relaxed family area has a contemporary feel, while there is an understated elegance in the more formal rooms on the floors above.

Storage has been a key consideration in every part of the house – there is a dedicated space for everything, to keep the rooms clutter-free. Mary-Anne designed window seats and seating around the dining area which doubles as storage. The children's toys can be whisked out of sight whenever required. The utility area is home to huge wardrobes, where most of the family's clothes are kept. "I didn't want big monolithic wardrobes in the bedrooms, and didn't want to compromise the Georgian architecture with built-in wardrobes," she explains.

She was equally resourceful when it came to the lighting, aware of the key role it plays in creating atmosphere. A mixture of soft LEDs, under-cabinet lighting and feature lights bring ▶



the house to life. Riccardo designed a scheme to light the cupola, to show off its restored grandeur.

The flooring choices are practical too, with tiles in the basement, marble in the hallway and extra-thick carpets upstairs for warmth. Attempts were made to restore the floorboards in the living room, but these were beyond repair. Unable to find wide floorboards off the shelf to replace them, they ended up buying untreated wide oak planks and staining them a rich chocolate colour.

They moved in just after their son was born, in late 2013, accompanied by barely enough furniture to fill one room. "We only had our beds and a sofa from our last house – we didn't even have carpets," recalls Mary-Anne. "We'd spent most of our budget on the restoration, and I didn't want to rush things, so I slowly went about buying pieces of furniture."

Despite such spartan beginnings, the family felt instantly at home, spending most of their time in the spacious open-plan kitchen and living area. Its underfloor heating and lower ceiling height make it cosy all year round, and opening on to the garden makes it bright. The kitchen, from Oceans Kitchens, was carefully planned and designed by Mary-Anne. The large island is ideal for informal eating, and as a vantage point for keeping an eye on the children in the garden. White quartz worktops and a smoked glass splashback add a touch of glamour. The living area, with its L-shaped sofa, is focused around a Stovax wood-burner, and the whole space flows thanks to its neutral palette and warm grey walls.

Up on the ground floor, furnishing the sitting room was trickier, and it took time to find the right pieces, at the right price, for such an impressive space. Mary-Anne ended up getting some of her best buys from eBay and auction houses, particularly Edinburgh's Ramsay Cornish.

There are extravagances here too – mahogany sideboards from Italy in the sitting room, glamorous Emperador marble in the guest bedroom en-suite, and some seriously luxurious fabrics throughout, but everything was chosen with an eye to durability. "I wanted the house to be comfortable, so I focused on adding lots of texture and accessories, but the materials were chosen for hard-wearing practicality."

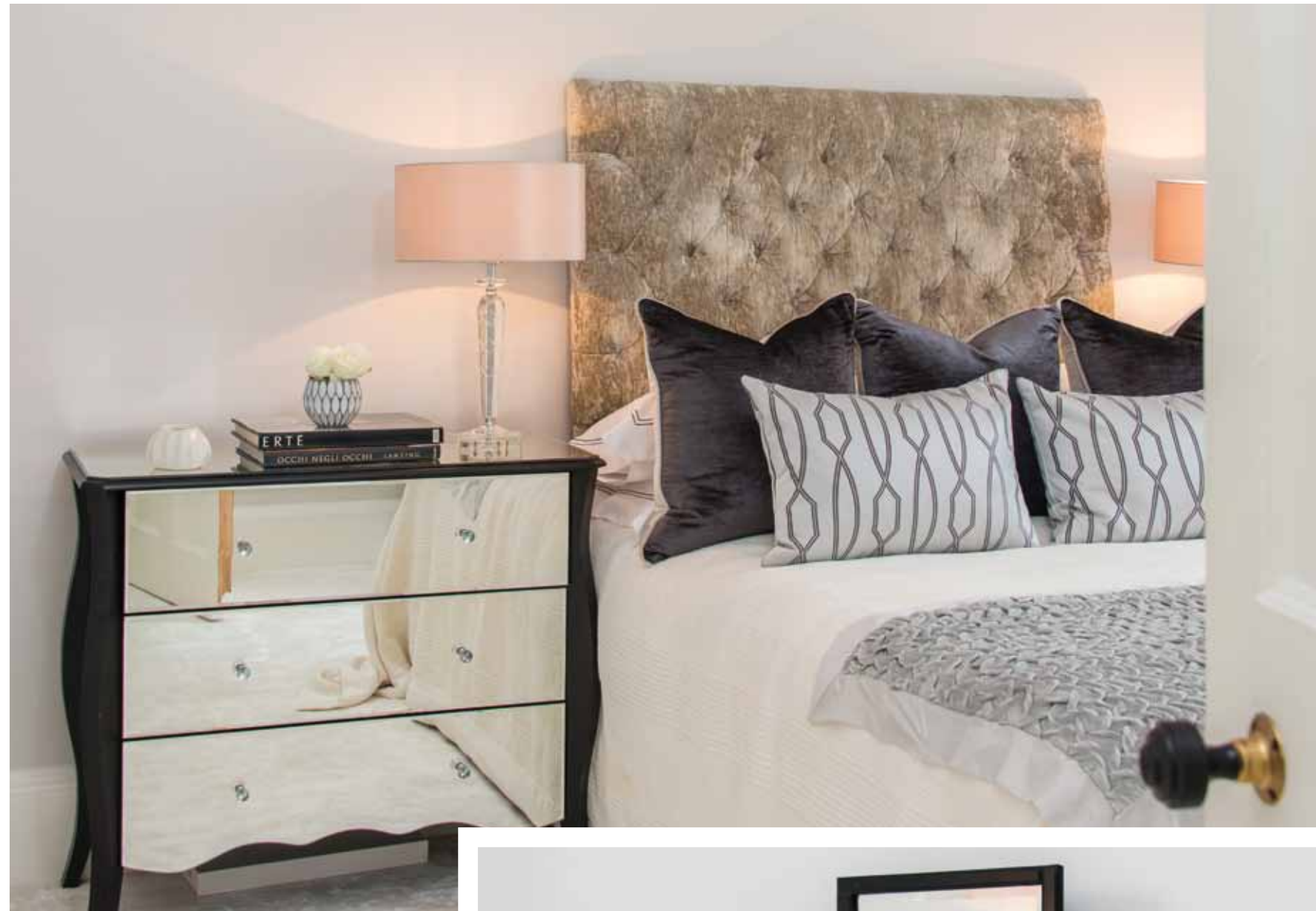
Keeping such a careful grip on the finances was crucial to the success of such a large and complicated project and the key reason why it came in on budget. "It helped that we both have project- ▶



[Top left] Elegant ironwork suits the stairs' graceful curve. [Top right] A palette of warm gold, grey and navy brings a richness and sophistication to the living room, with faux silk wallpaper from John Lewis and a real silk rug adding extra elegance. The sofa is from Sweetpea & Willow, the sideboards (on either side of the Stonecraft fire) were sourced in Italy, and the lamp bases were an eBay bargain, now topped with Heathfield shades. [Above, left] The chair and mirrored table were both internet finds. [Above, right] The curtains are a faux silk from Sanderson – a practical option that won't fade



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[Opposite page] The guest bedroom and its en-suite bathroom on the ground floor - a relaxing haven for family visitors. Mary-Anne specified the niches in the wall of Emperador marble wall. [This page] This bedroom on the top floor is full of luxurious touches - Zoffany silver paint, a Laura Ashley headboard and a Sweetpea & Willow dressing table



INTERIORS

[Right] The sunny back garden was just as in need of attention as the house. Now, after 15 skips-worth of soil, shrubbery and weeds have been removed to clean it up and level it out, it is a well-used play area for the children. **[Below]** The master en-suite is clad in Calacatta marble from Surface Tiles, balanced by plain quartz on the floor



management experience and were able to schedule tasks, handle deadlines and monitor the figures.”

Mary-Anne is delighted with the results of their efforts. “It has been amazing to see my vision come to life,” she acknowledges. In fact, she found it so rewarding that she has set up her own firm, Gallo and Gallo, to do more interiors projects, and has already completed her first job, at The Shore in Leith. Her best advice for anyone who’s tempted to take on a wreck of their own is to make sure you have the right people on board. “We were so lucky with our tradesmen,” she says. “You can have the best materials, but you need to get the right people to install them.”

She and Riccardo were also lucky to have had understanding neighbours; despite the noise and mess of a year of renovations, they couldn’t have been more supportive. “They were overjoyed that we were going to bring the house back to life,” smiles Mary-Anne. “When we moved in, our next-door neighbour Patricia, who’s a historian, gave us with a folder containing the entire history of the house – it turns out that William McGonagall, the famously terrible poet, lived here at the end of the 19th century.”

Would the author of ‘The Tay Bridge Disaster’ have composed better verse had he been writing at the Gallos’ white quartz island? Probably not. But he might just have been too content with his beautiful surroundings to bother the muse at all. ■