



TRANSFORMATION:
The Nook today,
left, before work
began, above, and
in progress, right.

An ideal HOME

Three years ago, The Nook comprised a disused and dilapidated bakery and baker's cottage. Now, thanks to Cambridge architect Richard Owers, the two have become one – forming the most fabulous family home. Alice Ryan visits a house with heart and soul.

Pictures by Keith Jones

It's fair to say The Nook isn't in the most auspicious of spots. Hidden away behind a parade of shops, accessed by a cut-through, it's an island in a sea of car parking.

But – and there's something truly magical about this – step within the confines of the house and you'd never know you were encircled by Tarmac. You're transported to a totally different place.

And it's not like you're hemmed in, closed off from the outside; quite the contrary. Thanks to dual-aspect floor-to-ceiling glass doors, the main living space opens right up, on to courtyard gardens front and back.

Sit at the kitchen table and, above the strategically positioned courtyard walls, all you can see is the birds in the trees and the clouds in the sky (today they're fluffy little white ones). It's incredibly clever.

"The views are carefully curtailed," admits owner and architect Richard Owers, with a smile. "When you complete a project, there's usually a sense of 'I should have done this' and 'I wish I'd done that', but that's actually not the case here. I think it's sort of perfect."

When Richard first viewed the property, back in the autumn of 2010, it was a far cry from the dream home you see today. Comprising a

disused bakery and detached two-up, two-down cottage – the buildings now adjoin, thanks to a nifty wood-clad extension – the site was, concedes Richard, somewhat aesthetically challenged.

"The bakery was completely empty, save for the cobwebs; it basically looked like a garage inside," he explains. "And the cottage, which had been rented out for some time, was pretty neglected."

"But as soon as I walked in I started doing that architect thing: waving my arms around and saying 'This is fantastic! There's so much potential – never a good idea if you want to get a good deal from the estate agent..."

blank canvas

"I think my wife, Susanne, seriously thought I was mad. But I could see that it ticked so many boxes, not least the south-facing aspect; nothing beats that natural light."

Richard had begun house-hunting in Cambridge with an investment property in mind. With a small sum left over from the sale of a London flat, he wanted to find a fixer-upper that could be sold on at a good profit – which would act as deposit on a 'forever home' for his family; he and Susanne have two children, Freddie, 11, and Tilly, 8.

"But I realised right away that I wanted this place for us," he says. "I just had to work out how to do it..."

The two existing buildings were ripe for conversion into a contemporary family home, explains Richard: the "blank canvas" of the bakery would readily translate into an open-plan kitchen, dining and living space, while the more compact rooms in the adjacent cottage were ideal bedrooms.

Director of NRAP in Cambridge, Richard says his passion for buildings is partly inherited: "My uncle is an architect. I wasn't really aware what a big influence he's been until – at the age of 30, about to do my final exams and losing my nerve – I told my mum I was having a crisis of confidence. »





» “She reminded me about a piece of writing I did when I was 7, in which I said ‘I’ve wanted to be an architect since I was 4’ and then talked about my uncle. . . There it was in black and white: I’ve wanted to do this all my life.”

Richard’s uncle has, albeit unwittingly, also made his mark on the fabric and fixtures of The Nook: “It happened subconsciously, but now I realise that his house in Stapleford had timber cladding and exposed brickwork, both of which I’ve used here. Even the green carpet, which we’ve got up the stairs, is like the one he had in his office.”

Working within a tight budget and time constraints – “we couldn’t afford to pay for two houses for long” – Richard wasted no time drawing up plans, and building work began the minute he got the keys. “The planning permission hadn’t come through, so it was either brave or foolish,” says Richard. “But we were in three months later.”

all white

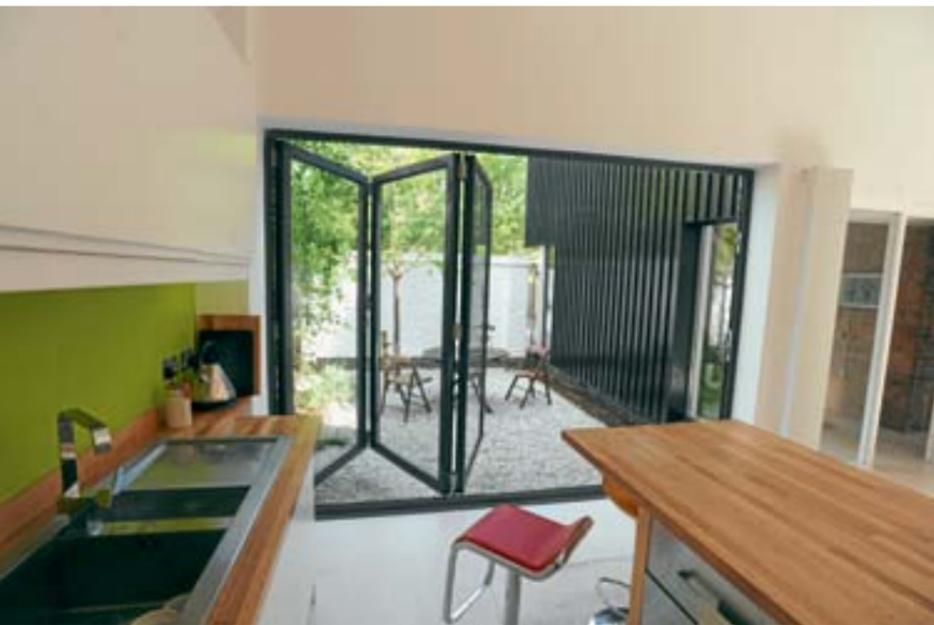
At NRAP, some 50 per cent of Richard’s work is residential; his expertise shines throughout The Nook.

The extension linking house to bakery, though only a few metres wide, makes all the difference to the finished property. Containing the lobby, staircase and galleried landing – the latter spacious enough to accommodate a writing desk and chair – it creates a natural link between the two halves of the house, and prevents the hallway from eating into the living space.

“Having lived in a flat in London and a semi round the corner, with the four of us rushing around in the mornings trying to get out to work and school, I know narrow corridors are where elbows knock and nerves start to jangle, so I wanted the stairs and hallway to have some space,” adds Richard.

The hall, with its one exposed-brick feature wall (which used to be the exterior wall of the cottage; a nice nod to the history of the place), leads straight down to the open-wide living area.

With white-washed walls and floors, and all-white fittings, it’s bright and very beautiful. “White,” says Richard sagely, “is a good way of covering up all the little imperfections. . .”



The sharp contrast with the black-stained wood exterior is pleasing. “I was in what I think of as my ‘coconut phase,’” laughs Richard. “I designed a number of buildings which are dark on the outside, pale on the inside.”

A defining feature is the glittering glass doors, which line two sides of the room. The doors, which either slide open concertina-style or fold right back on themselves courtesy of parliament hinges, link the indoors seamlessly with out; the courtyards fore and aft are a natural extension of the living space.

The doors were sourced from Somersham company Kloeber, which specialises in bespoke glazing solutions, and were made carefully to measure. Richard was so impressed, he’s gone on to use Kloeber for several other projects. “There’s no doubt,” he adds, “that the connection to the outside really makes this space.”

Mindful to keep both costs and waste to a minimum, Richard recycled what he could – the lintel over the fireplace was reclaimed from above the cottage’s old front door; the worktops



and units were salvaged from the Owners’ previous kitchen. Painted ply, usually reserved for an under-floor layer, lies directly atop rigid insulation on the original concrete floor, and low-energy fluoro lights are discreetly tucked behind timber pelmets.

“Rescuing a dilapidated building is an intrinsically sustainable thing to do,” adds Richard. “And I think this project shows how a building with little apparent architectural value can be rescued through thoughtful design; how you can make an awful lot out of not much, if you do it carefully.”

Wherever you look in The Nook, it’s clear a great deal of thought has gone into every element of the design, from major structural features through to the choice and positioning of furniture: a freestanding gloss-finished cabinet creates a clear yet unimposing divide between the kitchen and the sitting room area, for example.

“I like to sit in the far corner on the sofa. There’s an uninterrupted view out to both courtyards;

that’s probably my favourite spot,” adds Richard. Back through the hallway, the cottage’s downstairs rooms, once kitchen and sitting room, are now master and guest bedroom, while the children’s rooms and family bathroom are upstairs.

Doffing its cap to both Scandinavian style (all that white) and Japanese (the pebbled front courtyard, set out around a single cherry tree), Richard’s design is undoubtedly a triumph: it was crowned ‘Best Conservation’ at the 2013 Cambridge Design Awards. (Richard’s firm scooped a second gong at the same ceremony: ‘Best Alteration or Extension’ for their work on Pembroke College’s Dining Hall.)

“I was surprised how much I enjoyed this project,” he adds. “I wasn’t sure how I’d feel about doing it for myself, rather than a client, but I enjoyed the whole thing, especially the relationship with the builders.”

Richard negotiated a special contract with the building firm, allowing him to pay the final instalment of fees once the house, a stone’s throw from the centre of Cambridge, was complete, valued and mortgaged accordingly. “We didn’t have enough money to do things exactly the way you might want to, but that meant we had to be a bit more inventive.”

Creating a home of his own was, reflects Richard, a significant moment in his architectural career; the achievement made all the more meaningful by his father’s death the previous year.

“He always encouraged me and suggested it was important to live in one’s own creation; finally firing up the hearth at The Nook was therefore rather poignant,” says Richard.

“I honestly wouldn’t change a thing,” he concludes. “And it’s not often you can say that.”



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