

## ARCHITECTURE

## 'In a big space, dark colours are cosy'

Moody shades of paints and floorings bring warmth to this newly built house, says **Martina Lees**

The art had barely been hung on the inky walls of Jessica and Neil Smith's award-winning makeover of a Victorian semi in north London, yet when a double plot came up near by in

Belsize Park, they jumped at the chance to build a dream house from scratch for their five children.

"It is quite rare to find a south-facing garden of this size somewhere so central. I was not unhappy with our other house, but I thought, 'This is a real project and if I don't do it now, I'll never do it again,'" says Jessica, 50, a former publicist, and mother to Mack, 20, Cam, 17, India, 13, Zak, 12, and Layla, 9. "I wanted everyone to have their own space without being on top of one other — somewhere we could all live in harmony."

An estate agent who knew the Smiths called to offer them the site, on a leafy street between Hampstead Heath and Primrose Hill. Its previous owners had spent years buying two adjacent semis and securing planning permission to create one house, much like several Hollywood couples had done near by. (The actress Gwyneth Paltrow and the Coldplay singer Chris Martin joined two Victorian villas; while the actress Helena Bonham Carter and the film director Tim Burton connected two mews houses — before their respective splits.)

The Smiths' predecessors had abandoned their project once the buildings were demolished and a basement was dug. "I think it became too stressful for them," Jessica says. She asked MW Architects, which designed the family's previous refurbishment, to revive the 8,000 sq ft build, and the result is a masterclass in



creating spaces that feel grand yet warm.

The prevailing wisdom for living spaces has been light and bright: render walls in breezy neutrals and incorporate end-to-end glass. Yet the Smiths did the opposite, painting their living and dining rooms in Valspar "Thundercloud", a stormy purple shade. "In a big space like this, the dark colour makes it cosy," says Melissa Robinson, the director of MW Architects.

The wide plot allows the kitchen,

Jessica and Neil Smith's monochrome house was designed by MW Architects, with steel-framed glass doors to the garden, top, and marble panels in the kitchen. Above: the yoga studio and sunken hot tub in the garden

dining and living rooms to sit next to one other, each with steel-framed doors leading to a 70ft garden terrace. "It isn't one big opening — a lot of people are scared of leaving bits of wall," Robinson says. The three smaller openings "allow you to have really expansive spaces, but they are defined, so they don't feel too big".

At the heart of the seven-figure project, completed in December after two and a half years, is a black helical staircase curving up three storeys from the triple-height entrance hall. "It's all one sheet of 6mm steel, incredibly thin, rolled on a steel rolling machine and with timber treads welded into place on site," Robinson says. A rubbed finish shows off the beauty of the raw metal.

Quality materials is a theme throughout the house, from the acres of

smoky grey oak storage to the inverse Panda White and Black Moon marble walls in the master bathroom on the first floor. With a full-height vertical timber slat bed-head, the couple's bed faces French doors overlooking a tropical garden. "I love lying there, hearing the kids messing around," Jessica says. The two girls' en suite bedrooms lead off either side of the first-floor gallery; the three boys' bedrooms and playroom are tucked away under the eaves on the second floor.

Giopato & Coombes Bolle lights hang in almost every room, clustered together like clear bubbles floating up in the middle of the staircase, or hovering in a frosted cloud above the Moon Rock quartzite kitchen island. The same grey oak flooring, in parquet or planks, is used repeatedly. "There's continuity, but change," Robinson says. "Otherwise there is a risk in large houses of having too much going on. You can get a bit of a headache walking around."

The monochrome scheme makes a bold backdrop for Jessica's collection of art, such as a portrait of the children by Craig Wylie (whose work also hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London), Beckerharrison's photographic restaging of Jesus's last supper, and sculptures by Haraminder Judge. "The house is quite minimalist, but not too much," Jessica says.

In the basement their teenagers can dance under a disco ball hanging from the exposed concrete ceiling, while Neil, 54, an investment banker turned entrepreneur, works next door in his soundproof study, his desk basked in sunlight from the dome-shaped lightwell above.

At the bottom of the garden is a bespoke yoga studio in engineered brick with a sunken hot tub. That's where they all get together, Jessica says. "It's a great family home; it brings us a lot of happiness. I'm certainly not going to move house again."

