



## **BUILDING** ■ 5th Studio in East London

*The adaptation of a historic house meets the needs of the present while dealing sensitively with the past, says Mike Stiff.  
Photos: Ioana Marinescu.*



I would not be the first to wonder why architects take on private residential clients, especially when the house is listed. Architects rarely specialise in private houses; they are usually seen as a stepping stone to larger, more public projects. When they are successful, however, the relationship between client and architect becomes a friendship, and the project a shared intellectual property that adapts and grows with time.

5th Studio's house in Tredegar Square is an example of what successful residential work can offer an architect. This is a house that the client clearly enjoys, a project with architectural integrity, and the restoration of an important historic building.

Late Georgian and early Victorian stucco-fronted houses have a surfeit of formal rooms that are not necessarily useful living spaces. Domestic living is no longer as prescribed, lifestyle demands a looser fit, living spaces are necessarily multi-functional. Retaining the plan form is usually a requirement when working within a listed structure, but opinion seems divided on the amount of alteration that a building owner can make. Even recessed downlights are considered unacceptable in some quarters. The fact is that as the owner of a listed building you are seen as the guardian of a piece of local heritage. However, when these houses were developed they were not intended to be frozen in time. Indeed, only the most arrogant contemporary architect would expect a project to be cherished and untouched for posterity. In a sense the challenge for 5th Studio was to deal with the past and the future simultaneously, to reorder an outdated sequence of spaces and to create



new rooms that are relaxed and informal enough for the owner to personalise.

The practice has addressed this problem by building a rear extension that is a crafted mixture of transparent and solid space that slides and nudges its way into the historic fabric. From the garden, however, it is a piece of architecture in its own right, a pavilion that works with the landscape rather than the house.

This idea is cleverly explored throughout the existing interior. The architects developed a dialogue with the planners that allowed them to push the boundaries of restoration. New spaces within the listed structure are interventions that enhance enjoyment of the original plan.

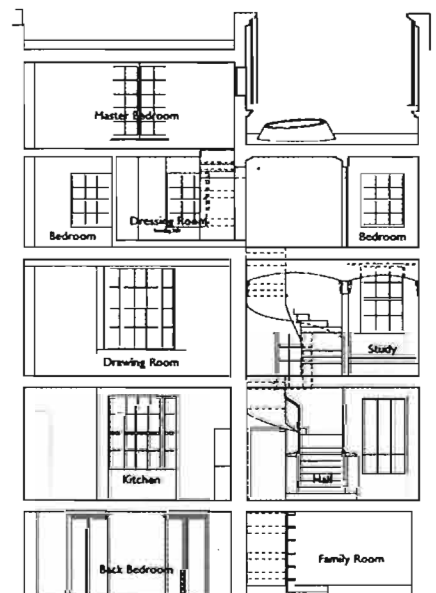
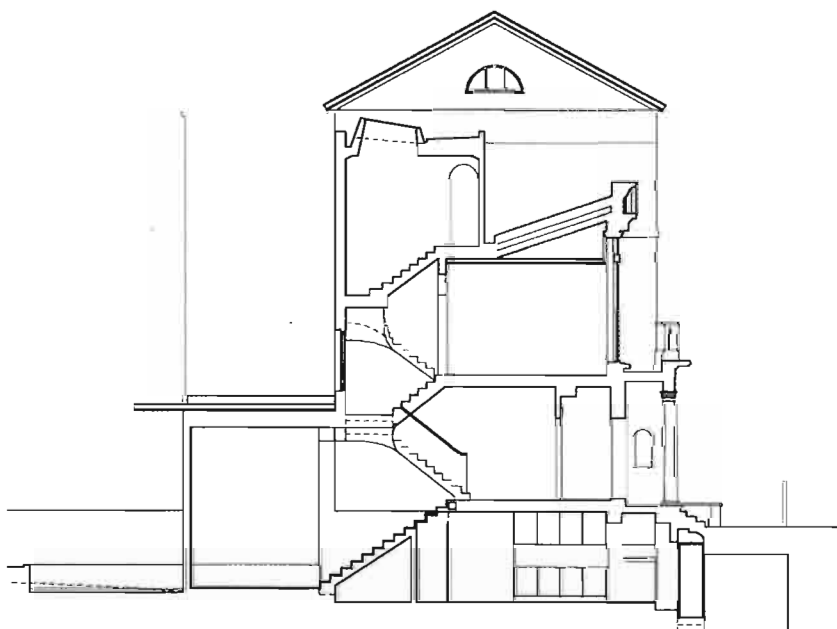
Materials are selected carefully and the palette is limited. The reclaimed oak floor creates a theme providing homogeneity,

*Above* 5th Studio has been playful in its treatment of the house: echoes of the original elevation remain behind the new glazed extension.

*Below* Sections show the relationship between the original house and the new extension. The oculus above the stairs is a contemporary addition.

*Opposite top* View from the entrance hall into the double-height extension.

*Opposite below* The spout discharges rainwater from the roof into the pond.







**Top left** Dining room overlooks the pond through a stainless steel bay window.

**Top right** Original interiors such as the painted drawing room required sensitive handling: minimal interventions such as

a new floor with inset lighting enhance the original house.

**Above** Double-height garden room. **Right** The oculus above the stairwell brings light down through the house.



**5th Studio writes:**

The project involves the extension and remodelling of a grade 2\* listed terrace house in the neo-classical north range of Tredegar Square, Bow. The square was laid out and the northern range completed speculatively in the boom of the 1830s, in an attempt to ally the wealth being generated in the docks with grand houses for the new bourgeoisie. The venture failed, insofar as the development was quickly subdivided rather than remain as single residences, while the well-heeled followed London's expansion to the west. War damage and subsequent

rebuilding further compromised the integrity of the square, which now sits marooned between Mile End Road and the viaduct of the Liverpool Street line. The house comprises the end bays of the central pavilion of the Square, and the recessed, lower linking block between this and the eastern pavilion. The house had originally included the first three bays of this pavilion but had been split by development in the early 1990s and further subdivided by the creation of separate flats at basement level. The client had acquired both house and basement flat and wished to re-unite them,



as well as creating new living spaces at the garden level.

5th Studio's brief was to reconfigure the existing fabric to accommodate contemporary life and make the most use of the listed interiors – to complement the best of the old with contemporary spaces and to occupy these older spaces with new interiors formed as furniture pieces – lining, freestanding and illuminating the listed fabric. We were also keen to use new interventions to try to reclaim some of the power of the house as originally conceived, much obscured beneath layers of subdivision.

The house is one of local authority Tower Hamlets' few listed structures, and the conservation office – while welcoming the addition of the contemporary spaces to the rear of the house – were initially unenthusiastic about the interventions within the original structure. Consequently, the entire project was negotiated space by space until a solution was agreed.

The client's original budget was not intended to cover significant conservation work, but when the building was opened up it became clear that the earlier work had concealed a chronic dry rot problem extending from the basement to the roof. The repair works, however, did afford the opportunities for several further interventions: to form the oculus to the stairwell and the skylight over the bath and to manipulate the roofline to raise the ceiling and light levels in this space.

The double-height garden room occupies the angle formed by the rear of the house and the flank of the adjacent property. This element is used to re-make the relationship between house and garden. The glass roof is supported on structural glass beams spanning between the flank wall and the timber-clad stair element. A sliding folding screen opens this space up to the terrace beyond. The dining room is sunk to existing basement level and again is glass roofed – this spanning from the existing rear wall to the new stainless steel clad bay window, which is detailed as a pleated fabric lining.

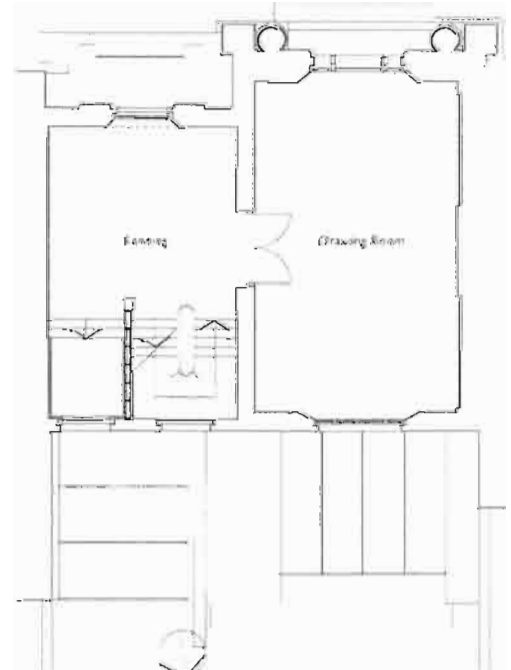
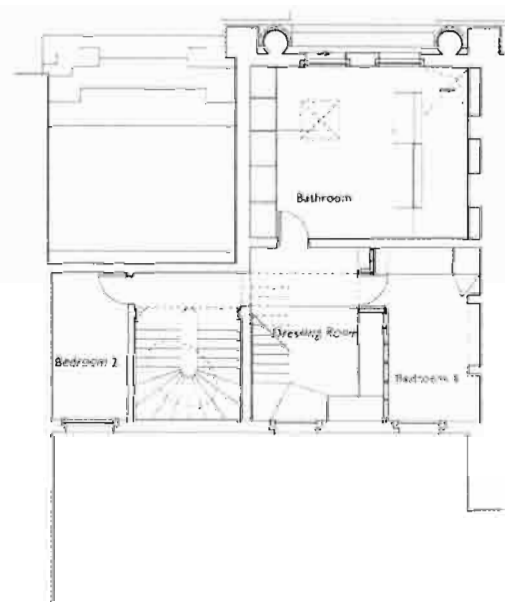
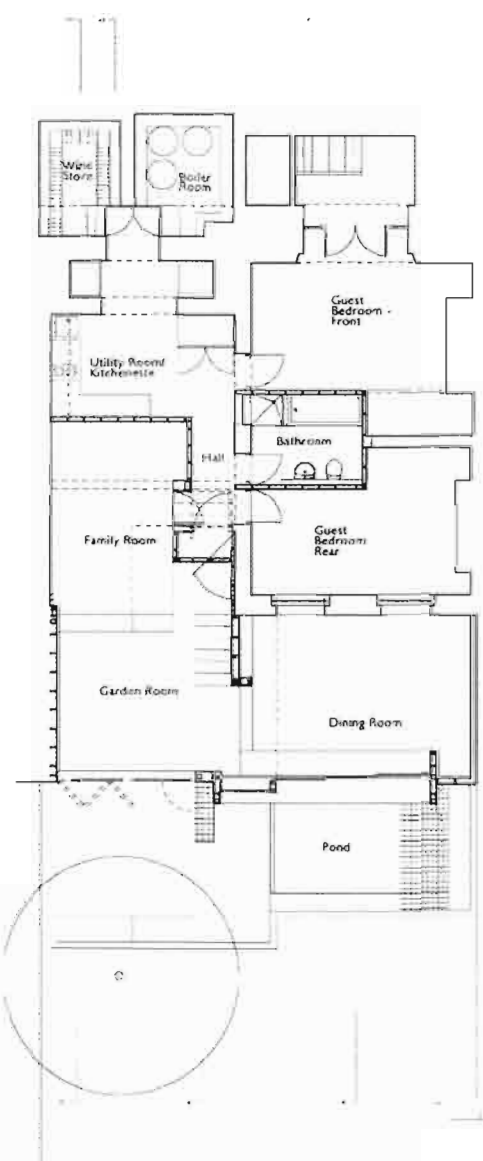
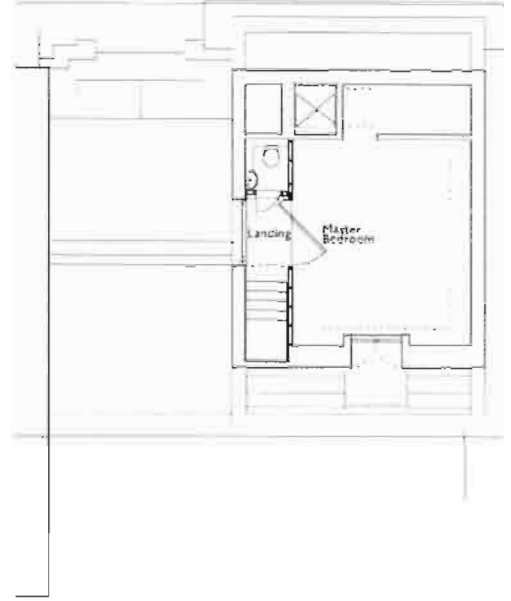
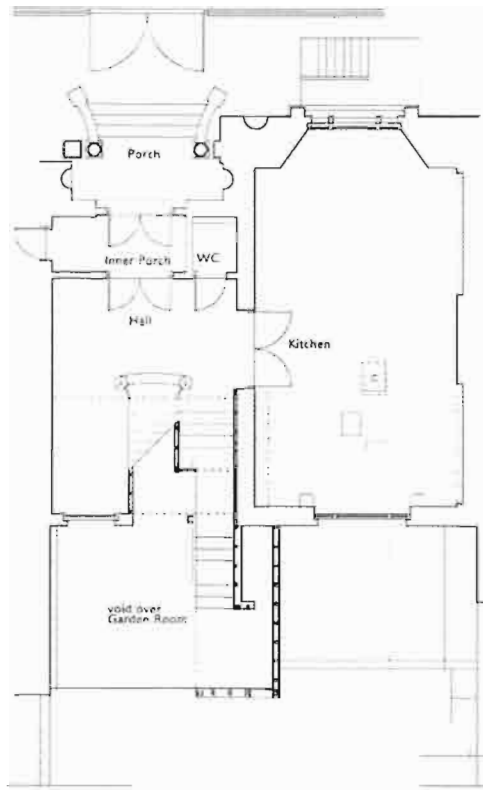
Bottom left Basement plan

Top left Ground floor plan

Bottom right First floor plan

Middle right Second floor plan: The bath, basins and lavatories, fixed to a low partition, form free-standing elements in the room, tied together materially by the use of the same stone used to line the shower cist. A roof light has been added above the bath.

Top right Loft plan







**Above** The window on the landing borrows light from the glazed extension, and frames a view of the garden.

**Above right** The first floor kitchen. **Right** The stone lining in the bathroom reveals and accentuates original features, acknowledging the room's earlier history.

**Design team**

Architect: 5th Studio; design team: Oliver Smith, Tom Holbrook, John Cain, Jay Gort, Nathan Jones, February Phillips, Ingrid Schroder, Nancy Peskett; structural engineer: Tottenham & Bennett; contractor: Coleman Harding & Taylor; client: Michael and Pauline Brennan

**Selected suppliers and subcontractors**  
 Kitchen/bathroom suppliers: Alternative Plans; kitchen: Boffi; bath: Agape; timber flooring supply: Edwards Cheshire; stone flooring supply: Granite & Marble International; tiles: Casalgrande; glass supply: FA Firmans; underfloor heating: Robbens; taps: Vola; radiators: Hudevad; stainless steel cladding: PMF Roofcraft; lead: Tim Salisbury; external doors/screens: Alco Beldan; furniture: Nic Rhode.

while colour is used to focus spaces and change moods. These devices help to order the complex structural relationships, and sometimes playful architectural placement of volumes, windows and rooflights. It is apparent that models were used extensively as a design tool – indeed the plan is deceptively simple. The split-level section is legible in the three main materials used on the elevation and roof, which for once really is treated as the 'fifth elevation'. These materials – glass, timber and stainless steel – define the garden room, circulation and dining room respectively.



A measure of the success of this project is that the inevitable clutter of daily life has not detracted from the architectural quality. The design is clearly not a backdrop or blank canvas, but almost 'Soanian' in its placement of walls and niches that set up opportunities for paintings and artefacts. This is exemplified by the carefully positioned window in the entrance hall, which frames a view of the garden like a work of art.

Too often, architects see private house projects as opportunities to explore ideas and expand the portfolio, and forget that someone will live in them. One thinks of the Adolf Loos tale of the architect who, visiting his finished project, is shocked to be greeted by the client standing in slippers: 'But Mr Architect, have you already forgotten? You yourself designed them.' 'Of course,' thundered the architect, 'but for the bedroom!' This house suggests a happier relationship, and has been the foundation of a new friendship.

*Mike Stiff is a partner in Stiff + Trevillion Architects in London.*