

# Crack Squad

Two young architects have transformed a derelict drugs den into an award-winning home complete with glorious glass extension. By Hannah Booth. Photographs: Michael Franke

**B**ack in 2005, when the market was booming, architect Patrick Michell and his partner, Claire McKeown, bought a three-bed house in Hackney, east London. The area boasts handsome terraces, but this house, a boarded-up former crack den, was in a sorry state. Fires had ripped through two rooms and there was a shabbily psychedelic paint scheme. Bailiffs had removed any character features that were left.

But to an architect wanting to make a property his own, it was perfect. "If there had been period features, we'd have worked more sensitively with them, but because it had all gone, we were free to give it a modernist slant," says Michell, 32.

He opened up the two front receptions, and transformed and expanded the narrow kitchen space at the back with a glass roof across the side return. The glass is one huge single piece, appearing to balance unaided on a wall of stone. The back wall is largely glass, too, with a ceiling-high, pivoting glass door to the garden and a glass box punched into the wall to create an

appealing window seat. In summer, sunlight streams in, while at night trees tower in silhouette above your head. With a concrete floor inside extending out to the patio, the design aims to merge the two spaces. "I've made it fairly obvious what's new and what's original," Michell says, "and it's given the house a new character." Sightlines from the front door and bay are designed to run through to the garden, and the stairs have been opened up with a glass wall. Doesn't all the glass compromise their privacy? "You can't get away from it in London," McKeown says. "You have to accept that you'll have neighbours and sometimes they'll see what you're doing."

The extension was allowed under "permitted development" planning law, and the building work took nine months, during which time they moved into McKeown's rented flat. "I'd muscled in by this stage," says McKeown, 31, who trained as an architect. Between them, they took the tough decisions essential to any project - where to spend money and where to cut back. Michell's initial £125,000 budget finally came in at £190,000 - all part of the learning



Patrick Michell and Claire McKeown (top) extended the narrow kitchen (left) with a glass-roofed extension and floor-to-ceiling windows. The staircase (above) has a glass wall - the palm tree sticker is from wall-print.com

process, he says. (The house cost £378,000 at auction.) And though they cut back on the kitchen and joinery budgets, they spent money where it counted, on striking elements such as the glass.

They moved in before the work was finished, and tackled the tiling and painting themselves. "We had hot water, but nothing to cook on," Michell says. "It wasn't really the right thing to do." But for McKeown the excitement was worth it. Her tip for surviving? Build a wardrobe. "If I can get up in the morning and get dressed, I can cope with anything."

Almost finished, the house won an award earlier this year for the best London extension of the last five years. There are still jobs to do - shelves to put up, a front garden to complete - but they are happy to find every weekend is no longer dominated by DIY. They spend most of their time in the kitchen, and take particular pride in the window seat. Their only worry is that, having created a bespoke home, there can be no going back. As McKeown says, "We couldn't imagine living somewhere someone else has designed." [platform5architects.com](http://platform5architects.com)