

The warehouse home

by Elspeth Pridham

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Interior architect Marta Nowicka, walks us round the converted warehouse in East London that she has made her home

MARTA NOWICKA'S COMPANY, Dom Stay & Live, offers architecturally interesting properties for holidays or full-time homes. The business developed from Nowicka's passion for converting derelict commercial buildings into residential spaces, a passion which was ignited when she and her late husband discovered a 19th-century warehouse on Old Street.

Q. Who was the property designed for and who will live there?

A. My late husband, artist Sean Kimber, and I purchased it in 1999. We were looking for a large space where we could live and house his studio and my design company at the time - Nowicka Stern. So this untouched warehouse ticked all the boxes and was cheaper than a one-bed flat in the area.

Q. What was on the site previously?

A. It was originally a 19th-century wine

warehouse and then a lithographic printing works. Sean found it on a night out in Hoxton from the lithographic printer who was now retiring, having had his business in the warehouse for 40 years. We stripped the building, removing all the layers of cladding, partitions, and lino to expose the old floorboards, brick walls and ceiling joists - which were cleaned off and sealed. Adding an industrial kitchen on wheels meant it could be moved around for parties, events and exhibitions. It gave us a flexible space, enabling us to run our creative practices.

Q. Describe the building to me?

A. Located on the fringes of Clerkenwell and Old Street, sitting snug within a tight urban plot, the warehouse has three bedrooms, three bathrooms, an office and studio space capped with a zinc-clad and glass box living space built at the top. The inside space evolved around the stunning views of St

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Luke's, whilst also improving natural light levels internally, so I turned my home on its head with a big open-plan living space and outside decking terraces at the top on the second floor.

The bedrooms, bathrooms and office sit within the original structure, which I stripped of layers of plasterboard to reveal the bricks beneath. I wanted to keep an industrial language and avoid a strong architectural statement.

A cantilevered metal staircase leads from an exposed concrete basement for my model studio up to the ground-floor studio space, before going up to two bedrooms and a floor-to-ceiling mirrored bathroom on the first floor. The staircase then leads you up to the part clad, part glass box space- the top open-plan living area which is quite a complex, stimulating space as it has so many views and you are constantly seeing different things.

Q. What was your starting point for the design?

A. After Sean passed away, I was a single mother to my son Lucas and running a design practice. I started working on the new design of the warehouse about three years after - it was great to create something that would be a solution to our spatial and financial needs, a totally pragmatic design resolving my dilemma between working full time and motherhood. I now needed a quiet, functional home and a way of generating an income, hence the practical solution of dividing the warehouse into three units - one for us to live in and two to rent out.

So the plans were reconsidered entirely - I designed three two-bed family homes, including an office in our unit so I could work from home with an additional bedroom. To squeeze in all our spatial needs, I designed a basement as well as

going up an additional level, taking it from a two-storey warehouse to four floors. Planning permission took two years to get, so that gave me time to raise the funds, detail the scheme, and relocate for the massive rebuild.

Q. Were there any particular challenges you had to overcome?

A. The council were really against having a modern addition to the building and it took two years to get my proposed zinc-clad and glass box through the planning committee. They wanted a mansard roof - my argument with them was that this would have been incongruous to a warehouse of this time, and eventually they agreed to something darker and robust to match the surrounding slate roofs. The narrative of a property is always interesting, and that's something I've always tried to retain as an interior architect.

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Q. What is your favourite feature?

A. I love the cantilevered staircase which leads you up to the top floor - and once you're there, the glazed dining area which frames St.Luke's church is really awesome and impressive. Sitting around the Saarinen Tulip table having dinner watching the church become dramatically illuminated whilst dusk falls is an exciting immersive experience.

Q. What did you enjoy most about this project?

A. Witnessing the challenge of digging out hundreds of tons of earth to make the basement. The brick walls seemed precariously supported by scaffold as diggers dug the largest void - the site looked like a strange medieval church, an earthy hollow and empty brick warehouse with no floors, lofty, damp and cool. To experience this transformation to a fully functioning basement was alchemy.

Q. Is there anything you would have done differently?

A. I wish the master bedroom was larger with space for a sofa by the fire, perhaps a writing desk so it could be more of a private relaxing space. With an exuberant and sociable 18-year-old, I've realized how wonderful the privacy of one's own bedroom is.

Q. How do you want to enjoy the house?

A. As it always is: drinks on the terrace, long dinners, top floor full of fun, music and people chatting, laughing and dancing or very snug and cosy by the wood burner reading the papers or watching a film.

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Photography: Voytek Ketz @ DOM Stay & Live; Ingrid Rasmussen

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