

**W**hen Massimo Malavasi first conceived the idea of adding an extra storey to his semi-detached Victorian bungalow more than 15 years ago, he asked his next-door neighbour if she might want to do the same, but his proposal was rejected. Fast-forward a decade and everything changed. He had a new neighbour who was just as enthusiastic about making alterations.

Catherine Lester, 39, bought the bungalow attached to Massimo's in 2013. 'It was a bit of a doer-upper in a backyard area with a wonderful garden,' says Catherine. 'Massimo and I discussed ideas for improving our homes and it became clear that knocking both down and starting again would be reasonably cost efficient. Unlike with extensions there's no VAT to pay on new-builds.'

Their ambitious plan faced a challenge. The bungalows were squeezed into an irregularly shaped rear plot in a conservation area, overlooked by the surrounding houses and with limited access along a narrow alley down the side of an adjacent mansion block. But the project's architect Jan Dobrowolski of Dust Architecture worked with these constraints to design a pair of houses that are inventive and respectful of their surroundings.

Keeping the height of the front entrances the same as the original bungalows, stepping the second storey back slightly and slanting the upper section of the first-floor walls inwards all helped minimise the homes' impact and any light loss to surrounding gardens. Side windows are set high up to maintain privacy and roof lights bring brightness into the heart of the interiors.

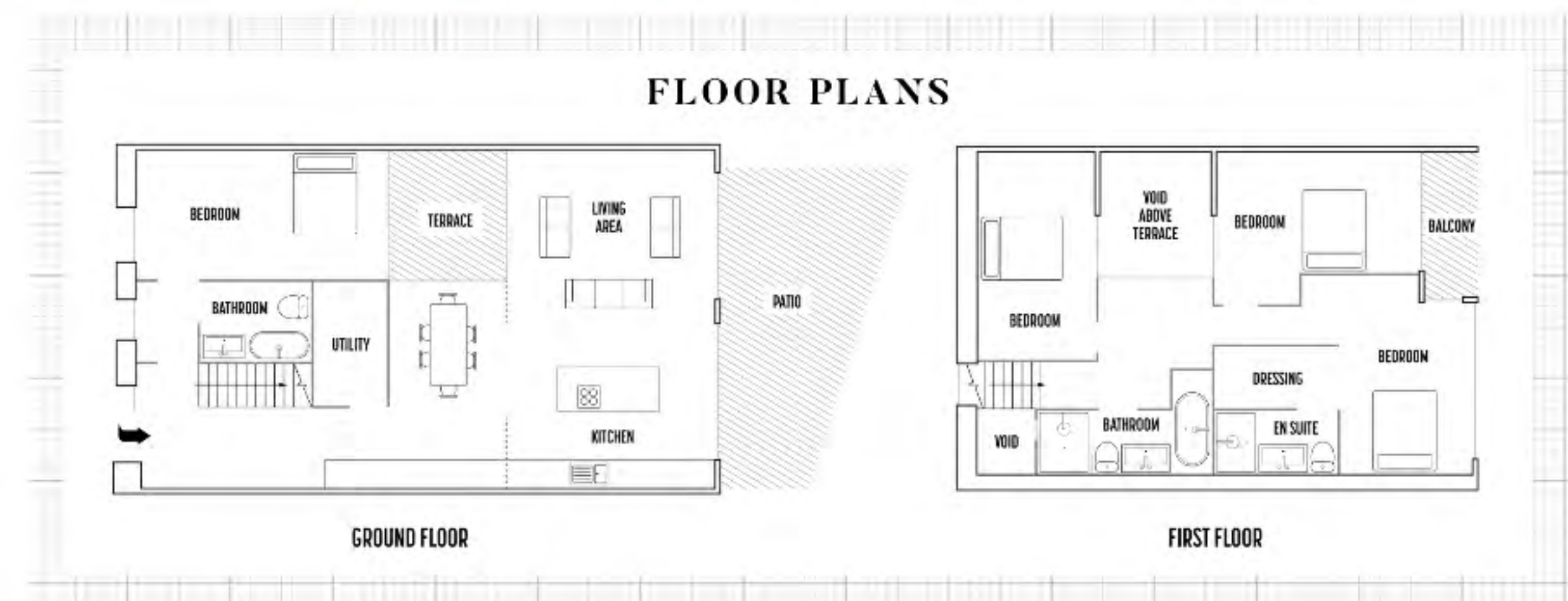
Nevertheless, planning permission was hard won. The 18 objections were overcome by going through the pre-planning process and only making a formal submission to the local authority once concerns had been addressed. »



ABOVE The lightwell has a low-maintenance living wall, fed by rainwater that is harvested from the roof. Its sides are in white render to reflect light



ABOVE Catherine favoured a palette of blues and greys in her house, and polished concrete floors throughout the ground floor  
LEFT The exterior is clad in a slatted pine shell, treated with silica to protect it from fungi and accelerate the weathering





In this kitchen by Blakes of London, the inclusion of deep blue in the scheme was a late decision but it gives an extra dimension to the space



It was another year before the finances were all fully arranged. 'Getting a mortgage for a self-build can be tricky, and especially for two projects that are connected,' says chartered accountant Catherine. 'In the end we went with a private Swedish bank, Handelsbanken. A representative met with us to make a judgment, rather than just ticking boxes.'

'The bank made us sign an agreement whereby neither one of us could stop the other from completing the project, whatever happened,' adds Massimo, who runs his own business. 'We were both legally committed to getting it done. It was a bit like a pre-nup.'

The build provided its own challenges with all materials and debris having to be carried from the road down the narrow path, including lifting a small digger over a fence. This also influenced Jan's decision to go with a glulam timber frame, which was light and compact enough to be brought down the alleyway and erected on site. Then, there were the practicalities of self-building with someone who, at the beginning of the process, was effectively a complete stranger. 'I suggest keeping the communication channels open, set out strict joint >>



**ABOVE** When the architect designed floor-to-ceiling shelving in BauBuche, a beech laminate timber, Catherine asked if she could have a ladder on a rail so it would feel like a library

**LEFT** The ground-floor living area leads out seamlessly to the patio





GD HOMES LONDON CATHERINE

A seating area on the landing looks out to the lightwell and courtyard. Almost everywhere in the house has a connection to the outdoors

RIGHT The glass in the bathroom is custom sprayed and made to measure



As Catherine has multiple sclerosis, she wanted to ensure that her house would be suitable should she ever need to use a wheelchair. A fourth bedroom downstairs can be partitioned off and the bathroom made en suite. All door openings, surface heights and light switches take account of wheelchair reach and turning circles, in accordance with the Lifetimes Homes Standard ([lifetimehomes.org.uk](http://lifetimehomes.org.uk)), and the polished concrete floor means all thresholds are level.

budgets as well as your personal ones, and save meetings to discuss joint issues, using one-to-one sessions for things only relevant to your own home,' says Jan, who also acted as project manager.

'It worked quite well,' says Catherine. 'We are both very different people with different tastes, different ages and at different points in our careers, but that has been good. When I was worried about something, Massimo was able to calm me down, and vice versa.'

Catherine's home, which is roughly twice the floor area of Massimo's, has an open-plan ground-floor kitchen/dining/living area with sliding glazed doors onto a patio. Slatted BauBuche hardwood sliding screens divide the space into cosier nooks and echo the exterior cladding.

Life has changed considerably since Catherine embarked on the project. Single when she bought the house, she is now married to fellow chartered accountant Prem Mohan Raj, 50, with their son Teddy born in December 2019. Luckily the flexible designs have adapted to family life. 'Concrete floors are not necessarily good for babies, but they are great for cleaning,' says Catherine. 'Being at home with Teddy, it's brilliant to have so many different areas we can be in, and not be cooped up in a flat.'

As Catherine's house abuts a third property, there are no side windows so a central internal courtyard with green wall acts as a lightwell. 'I grew up in the countryside and love outdoor space, hence the living wall, and the sliding glass doors give a real indoor/outdoor feel,' she says. »



Large sliding glazed doors to the bedrooms at the rear of the house overlook the gardens and are framed by enveloping louvres



## GDHOMES LONDON MASSIMO



Massimo and Catherine used the same joiners for the built-in birch ply and BauBuche furniture

LEFT There are oak floors throughout Massimo's house. His dog, Bee, particularly enjoys the underfloor heating

**'I kept all my pine doors and had them refurbished, though it would have been cheaper to buy new ones'**

Massimo, 59, favours a more eclectic style. 'I liked the idea of retaining some of the features from the old house so I kept all my pine doors and had them refurbished and fireproofed, though it would have been much cheaper to buy new ones. I also kept the fireplace, which I've installed downstairs, and a stained-glass window. And I've recycled the house bricks as garden paving.'

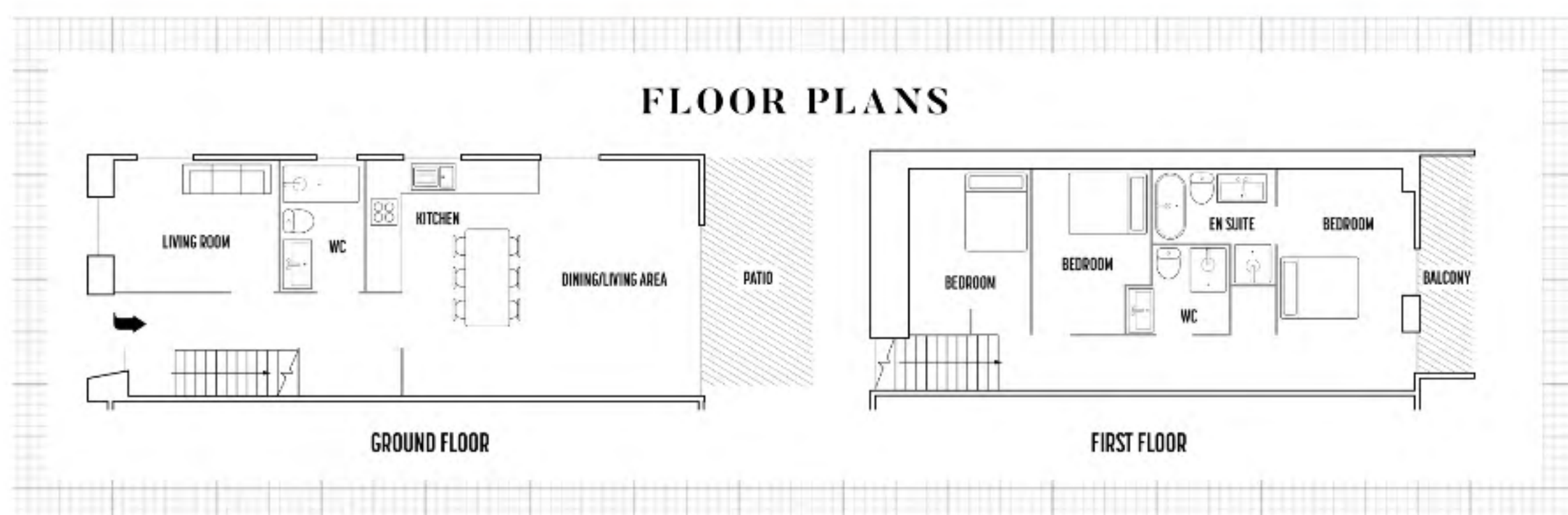
An advantage of building from scratch meant that Massimo was able to reconfigure the garden space. He ran a gas pipeline to the back of the garden for a barbecue set-up alongside specially made furniture made from Accoya and red cedar, mimicking the house.

Insulation, triple glazing, solar panels, LED lights, underfloor heating and a mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR) system have halved his energy bills, despite his home being double the size of the old one. 'The new house is much warmer than the previous building,' he says. 'It's a real pleasure to live in. I love the sunlight flooding in through the roof glazing.'

For Massimo, the long journey to finally get his second storey might not have been a straightforward one, but it was definitely worth it. **GD**







**ABOVE LEFT** Both houses open into double-height spaces around the stairwell with a roof light above

**ABOVE** The bespoke glass splashbacks in the bathrooms are by local company Dawes Glass

**RIGHT** A skylight and a window in the slope of the roof brings brightness into Massimo's guest bedroom



## GD HOMES LONDON MASSIMO

At first, Massimo thought the slatted cladding and brise soleil shading were unusual but he came to love them and commissioned a joiner to make matching garden furniture



### SUPPLIERS

#### PROJECT TEAM

**Architect and landscaping** Dust Architecture ([dustarchitecture.com](http://dustarchitecture.com))

**Structural engineer** Edge Structures ([edgestructures.com](http://edgestructures.com))

**Energy consultants** Eight Associates ([eightassociates.co.uk](http://eightassociates.co.uk))

**Drainage design** PURA ([puraesignlimited.co.uk](http://puraesignlimited.co.uk))

**AV consultant, Catherine's house**

Avinu ([avinu.co.uk](http://avinu.co.uk))

#### STRUCTURE

**Timber cladding** James Latham ([lathamtimber.co.uk](http://lathamtimber.co.uk)),

SioaX ([sioax.org.uk](http://sioax.org.uk)), Southgate Timber

([southgatetimber.co.uk](http://southgatetimber.co.uk))

**Windows and doors** Josko ([josko.uk](http://josko.uk))

**Solar panels** Treadlighter ([treadlighter.co.uk](http://treadlighter.co.uk))

#### FIXTURES & FITTINGS

**Bathroom fittings** Bette ([bette.co.uk](http://bette.co.uk)),

Crosswater ([crosswater.co.uk](http://crosswater.co.uk)), Duravit ([duravit.co.uk](http://duravit.co.uk)),

Grohe ([grohe.com](http://grohe.com))

**Bathroom bespoke glass splashback**

Dawes Glass ([dawesglass.com](http://dawesglass.com))

**Kitchen, Catherine's house**

Blakes London ([blakeslondon.com](http://blakeslondon.com))

**Kitchen sink** Franke ([franke.com](http://franke.com))

**Kitchen taps** Quooker ([quooker.co.uk](http://quooker.co.uk))

**Kitchen handles** Superfront

([superfront.com](http://superfront.com))

**Kitchen carcass, Massimo's house**

Ikea ([ikea.com](http://ikea.com))

**Polished-concrete floor, Catherine's house**

Lazenby ([lazenby.co.uk](http://lazenby.co.uk))

**Timber flooring, Catherine's house**

Reeve Wood ([reevewood.com](http://reevewood.com))

**Timber flooring, Massimo's house**

The Natural Wood Floor Co ([naturalwoodfloor.co.uk](http://naturalwoodfloor.co.uk))

#### FURNITURE & ACCESSORIES

**Dining table, chairs and breakfast bar-stools,**

Catherine's house Made ([made.com](http://made.com))

**Fireplace** Geoflame ([geoflame.co.uk](http://geoflame.co.uk))

**Sofas** Barker and Stonehouse

([barkerandstonehouse.co.uk](http://barkerandstonehouse.co.uk)),

Camerich ([camerich.co.uk](http://camerich.co.uk))

**Hallway light** Wever & Ducre

([weverducre.com](http://weverducre.com))

**Pendant lights in kitchen and dining room**

Dreizehngard ([dreizehngard.de](http://dreizehngard.de))

**Pendant light in living room**

Assembly Room ([assemblyroom.co.uk](http://assemblyroom.co.uk))

**Pendant lights, Massimo's house**

Grupa ([grupa.com](http://grupa.com))

 **prowarm**™

UNDERFLOOR HEATING



It's what's underneath that counts