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Angel delight for French duo

A property downturn allowed this Parisian couple to buy a new home off plan and turn it into a very different family space, says **Philippa Stockley**

Photographs: **David Butler and Luke Hayes**



Glass houses: the bright three-bedroom, three-bathroom home

BUYING a house off-plan during a financial crash takes some guts, but that's what married French couple Alexandra and Matthieu did. Now in their mid-thirties, they met as economics students in Paris and work in the City. They moved to London in 2009, married, and rented near the Angel while looking for somewhere to buy. Angel was the only area that Alexandra wanted — she loves how central it is — but everything was far too expensive. Then online they spotted a small off-plan development. The asking price had already dropped by a third. “We looked on the Tuesday and bought it on the Thursday,” she says.

However, buying off-plan when prices are falling is high risk. “Friends said, ‘Don’t do it,’ but we did,” she adds.

It takes a leap of faith and imagination to buy a building site. The brochure showed a smart, high-spec three-storey house with a lot of white and glass, making a bright three-bedroom, three-bathroom home with a neat courtyard garden. On the whole they liked the design, and anyway were not allowed to alter it until they owned it.

Once they had moved in, they had a chance to assess the space. They were not keen on the large staircase with a solid white balustrade that dominated the hall. They liked the all-white kitchen though it had a “slightly clinical” white floor running into the open-plan sitting room. And a big, centrally sited downstairs bathroom seemed to cut the ground floor in two. On the first floor, a huge master bedroom had a staircase in the cor-





Into the void: main, the new mezzanine area is reached by a staircase with a netted side and the ceiling profiles are curved so you don't bump your head

Calm and composed: right, intelligent use of space has been made, leading to a sense of tranquillity



Net fix: right, the mezzanine provides a playroom for the children

Cracking the design: far right, the staircase became a run of walnut steps



ner rising to a massive bathroom above. Open to soaring eaves, this held an enormous central tub with a double shower. "It was a big wow factor, but it wasted space and I rarely used that bath," Alexandra says.

When their first child, Antoine, was born in 2012, the couple thought about more space. Their neighbours were planning a basement so they looked into doing one too. However, practical Alexandra realised she really didn't want one, let alone to deal with the expense. The couple's thoughts often returned to that big bathroom and void above their bedroom.

A friend near by was having an extension built, which the couple liked, so in November 2015, when Alexandra was pregnant with Marion, now two, they invited round the architects. Initially, they thought they would sort out the hall and ground floor, making a smaller bathroom to create a better space and flow, create a smaller staircase and change the flooring.

"What I liked was that the architects asked us how we live — 'Do you drink coffee in the morning? Where do you take your shoes off? Things like that.'"

The architects suggested making a narrower staircase with a glass balustrade, a smaller bathroom to maximise the living area, plentiful storage, a cute curved seat to put shoes in and a soft-grey concrete floor.

The couple liked it, and asked the architects to look at the rest of the house. Of three designs that came back, the third altered the top floor in a unique and unexpected way.

The staircase in the bedroom was taken out, making space in the reconfigured room for a sleek, elegant bathroom with two show-

ers and two basins. The staircase became a new run of folded walnut steps leading up from the existing hall stairs.

But the magical transformation was the huge bathroom above the bedroom, with its empty roof space. The architects changed it into a smart office, carving a slice off for a large utility room. Then they set a mezzanine into the void. No bog-standard mezzanine with glass balustrade here. Visually, it's a mix of a nautical style like the inside of a submarine with baseball practice nets.

A riveted steel frame is fronted with a strong white rope net overlooking the study below. The mezzanine is reached by a staircase with a netted side. Both net sections are held by huge steel rivets. The ceiling profiles are all curved to avoid bumping your head. This high-up room is a playroom for the children, with generous storage for toys, but it could later become a great place to relax in. The skylights provide a lot of light, and the nets are substantial, so you feel safe leaning into them.

The unexpected and fun design also makes extra floor space from nothing. Essentially, the house has gained two rooms and about 160sq ft.

The family moved back into the house in March 2017. Alexandra is happy that a house that started life as a brochure — and looked a bit like one — is now a family home, with an intelligent use of space. It is also serene, although with spectacular touches. Sweeping lavender and a mature olive tree in the redesigned courtyard garden enhances this feeling.

Alexandra smiles. "We planned just on changing the hall, and ended up changing everything in sight."

NOTEBOOK

What it cost

- In 2009 £900,000 on 1,730sq ft house
- Spent about £450,000 on improvements
- Value of 1,890sq ft house now is £2,100,000

Get the look

- Architecture by Scenario (scenarioarchitecture.com)
- Builder — Artbud (artbud.co.uk)
- Garden design by Luis Buitrago at The Four Leaf Clover (07970 258364)
- Sitting-room sofa by Ligne Roset (ligne-roset.com)
- Rug and leather armchairs also by Ligne Roset, as above
- Marble-topped coffee table from Swoon (swooneditions.com)
- Dining table from Paris, vintage Ligne Roset, as above
- Vitra Eames DSW side chairs from shops such as Aram (aram.co.uk)
- AJ Royal lamp by Louis Poulsen from Ivor Innes (innes.co.uk)
- Pendant in Marion's bedroom from Heal's (heals.com)
- Taps in master bathroom from Axor (axor-design.com)
- Trestle legs for office table by Tiptoe (tiptoe.fr/en)