

Homes & Property My home

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Alison, and sons Ethan, five, and David, eight, in the sitting room

All her bargain-hunting talent was needed when **Alison Cork** fell for a Belgravia town house she couldn't afford. But her skills won the prize

EVERY recession has its silver lining and in my case it was being able to move into the dream house I thought I'd never have.

Wedded to the glamorous notion of living in central London, I had gradually renovated my way up the property ladder from a one bedroom flat in Blackheath, via Pimlico and Hampstead, to a Belgravia maisonette.

In 2006 I set my sites on a town house in Belgravia. I sold the maisonette, expecting to find a property fairly quickly. But, in the throws of a notoriously frothy housing market, as prices rose my dream slipped away.

Depression set in as I squeezed my family into a small rented flat above a fish restaurant and next to a pub. There I waited for what I firmly believed would be a property-market crash.

Twelve months later, in October 2007, just as I was losing heart, I spotted my dream home: a late-Georgian town house on six floors in a beautiful Belgravia street, utterly unmodernised. But, at £4.6 million, double what I could afford.

Just a few months later, in 2008, property prices were not so confident. I placed a bid at half the asking price and waited. Over the next few months five other potential buyers came, offered the asking price, and mysteriously disappeared unable to exchange.

By October 2008 the housing market was in paralysis and mine was the only offer left on the table. With some cash in the bank from the sale of the maisonette, and a mortgage agreed, my husband Efi and I were in pole position and landed our dream house a week before Christmas.

I set about the refurbishment with little time and no money. Ever aspirational, I decided that only a "designer look" would do for my Belgravia home. I decided the strategy was a makeover that would focus on the cosmetic with no-time consuming and expensive structural alterations.



Luxury fabrics were used for curtains and re-upholstery in the sitting room, where grandeur is added by fake "Old Masters" imported from Bulgaria and

LUXURY FOR LESS

QUEEN OF

SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN

Top priority was to find a first-rate, understanding builder who could work to an exacting standard and come up with imaginative and cost-efficient ideas. Having found Mark of Get Turner, we sat down and planned the work, a crucial few meetings that saved a lot of time and potential expenditure later on.

Several things became clear – forget a fancy new kitchen or a rear extension – we needed a new bathroom. We used the same "footprint" for bathware, thus avoiding new pipework, tiling would be kept to key areas around basins and showers, elsewhere would be painted. In the rest of the house we needed a few extra electrical sockets (I used table lamps and dimmers to create atmosphere); simple new kitchen units with a more expensive worktop (that's the bit you see most); and all quirks, such as uneven doorframes and dented wall panelling, to be left. This was because, once you start to even things up, it's a never-end-

ing drain on resources. I sourced the vast majority of materials myself. My builder was happy with that.

I decided to rely on colour to create drama and divert the eye from the less than perfect infrastructure. I would have to recycle my existing furniture and accessories and find the best interiors bargains on the internet.

The stunning original black-and-white tiles in the entrance hall were cleaned and polished and inspired the very "now" slate-grey colour scheme for the walls. The front door's original furniture was re-plated rather than replaced; bannisters and internal doors were waxed back to their former glory but the distinctly unsexy 1950s fireplaces stayed.

Paint is a liberating and cost-effective way to create drama if you are brave with colours. I used high-street brands, opting for chocolate in the dining room and library, with mirrors used to reflect light around the rooms; dark green and bamboo in the sitting room, overlaid with a

gold wash to give depth and shimmer; divine "Sugared Violet" – a sensuous, sluttily mauve – for the master bedroom, and a smattering of metallics to create feature walls in other rooms.

With that backdrop in place, it was time to furnish.

All my favourite tricks came into play. An inherited oil painting was dismembered and its canvas boldly re-framed for the hallway; the old frame became a mirror for the sitting room (two for the price of one); my shabby sitting-room sofa was re-upholstered; cushions were re-covered (£20 each); I hung a matching mirror (£80) opposite an existing favourite, creating a "hall of mirrors" effect in the dining room; I re-stained (it cost £100) the wooden sideboard to match the dining room table; dry, cracked leather chairs were fed until they gleamed (the cream was £4 a pot); cheap occasional chairs found on the internet were upholstered with luxe fabric (chairs from under £100, re-upholstery from £60 per chair);

For "pure-kitsch joy" Alison painted this cocktail cabinet flamingo pink inside and gold outside. A pop art dalmatian guards the doors

Photographs by: **John Griffin**

'By now the housing market was less confident. I placed a bid at half the asking price and waited...'

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Shimmering gold paint used on the walls



Glass and crystal dazzle in the dining room where the walls are painted chocolate brown



A "slutty mauve" and a Marlene Dietrich mural grace the walls of the master bedroom



Bold original tiles inspired the hall's slate-grey colour scheme. A seascape added drama

BARGAINS



and an old daybed became matt black. My favourite transformation: the old brown 1930s brown cocktail cabinet I bought for £250. It was painted gold on the outside, flamingo pink on the inside and finished off with a pop art dalmatian on the doors: pure-kitsch joy.

MY BEST BITS

Mirrored wall sconces (£6 each) from an online retailer; a crystal "look a like" pair of candlesticks from BHS; gorgeous acrylic chandeliers from [www.lighting-direct](http://www.lighting-direct.com) (several hundred pounds cheaper than the competition at £250 each); sleek German high-gloss kitchen units at 30 per cent less than elsewhere; three fake "Old Masters" commissioned online (£1,000 each) from a Bulgarian company, which arrived by Fedex rolled up in a cardboard tube; a stunning free-standing bath from a Rotherhithe bathroom warehouse; a classical wall mosaic that came in kit form; fitted sliding wardrobes; DIY silver wallpaper; lacquered

red drawers from Tesco (£250); reproduction period furniture that I re-upholstered; funky, computer furniture for the children's room (£70 for a chair; £90 for a bookshelf); wall tiles bought online; mirrors commissioned from a backstreet King's Cross-based glass specialist and antique lighting from Alfies Antiques Market.

MY GOLDEN RULE

Don't be a label snob but be prepared to spend money on a few pivotal items, in my case, an enormous crystal dining room chandelier; a burnt-orange lacquered library desk; fabulous fabric from Zoffany, Zimmer Rohde and JAB Anstoetz; oversized curtain tassels; the wirework ghost chandelier on the stairwell; focal-point wallpaper from Cole & Son, Bodie and Fou, and my bedroom mural featuring Marlene Dietrich; funky blinds from Digetex and, finally, a 6ft bronze stag in the front garden – I just couldn't resist that one.

WHERE TO GET THE LOOK

- Get Turner builders www.getturner.co.uk
- FEET www.feet-international.co.uk
- KDCUK Kitchens (www.kdcuk.co.uk)
- Lighting Direct (www.lighting-direct.co.uk)
- QF4U (www.qualityfurniture4u.com)
- Cole and Son (www.cole-and-son.com)
- Bodie and Fou (www.bodieandfou.com)
- Alfies Antiques Market (www.alfiesantiques.com)
- 2K Mirrors (www.2kmirror.co.uk)
- Urban Upholstery (www.urbanupholstery.com)
- Margam Jones Tassels (www.margamjonestassels.com)
- Harlequin (www.harlequin.uk.com)
- B&Q (www.diy.com)
- Anderson Bradshaw (www.andersonbradshaw.co.uk)
- Sinter Mosaics (www.sinterstudio.com)
- ID Wall Murals (www.id-wall.com)
- Vertigo Interiors (www.vertigo-interiors.co.uk)
- White Room (www.awhiteroom.com)
- Space Slide (www.spaceslide.co.uk)
- Unto this Last (www.untothistlast.co.uk)
- Harvey Maria (www.harveymaria.co.uk)
- Walls and Floors (www.wallsandfloors.co.uk)
- Atelir Abigail Ahern (www.atelirabigailahern.com)
- Crystal Corner (www.crystal-corner.co.uk)
- Digetex (www.digetex.com)
- Designer Curtains www.designercurtains.com
- Topofart (www.topofart.com)
- Zoffany (www.zoffany.com)
- Zimmer Rohde (www.zimmer-rohde.com)
- Jab Anstoetz (www.jab.de)

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