

The kitchen and its sitting area flow seamlessly into each other, with black-metal-framed glass doors leading to the garden and three skylight windows providing plenty of light



## *the* ELEMENT of SURPRISE

Relocating to Oxford after 15 years in Japan and Hong Kong, the owners of this Victorian house put together a team of experts to create a mostly open-plan layout full of intriguing design details to capture the imagination

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FROM LEFT in the sitting area, a screen slides down to hide the TV above the fireplace. The ottoman is from George Smith



FROM LEFT A leather chaise longue from Douglass Workroom contrasts with the blue palette of the drawing room. The entrance hall



It would take just the blink of an eye to miss the first secret door in this Oxford house, which is concealed in a panelled wall of the entrance hall. The room commands attention, pulling your gaze up from the elegant tiled floor to take in the striking painting by Guy Maestri, ceiling. It is no surprise to hear that this welcome was carefully planned by the owners. 'We liked the idea of capturing someone's attention when they walk in and creating that sense of intrigue, like the secret door that leads into the boot room,' says the husband.

The enclosed hall is a deliberate design pause point. The rest of the ground floor is hidden beyond and soon proves to be entirely open plan, cementing an open/closed concept that is repeated throughout the house. 'We didn't want the whole of the downstairs to be revealed straight away,' the owner continues. 'You turn right, the stairs appear and your eye is drawn towards the drawing room to the kitchen with a sitting area and you enter the dining room and then go through to the kitchen with a sitting area and out into the garden.'

This is the couple's self-proclaimed first 'grown-up house' after 15 years of expat apartment living in Japan and Hong Kong. They bought the Victorian house in 2012 and decided to renovate it before relocating to Oxford with their three children. Used to lateral living on one floor, they found the warren of downstairs rooms and modern add-ons incongruous, as well as the steep, narrow stairs winding over four storeys.

They turned to the architect Don Ruggles, his partner Melissa Mabe and the team at Ruggles Mabe Studio in Denver. The firm was also behind the redesign of the owners' former Colorado holiday home, near to where the wife grew up. They knew ideas about opening and connecting spaces. A new rear extension created space for a kitchen with a sitting area, and a third storey was added to the existing side extension to create a playroom, laundry room and en suite to the sons' bedroom. The owners application, execute the design details and manage the construction with the builders, Sporn Construction. After a year of Skyping and emails between the international teams, the family was able to move in for Christmas 2013.

Punctuation points in the shape of strategically placed pillars and curtains separate spaces in the open-plan ground floor. Steps lead down into the kitchen and sitting room, and a ceiling thrown high adds volume, daylight and a sense of space without the cavernous echo of an oversize room. The architectural framework stands proud: three black-metal-framed glass doors lead to the garden, and the newly built staircase – just millimetres wider than before and with an elegant iron balustrade – is set back from the hall to enhance the circulation space.

Despite the architectural strength, the house unfolds slowly, allowing the eye to pick up intricate details and layered textures as you wander through. It is an interior scheme that strikes the balance between formal and family living in the brief to American interior designer Susan Ferrier of McAlpine. 'The classic joke between us is we wanted our home to be big but small and formal yet relaxed,' says the wife. 'We like strong, physical design, but wanted rooms to feel nurturing and comfortable.'

Susan had got to know the couple while working on their Colorado house and so (inevitably) parallels were drawn. 'Both locations experience the cold, so rich textures help keep the home steeped in warmth,' Susan says. 'The sturdy linen fabrics and sofas in the sitting area have strength in their scale but tones that bring a calming mood to smaller spaces.' Curtains from Lewis & Sheron Textiles hang in place of doors to the drawing and dining rooms, delineating the spaces and allowing light and views to flow unobstructed. Open-plan spaces retain their own identity with large, dramatic art brought back from Hong Kong and oversize lighting from McLain Wiesand and Roll & Hill. 'Lots of activity goes on in the kitchen and sitting room and it's important that the room doesn't compete,' says Susan. 'Too many small objects can create chatter, so I chose large lamps and large light fixtures to fill the space more generously.'

An understated palette aids the transition upstairs. The first floor is adult space and the top floor is for guests. Sandwiched safely in between is the children's floor and the location of the second secret door: a solid bookcase, which rolls back to reveal the playroom. As the husband says, 'We love the feeling of not knowing what you might find' □

Ruggles Mabe Studio: [rugglesmabe.com](http://rugglesmabe.com) | Riach Architects: [riacharchitects.com](http://riacharchitects.com)  
Sporn Construction: [spornconstruction.com](http://spornconstruction.com) | McAlpine: [mc Alpinehouse.com](http://mc Alpinehouse.com)



FROM TOP The new rear extension, which is an open-plan kitchen with a sitting area. The spare children's room on the third floor has specially made built-in bunks. In a bathroom, Cole & Son 'Orchid' wallpaper softens the effect of the marble basins and grey mosaic flooring