

When a plan comes together...

Zoe Moorhouse is an architect, but the home she has created in a tiny Byley cottage suggests her design talents stretch firmly into interiors, too

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Working in an architects' firm in Manchester, Zoe was quite happy with her city centre studio flat, but the arrival of her now husband, Chris, pushed them both to expand their horizons beyond city life and start their progress deeper and deeper into Cheshire.

'Chris couldn't cope with just a small studio flat,' Zoe laughs, 'so we first moved to Heald Green, then to Hale and now to Byley, where we finally found our "one day" house, the house we had always dreamed of living in, one day, and had even been buying bits and pieces for over the years we've been together.'

When the couple moved in, the cottage was tiny and slightly inconveniently planned, at least by modern standards. Over the centuries of its existence, owners had bolted on extensions or made changes to the layout that didn't work for them.

'When we moved in it was liveable, but really awkward,' Zoe says. 'We never planned to keep it as it was. The kitchen was in what is now the hallway, with the oven under the stairs. It had two double bedrooms and two boxrooms, the main lounge was in a small room bolted on behind the kitchen, but it was very dark and not at all family-friendly – and most of all there was no attempt to benefit from the views, which are glorious.'

Zoe designed a two-storey extension, which gave them an open L-shaped kitchen and living space, with views across the





The dining table delivers a touch of industrial style to the room, while the huge mirror throws back the abundant light



Black cabinetry and a polished cement island top add a contemporary uplift to a traditional cottage-style kitchen



The secret snug offers a child-free zone for Zoe and Chris to relax in

countryside, and in the second storey an en-suite and dressing room, plus an additional bedroom, having taken one of the existing rooms to create the master suite. They also moved the front door, to a much more sensible place, opening into the hallway, no longer a kitchen. The overall result is a cottage that is light, airy, definitely family-friendly and designed for modern living, yet offers the family everything they wish from rural living.

'It was an 18-month project. All three of us [Zoe, her husband and now four-year-old daughter, Daisy] lived in one bedroom, hopping through a building site every day.'

Entering the cottage, we step into a spacious hallway (very unusual in a cottage, but of course this was originally the kitchen). Stairs lead to the first floor, and a bookshelf tucked into a shallow niche catches my attention. Zoe pushes gently on the shelves, and they swing open to reveal a snug, with an open fireplace, cosy sofas and dark painted walls.



'The secret bookcase is something that really appealed to Chris, but we wouldn't have attempted it without a really great joiner. It's quite heavy, so not very child-friendly, so the snug is very much our space for evening relaxation, and for Chris on days he's working from home.'

On entering the kitchen the first impression is one of light and air and wide-open spaces. Glass bifold doors open into a garden with nothing beyond but fields, a seating area offers space for all the family to gather, and a dining table, made from warm, glowing wood, provides seating for family or friends to gather. Bold black walls in the dining space reflect the black cabinetry in the kitchen.

'We just decided we wanted a black kitchen. We found one we liked in Jewsons, and our amazing joiner, Alan Boyllin, fitted it. We had to have in-frame cupboards, for that cottage style, but the colour adds a contemporary uplift. The island is polished concrete, which gives a slightly industrial feel – we got the idea from a cottage we stayed at in Devon.'

The island was a mammoth DIY task. Alan built the frame and Zoe and Chris mixed and poured the concrete.

'It wasn't made in-situ,' Zoe laughs. 'We needed a lot of help lifting it. Once it was all polished, we treated it with the appropriate treatment – a lot – to seal it and make it food safe.'

Zoe took a sample of the cabinetry to B&Q to have it paint-matched for the dining area wall. The lights above the island are from Ikea, the copper and white drawing the various elements



The guest room mixes modern and traditional pieces in perfect harmony

of the kitchen together, including the copper pans that were a welcome wedding gift, but unused until they found their perfect home.

In every room, there are slightly quirky and interesting bits and pieces to look at, set against rich colours and in uncompromising style.

'The interiors were very much a joint effort,' Zoe says. 'We had a very clear vision, and luckily we have very similar taste and so we were able to go big and bold, and not compromise on anything. This is our 'one day' house and we had collected furniture, art, trinkets, lights,



Zoe Moorhouse has created a beautiful home in Byley



A French cabinet and vintage cinema chairs add quirky style to the hallway

even an old fire extinguisher, for years until we finally found the home we wanted. We found stuff everywhere, from Homebase to French flea markets, Ikea to a vintage and reclamation fair at Tatton Park.'

In the hallway a trio of vintage cinema seats sit next to a 19th century French pharmacy cabinet. The seats have been customised with images from the couples' favourite films, printed onto canvas then pinned onto the chairs' bases. Kirsty, our photographer, and I, are delighted to discover that Zoe has painted the leading edge of each door in a contrasting colour to the panels.

'We have picked a feature colour from each room for this,' Zoe says. 'I saw it on Instagram and just decided to go for it. We have red in the kitchen and upstairs we went a bit blingy in the spare room, with gold for the lamp and the bedframe.'

It's this attention to detail, and the extra consideration Zoe gives every space, which has no doubt resulted in her success setting up her own architectural firm, a story that started, in April 2020, in lockdown.

'I was about to start my maternity leave,' Zoe says, 'and then was also offered redundancy, so decided to go for it and set up Plan Architects. My first client came through the Next-Door app, which is all hyper-local users. He then went on to

'The seats have been customised with images from the couples' favourite films'



Surely everybody's dream – a secret room hidden behind a bookcase



Zoe designed a new master suite, with dressing room and en-suite, taking an existing bedroom to create the space

refer me to his two neighbours. I also find quite a few clients through Bark [a website where people can find recommended local professionals for almost anything you could need]. Some jobs are quite basic, but I have had a few really interesting ones too. My first meetings were all done over Zoom, with carefully planned site visits. I had my twins, Charlie and Luke, soon after and they would come with me.'

Lockdown was, of course, a trigger for many homeowners to look at their homes and consider how they could make changes to support their lifestyles, and the new ability to work from home so many have maintained ever since.

Zoe says: 'People saw the problems and the opportunities, and I help them achieve the goal of living better in the home they have.' ♦

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