

SEEING THE LIGHT

How ancient Japanese palaces inspired the redesign of a London Victorian terrace to create a miniature haven of greenery. By *Ruth Bloomfield*





The view of the house from the garden
ADAM SCOTT

The kitchen extension is one of the most popular home improvements, but how to make it feel modern and up-to-date? Gemma Ruse and Xavier Sheriff turned to an ancient approach to breathe new life into a tried-and-tested project. The couple borrowed a trick from classical Japanese palaces to reinvent their inner-city Victorian terrace.

Gemma, 36, and Xavier, 35, who have a two-year-old son, Raffi, wanted to create a large, light kitchen at the heart of their family home in Clapton, east London.

This meant rethinking its original arrangement: a small narrow kitchen with a utility space in the side-return. They

decided to extend back three metres (9ft 8in) to enlarge the kitchen, and to install a wall of glass doors and full-height windows, which would mean light would stream in from the garden. The problem was that doing so would leave the basement floor and the middle of the house in the shade — literally.

The solution? Create an internal courtyard that would act as a light well and the focal point of the ground floor.

“I really liked the idea that we were going to be surrounded and immersed in greenery,” Gemma says.

The couple’s first home was a two-bedroom maisonette in nearby London Fields, which

they had bought in 2008 and slowly renovated.

Gemma had recently completed a degree in fashion design and Xavier had studied product design, and a year later they combined their talents and set up their own company, StudioXAG, to create pop-up shops and window displays for high-end brands.

Three years ago, in search of more space, they began house-hunting. London Fields, by this point, was fiendishly expensive and they homed in on better value Lower Clapton, where they found a run-down six-bedroom house for £1 million.

“When we first saw our



TOP TIPS

- including a courtyard when doing a kitchen or side-return extension won't add to the cost; what you spend on extra windows and doors you should claw back in less flooring, heating, and decoration.

- Use double glazed windows and doors to surround a courtyard — metal panels

have slimmer frames than timber and will maximize the view.

- A courtyard must have access, so you can clear leaves and water plants.

- Gemma and Xavier's courtyard is about 35 sq ft, as small as you should go if planning a similar project.

- When it comes to planting, bear in mind how large it might grow — you don't want your inner sanctuary blocked by a weeping willow. Include evergreens for a winter display.

- Spotlights on plants and wall lights will create a magical grotto effect at night.

house it looked pretty awful and we didn't want it, Gemma says. "But it had potential — and I know it sounds ridiculous given what it cost, but it was also relatively inexpensive."

The catch was that the house needed everything done to it.

"It had some subsidence, it was falling down a bit at the back, and it hadn't really been touched since the 1960s or 1970s," Gemma says. "The attic had been converted, but really badly, and it had been used as a darkroom so it had one A4-sized window."

It took until 2018 for the sale to go through and the couple moved into the house

The property, which measures just over 2,000 sq ft, is set out over four main floors. As well as extending the kitchen, Gemma and Xavier wanted to use the basement level as a self-contained one-

bedroom flat that they could rent out if necessary. But they also wanted it to have a link to the rest of the house.

The trouble was that pushing the kitchen back would leave the rear of the basement semi-underground. The courtyard, which was embedded through both ground and basement levels, solved the puzzle.

She was influenced by the small inner gardens, or *tsubo-niwa*, that were used in Japanese palaces during the Heian period (794 to 1185) to give residents a soothing glimpse of nature. The idea gained traction and spread to private homes, temples, hotels and restaurants, as people realised that the small spaces acted as light wells, assisted with ventilation and made rooms seem larger. And in a country where city space is at a premium, *tsubo-niwa* remains a popular way to provide a (very) small slice of

outdoor space.

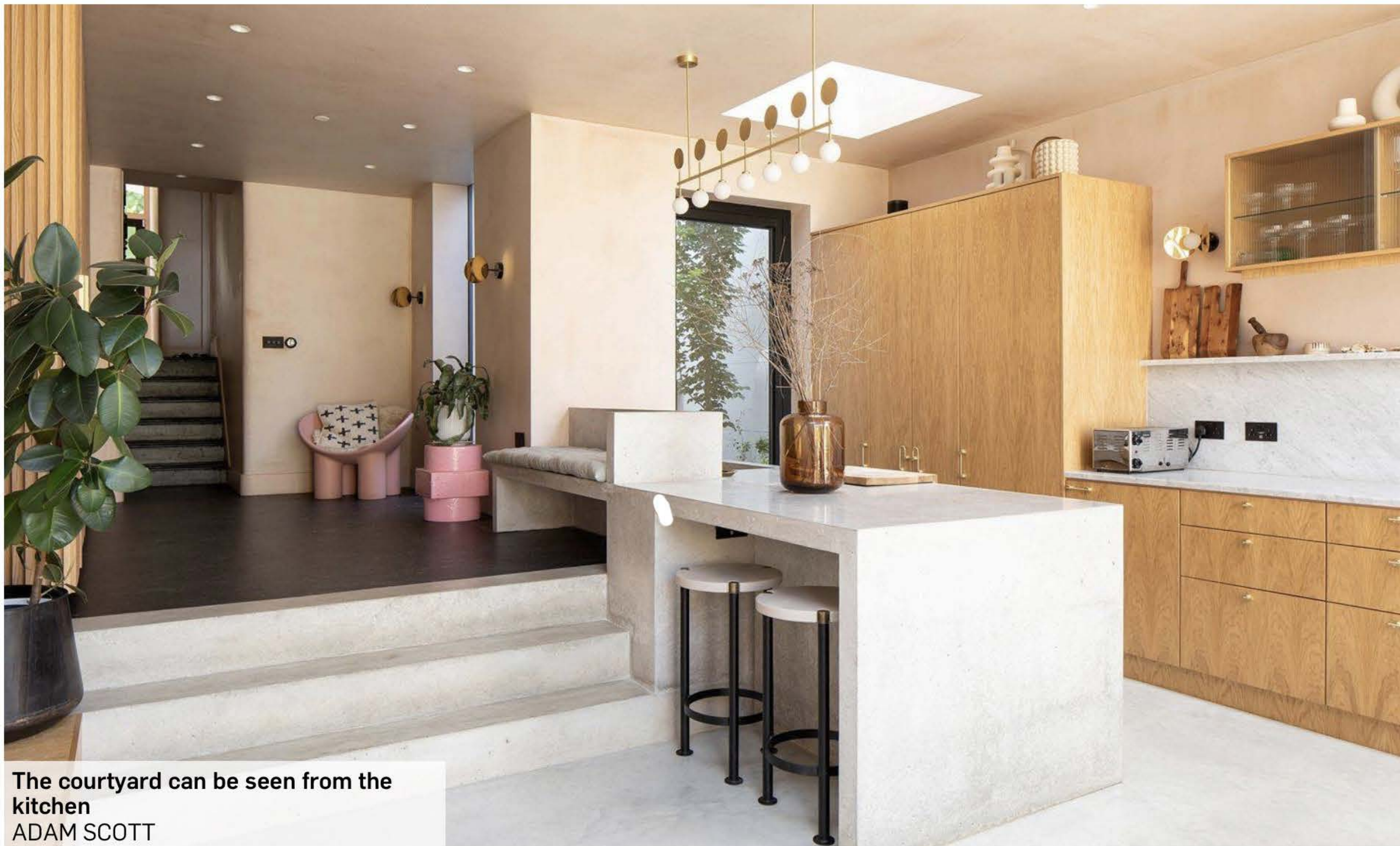
"*Tsubo* means 'an area equal to two tatami mats, or 3.3sq m (36 sq ft)' and so is very small," "However, within this space we can capture soft light, the pattering of rain on leaves, a sweet smell of the planting. It feels like a quiet force — providing life energy to the house. It is visible from most of the rooms in the house."

Courtyard homes have been around for millennia, as well as being a global trend. The remains of Stone Age homes found in Jordan, dating from around 6,000BC, were designed as a series of rooms set around a central courtyard, while the Romans built houses centred on an atrium. Similar styles have also been found in China, India and South America, as well as Japan.

And although it did mean giving up a little interior floor space,

"People get very, very fixated on maximising





The courtyard can be seen from the kitchen
ADAM SCOTT

footprint,” she says. “I tell people that is not the way to think about it. A courtyard makes the space which looks on to it so much better, and that has a value in itself.”

And, as well as natural light and ventilation, courtyards can have health benefits.

“There has been so much written about the mental health benefits of having a green outlook,” Fraher says.

Gemma and Xavier were swiftly convinced. “I bought into it,” Gemma says. “It was a really smart way of dividing up the house, and a practical way to bring in more light.”

The house, before work began, had a classic Victorian terrace layout, with the front

door opening on to a hallway that passes the living room and leads to the kitchen at the back. The courtyard has been inserted between the living room and the kitchen, which means both rooms are now double aspect.

The tiny green space also bridges the gap between the basement and the kitchen — with a door and a couple of steps on either side. Gemma and Xavier enlisted the help of landscape designer Miria Harris (miriaharris.com) to help to plant their courtyard.

The focal point is an *Acer campestre* ‘William Caldwell’, or field maple. Although the tree can grow eight metres tall, its spread is a modest 1.5

metres — ideal dimensions for a compact garden just large enough to also include a concrete bench seat.

The acer is deciduous so, to ensure year-round greenery, they have added jasmine, climbing a wire trellis on the side wall, and large pots for a selection of ferns, periwinkle, and other evergreens.

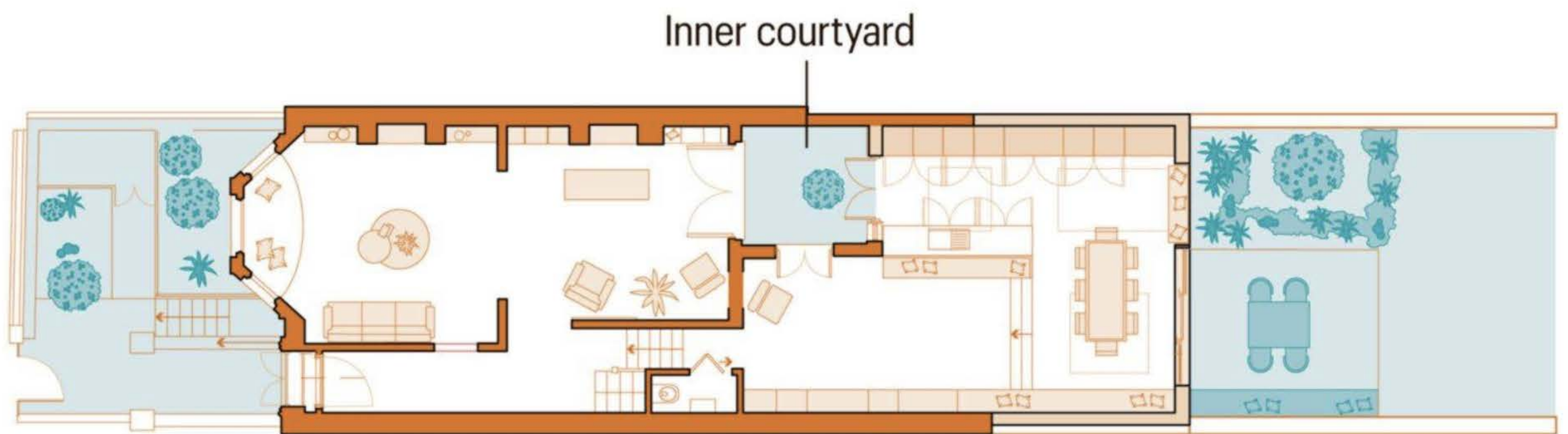
The plants do, of course, need regular watering. “In hindsight some irrigation should have been planned,” Gemma says. “We also have a green roof above the kitchen, but our wildflower meadow is in a sorry state and should probably have had some sort of irrigation too.”

Work began on the site in



THEIR GREEN AND PLEASANT PLAN FOR MORE SPACE

◆ Old footprint ◆ New footprint



the summer of 2018 — by which time Gemma was pregnant — and the family were able to move into their reconfigured house at the end of last summer.

Beyond the kitchen, the house has been fully refurbished. A box room has been repurposed as an extra bathroom, and a master suite created from two bedrooms. There is also a nursery for Raffi, a guest bedroom and an office/fourth bedroom in the attic.

The decor is striking, with raw plaster on most of the walls (sealed with varnish to protect it), two monochrome bathrooms, and black-painted floors, stairs and window frames.

The kitchen is a beauty, with

its concrete island and floor, marble work surfaces and splashback, and cabinets made from carefully chosen oak veneer.

“My brief to myself was clean lines and patina,” Gemma says. “We could paint over the walls in the future, if we wanted to, but I really like its imperfections. Materiality is really important to us. We wanted real marble in the kitchen, and I don’t mind if it gets a bit bashed up.”

The project also involved excavating below the kitchen floor to raise its ceiling height and adding sliding metal doors and dramatic charred timber cladding to the back of the house.

The cost of installing the courtyard and rebuilding and

enlarging the kitchen came in at about £250,000; this included excavating the kitchen floor to give the room increased head height.

“We did end up spending what one of the houses we first looked at, and rejected as too expensive, would have cost,” Gemma says. “But the thing is we would have wanted to make changes to those houses too. Having done our own renovation were quite used to living to our tastes.”

Opening image: Gemma Ruse, Xavier Sheriff and their son Raffi in the courtyard (Vicki Couchman)

► *Swipe for more photos of the renovation* ■

