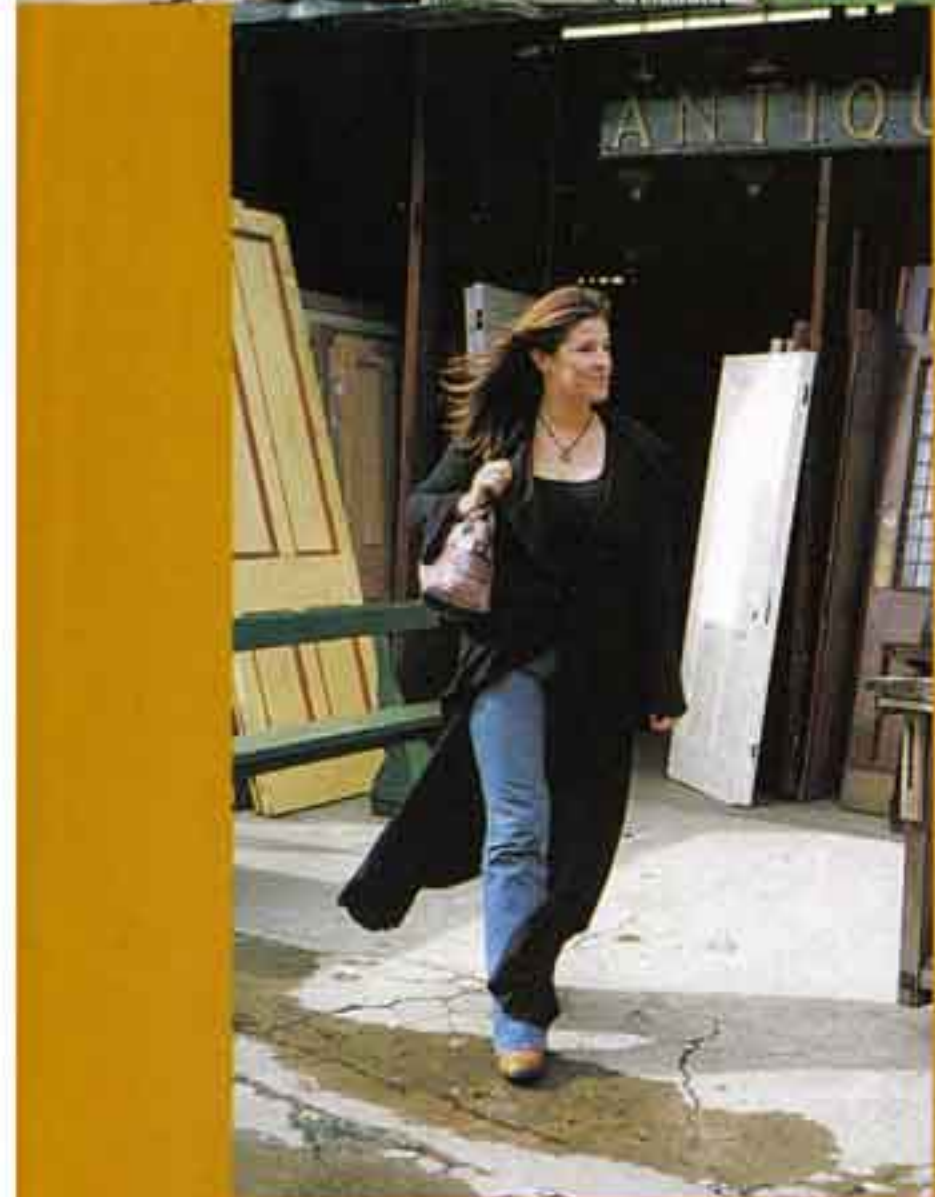


# 'I transformed this house with bargain buys'

Alison Cork, author of *The Streetwise Guide to Renovating your Home*, put her expertise to the test when she spotted the potential of a tired flat in central London



▲ Alison bought 'the worst property in the best street I could afford,' and added value with an extension and lots of hard work



Alison Cork runs two websites: [www.thereallyusefuldirectory.co.uk](http://www.thereallyusefuldirectory.co.uk), which together with a printed directory published twice a year, provides an essential guide to goods and services for home owners, and [www.londontradesmen.co.uk](http://www.londontradesmen.co.uk), a recommendation service of reliable tradesmen in the M25 area. As a self-taught renovation expert, Alison got to put all her knowledge into practice last year when moving house inspired her to conduct her own property experiment.



▲ Second-hand curtains from The Curtain Exchange (020-7731 8316) fit the living room's tall windows perfectly. The chairs and sofa are from Collins & Hayes (01424-720027). Alison has a passion for lamps and buys most of her lighting from Christopher Wray (020-7751 8701) and Graham & Green (0870-044 5656)

City girl at heart, Alison Cork and her husband Efi swapped leafy Hampstead for the buzz of central London and, faced with a down-at-heel home to renovate, set out to discover what constitutes good value.

Alison's first step was to employ an agent to find a property. She was busy with work and her son David, three, and was pregnant with Ethan, now seven months, so didn't have much time for house-hunting. 'At first

▶ A bargain at just £150, the desk was snapped up at Lots Road Auctions (020-7376 6800). The painting is by Ben Lowe (020-8605 1199)

I was loath to pay for something I could do myself, but it turned out to be a smart move as he had access to properties we'd never have found,' she says. 'A house was out of our budget in our chosen location, so he showed us this flat – it was the first place we saw.'

The flat is a split-level conversion in a Regency house in Belgravia, with a ground ▶





# Easy updates that will transform every room

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**ALISON'S FIVE TOP TIPS FOR RENOVATING A PROPERTY**

- 1** Always go for location over size and condition – it's the first rule of property. It's better to buy the worst house in the best street than the other way round.
- 2** Property professionals will save you money in the long run. A house hunter will find you a home that's not yet advertised. An architect will introduce you to reliable builders and trade-price suppliers.
- 3** Carve up the space so it works for you. If planning permission allows, extend, or consider moving internal walls. Make the most of even the smallest area of dead space – adding a cloakroom, for example, can really boost your home's value.
- 4** Commission your own furniture to get exactly what you want. You're not footing the bill for marketing and high-street overheads, so prices are usually much lower than you'd pay for similar quality in the shops.
- 5** Buy good-quality catches and fittings. They won't be the first thing buyers notice but they'll add an air of quality. If you can only afford basic units in your kitchen, expensive handles will lift them into a different league.

◀ Floor-to-ceiling windows and doors open up the space in David's bedroom and provide fabulous views of the courtyard. The bed is from Litvinoff & Fawcett (020-7739 3480), which Alison recommends for its high-quality hand-made designs



◀ Rich toffee shades create warmth and comfort in the main bedroom. The bespoke wardrobes in bur oak and a dressing room next door provide plenty of storage space. A seven-foot bed is a must for family lie-ins on Sunday mornings. The Art Deco-inspired headboard was made by The Curtain Exchange (020-7731 8316)

▼ A large mirror makes the most of the limited light in the boys' bathroom. A hard-wearing composite from Taurostone (01536-740000) makes an ideal surface for the vanity unit



▲ This dressing table in the couple's bedroom was an antique buy from Alfie's Antique Market (020-7723 6066). Alison had it topped with mirrored glass by The Mirror Workshop (020-7275 9436)



nervous about commissioning art, but Ben will come to your house and paint something the right size that fits your decor from £350, which is a great price for an original piece.'

Lighting is another element of decoration that Alison feels is under-exploited and she has used every conceivable form, from uplighters to lamps, to cater for every mood. Lighting was especially important in the basement, which now contains a main bedroom with en suite and dressing room, a guest room, guest cloakroom and a room for

each of the boys, plus the children's bathroom. 'My chief aim was to inject as much light as possible,' she explains. The boys' rooms, looking out over the courtyard garden, have floor-to-ceiling glass windows to give them a greater sense of space.

Alison was at pains to consider Efi when decorating their bedroom. 'It had to work for both of us so I chose rich chocolate curtains and warm toffee tones,' she says. Walk-in wardrobes keep Alison organised while Efi has a small dressing room, but the focus of

the room is a seven-foot bed that the children can join them in on Sunday mornings. 'In a flat, it's important to define areas clearly and I think we've done that successfully,' says Alison. 'We now have the home we wanted at a price we could afford.'

Order The Streetwise Guide to Renovating your Home (Piatkus Books, £10.99, plus p&tp) by calling 01476-541080. The latest edition of The Really Useful Directory costs £4.95 (plus p&tp) – call 01732-878800 to order.



▲ Family meals take place in the dining room, which leads out onto the balcony. The table was made by Jeff Watson at Paragon Furniture (020-8503 0199). The fireplace is from Elgin & Hall (01677-450100)

► On the ground floor of the new extension sits the Art Deco-inspired kitchen. The gorgeous units were built to Alison's design and the skylight, by specialists Durabuild (024-7666 9169), floods the room with natural light

▼ David loves eating at the breakfast bar, where Alison can keep an eye on him. Alison's favourite kitchen buy was the huge American fridge-freezer from Maytag (01737-231000)



► Practical composite flooring from Classico Marble (01753-650507) was laid over underfloor heating. The couple sourced the granite splashback and worktops from Pisani (020-8568 5001)

▼ Alison turned the entrance hall into a stunning library, which provides a home for the couple's vast collection of books and doubles as a formal dining room. The beautiful parquet floor was supplied and laid by Campbell Marson (020-8879 1909)



a breakfast bar and a skylight to flood the room with natural light. With her heart set on granite worktops, she went straight to stone specialists Pisani. 'Because it's a natural material every piece is unique and I hand-picked my own slabs,' she says.

Next to the kitchen there's a small dining room, but entertaining often takes place in the spacious entrance hall, which the couple turned into a library. 'We have over 3,000 books so it was the most practical use of the space,' says Alison. The bur oak bookcases have clever removable hidden panels that slot into the round dining table, extending it to seat up to ten people.

With its high ceiling and tall windows, standard furnishings for the living room were out of the question. Alison picked up outsized furniture at auctions and went to Wembley's rug warehouses, saving up to 30% in the process. One area she decided not to scrimp on, however, was the flooring. 'It's crucial to have a parquet floor laid by skilled craftsmen,' she says. 'It took three weeks to put down and was sanded and sealed three times to create the perfect finish.'

A huge oil painting of a shipwreck fills one wall of the living room and Alison commissioned artist Ben Lowe to create a sympathetic modern piece to hang above the desk opposite. 'People are notoriously ►

▼ Ladybird Landscapes (020-7610 6141) designed the courtyard garden, which looks good all year round. For the patio, Alison chose the same composite flooring as she used in the kitchen



floor boasting all the magnificent proportions of the era and bedrooms and bathrooms in the basement below. But it was only after they had bought the property that Alison discovered a real gem. Hidden away in the documentation was planning permission for an extension. 'No one had mentioned it when we were buying and, in a Grade II listed building, that kind of luck saves six months to a year's worth of hassle,' she explains.

Alison planned to transform the space with a two-storey extension, plus alterations to the layout downstairs, so she asked the

Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to recommend an architect. 'I decided to do some of the work myself and use the architect for things such as planning office applications and amendments,' she says.

With building work completed eight months later, Alison was ready to decorate. 'I decided to source all the materials myself to make sure I got the best quality at an excellent price,' she says. She commissioned joiner Jeff Watson at Paragon Furniture to make Art Deco-inspired units in sycamore with oak inlay for her kitchen. She included