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ARCHITECT PROFILE

Judith Wilson talks to Alan Higgs, who describes how he converted a Georgian pub building in London into a subtly modern flat for himself, with an office for his practice below, using geometry as an ordering device

PHOTOGRAPHS ALICIA TAYLOR

This property was a complex acquisition, as the Georgian building was a pub, with a basement and a first-floor flat. I had to obtain planning consent to convert it into an office, and subsequently to add a new residential second floor. I waited to secure planning consent for the roof terrace before I could invert my accommodation, designing two bedrooms and bathrooms below and a living area with access to the terrace.

'For the new top floor, I designed classical sash windows that were part of the external design. The best solution was a seamless extension of the language of the original building, rather than a contrasting foil. However the roof terrace is not visible from the street, so the opposite side of the room has glass doors. I like the surprise of traditional and new together.'

'The room is just under 90 square metres, with ample provision for kitchen, dining and seating areas. I wanted a space that was calm and orderly, with geometry as a subtle ordering device. To define the line from the staircase to the kitchen, we chose a stone floor, leaving the timber floor for the living area to create a perfect rectangle. Likewise, a trio of skylights and wall recesses align. The column is structural support, but I deliberately made it larger to give the kitchen a sense of separation.'

'I don't start by choosing materials: instead, they play a supporting role. This room is very bright, with a distinctive luminosity. I decided to enhance that characteristic by choosing light tones. So the kitchen floor, fire surround and wet areas are pale stone, and the timber floor and kitchen units are limed oak. The walls are painted in 'Skimming Stone' by Farrow & Ball – a rich neutral.'

'I included a chimneypiece as it remains the



**ALAN HIGGS
ARCHITECTS**
020-7723 0075;
alanhiggsarchitects.com

single most important attribute for a property in a cold climate. A fire creates atmosphere with sound, warmth and smell, linking us to our primeval instincts and providing a focal point. In such a large space it was important that the chimneypiece didn't become amorphous, so I've scaled it to dominate the wall.

'I like to include furniture with personal meaning. I was given two 'Brno' Mies van der Rohe chairs for my twenty-first birthday, and I originally had the 1835 lead-lined wine cooler – used as a side table – dispatched to Australia, but it is now back in London. The Sixties coffee table is a recent acquisition from Schmid McDonagh. I had my eye on it for a while: the copper top has great reflectivity.'

'I think of this extension as adaptive re-use. An old London building has been upgraded using modern materials and sustainable elements, including a sedum-planted roof, and it has taken on a new life. For me, that's the perfect form of sustainability.'

ABOVE A Tim Page carpet introduces pattern and defines the sitting area of Alan's living space. Moooi lamps and William Yeoward side chairs, upholstered in Romo velvet, emphasise the symmetry of this area; the Sixties copper coffee table in the centre is from Schmid McDonagh



1 On one wall, a mirror slides back to reveal a TV screen. The dramatic lighting scheme by Sally Storey has been designed to create clean lines that run along the furniture.

2 Around the modern wenge dining table from Cassina, there are four 'Brno' chairs from Knoll that Alan bought to match his original two. Chosen to suit the proportions of the room, the 302 x 205cm painting *Red Earth*, by Hughie



O'Donoghue, adds drama. 'Like all the best abstract art, this painting has great emotional power,' says Alan.

3 To maximise the natural light from the roof terrace, Alan has installed floor-to-ceiling glass doors and a modern glass balustrade. The Florence Knoll sofas upholstered in black Danish wool were bought for the space; Oka velvet cushions introduce a warm but controlled splash of colour.



ADDED INSIGHT

Which three words sum up your style?
Balanced, timeless, powerful.

Your greatest challenge in architecture?
Finding the best outcome is always the challenge, as is doing the best you can with any commission, given planning, budget and site constraints.

What shaped your design aesthetic?
The pared-back necessity of post-colonial Australian environments. It's crucial to make the most of what you have, rather than hankering after what you don't.

Are you a Modernist or a traditional architect?
My designs are informed by the classical principles of architecture. I am not a minimalist but I like architecture without unnecessary excrement.

What's next?
As a practice, we continue to push the boundaries with ever larger and more complex commissions. I'm also undertaking a postgraduate research project □