

Entrances can often be dark and difficult to use well. The owners of this mid-Victorian house wanted to increase the feeling of spaciousness by incorporating the hall into a fluid multi-purpose living area.



# GOING WITH THE *Flow*

Three architectural experts offer insights into creating fluid, sociable, multi-functional living spaces in older properties

Open-plan living may not be for everyone, or for every aspect of life; recent research has shown that workers in open-plan offices are up to 30 per cent less productive than those who work in quiet, private spaces. At home, however, our needs are very different. In our increasingly busy, multi-tasking world, families benefit from spending time together even though they may be engaged in quite different activities – one preparing supper, for example, whilst another is busy on his laptop and the children watch television, read or play close by. Open-plan living was pioneered

by the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright who created serene, spacious modernist living spaces in his legendary Prairie houses during the early years of the last century, and these simple, fluid spaces seem every bit as enticing and easy to live in as they did a hundred years ago.

Removing internal partition walls can improve living spaces in a number of ways: an increased feeling of spaciousness and light – particularly at lower levels – as well as reclaiming ‘dead’ or wasted transitional spaces such as passageways and corridors. Of course there are structural issues with period houses – indeed most houses that

are not specifically designed for open-plan living – but Stephen Fletcher, an architect specialising in working with period buildings, suggests that almost any structural issue may be overcome with sufficient budget. Listed buildings have special restrictions and any structural changes will need listed-building consent which is not always forthcoming – something to bear in mind. As with any structural work, it is important to ensure the alterations are sympathetic to the style and period of the building, and it is important to keep all the relevant paperwork in the event of a future sale.





**LEFT** To create the feeling of a single, unified space, a structural beam was recessed into the ceiling space, and a new, slightly grander cornice was added.  
**BELOW** Following the removal of internal walls and the extension outwards under the side return and to the rear of the house, it was necessary to lower the floor of the basement to keep the space in proportion. A flexible, informal living, cooking and dining area was created here.



## CASE STUDY 1

STEPHEN FLETCHER *Stephen Fletcher Architects*

*A Victorian house was remodelled to create an open-plan family home*

Very few period buildings exist today exactly as they were designed and built – the vast majority have evolved over the years, being adapted and added to in a piecemeal, ad hoc way as particular needs arose and as funds allowed, with the result that aesthetics, flow and practicality are all compromised to some degree. London-based architect Stephen Fletcher specialises in working with historically sensitive and listed buildings and enjoys the challenge of creating practical, bespoke spaces that work sympathetically within their historic context.

“This project was the remodelling of the

entire house, which allowed us to create a succession of spaces that flowed and worked together,” explains Fletcher. “It was a sizable project; the mid-Victorian house retained much of the original configuration, and the clients – a couple with a young family – wanted to make the most of the available space whilst retaining a period feel. The brief was for a generous, flexible entertaining space at ground-floor level, with a more informal kitchen, dining and living space as well as a children’s playroom, study and utility room on the lower-ground floor. The original layout of upper floors would remain more or less the same, save for the addition of a handsome master bedroom suite complemented by an interconnecting dressing and bathroom running from the front to the back of the house.”

The most radical transformation was on the lower-ground floor: the original internal walls were demolished and the space was extended sideways under the side return and backwards into the garden. “We completely stripped the house back and excavated a couple of feet from the basement to add ceiling height,” Fletcher adds. “It was quite a low space to start with and once we had demolished all the internal walls and extended to the side and rear, the space would have looked completely out of proportion. The ▶





An elegant open-plan master suite with bathing, dressing and seating areas runs from the front to the back of the house.

staircase was also moved to the centre of the space to free up more room for the kitchen.”

Since all the original internal walls as well as two of the external ones were being removed, considerable additional structural support was required, and for this, Fletcher enlisted the services of a structural engineer who devised a comprehensive structural scheme. Also, the house was semi-detached, so a party-wall surveyor was also involved to ensure there were no repercussions for either neighbouring property.

“We needed to add a major piece of structural support to the back of the house,” Fletcher reveals. “We installed a box frame – a steel beam, two columns and a further beam – however this is all well hidden above the ceiling and beneath the floor. The idea was to have completely level ceilings to add the idea of a complete, flowing space.” A similar, although somewhat less heavy-duty device has been used to support the upper level of the house following the

demolition of the wall between the former front and back reception rooms at ground-floor level, and a new, slightly grander cornice was added to reinforce the feeling of a generous single space rather than a pair of conjoined rooms. “Obviously, there is a cost implication to concealing all the structural elements, but just about anything is possible, provided that sufficient funds are available.”

As well as creating a contemporary, fluid space designed for modern family living, the new scheme still honours the aesthetics of the original period home. “We actually brought back some of the Victorian elements that weren’t there before,” Fletcher adds. “We replaced an incongruous bay window that had been



Cabinetry and shutters that reflect the original Victorian architecture ensure a sympathetic period feel is retained.

added in the 1930s with proper sliding sashes, and put in window shutters and architraves at ground- and first-floor levels. And although elements such as the skyframe French windows on the lower-ground floor are about as minimal and contemporary as you can get, we have still respected the Victorian materials as the new brickwork matches the original.” ▶