

Newbery House Shaping a sanctuary

Russian For Fish transforms local-authority flat into design-lover's dream



Buyers of ex-local-authority properties often have a lot of work in their hands. They can be faced with uninspiring, drably decorated, often neglected spaces that need, at very least, a decorative, tweak, if not a full facelift. Added to that there's the fact that alterations may be restricted by the freeholder, making it even harder to achieve your perfect home.

This was the problem confronting the new owner of a ground-floor flat in Newbery House, a large 1930s brick-built block in the heart of Canonbury, North London. As

she divides her time between Germany and the UK, she wanted a London bolthole that could double as an Airbnb rental when she was out of the country. However, the run-down, cramped space with the uninspiring decor and the unfinished kitchen initially seemed inappropriate for either.

As an arts professional, the owner had a clear idea of the aesthetic she wanted – clean and pared-back, but full of rustic texture – so, seeing her own sense of style reflected in the Russian For Fish Instagram feed, she approached the practice with her brief: design, configure, decorate and furnish a flat with the character of a personal home; that captures the eyes of potential guests in search of a short-term let; and is robust and hard-wearing enough to sustain multiple occupants over the course of a year.

With the client based in Germany and Russian For Fish in London, much of the project was coordinated remotely, with Russian For Fish founders Pereen D’Avoine and Nilesh Shah sustaining a close creative collaboration with their client over email and digital platforms – which, in retrospect, gave the architects excellent practice for sustaining a business through the 2020 lockdown.

Making the space

Although structural changes were minimal, to combat the flat’s constricted feel, Russian For Fish created a sense of space and flow by opening up the kitchen and living room, and reconfiguring the kitchen to make more intelligent use of the space available.



Replacing the bathtub with a walk-in shower turned the once-cramped bathroom into a generous space. Removing two structurally unnecessary ceiling-high cupboards by the entrance allowed for the creation of a welcoming seating area with a bench, coat hooks and space to store luggage – ideal for Airbnb guests.

What was a rickety timber door between the kitchen and the outside has been replaced by a striking Crittall-style door supplied by Perla, and framed in an effective but unconventional white. This floods the kitchen with natural light, and offers a sweeping view over the flat's fenced yard to the greenery of the communal gardens.

Colour and texture

Although the owner was keen that the interior decor be restrained enough to appeal to a broad audience of potential renters, she was also determined it should incorporate playful elements and touches of character. Russian For Fish therefore sought to balance neutral monochromes with warm textures, offbeat patterns and block colours that brought personality and creativity into the design. Dominated by a clean, crisp white, the colour palette incorporates accents of black in fixtures such as handles and taps, as well as a soft, welcoming pink in the bathroom tiles – picked up in the kitchen's splashback, where an irregular pattern in blue and pink is itself echoed in the soft furnishings in the living room.

RUSSIAN FOR FISH



To create a rich interplay of textures, simple and elegant natural materials are deployed throughout – including a timber floor in white-stained oak and the unfinished white plaster on the walls, which introduces a gently mottled, tactile effect.



Durability was a key consideration. From the marble-block lamps to the hairpin steel legs of the dining table, materials and furniture were chosen to be robust and long-lasting, so the flat maintains its beauty while being 'Airbnb-proof'.

Creativity flourishes under pressure

The renovation posed a number of logistical challenges. Not only were Russian For Fish obliged to update the property to ensure it met all model building regulations, they had to do so while staying within the limits set by the freeholder, Islington Council. These include a prohibition against cutting chases into the floors or ceilings, which called for a creative approach to lighting, whereby wires trailed up the walls and across the ceiling – foregrounded as decorative features rather than hidden beneath layers of plaster. The light switches, with their distinctive circular plates and twisting-lozenge mechanism, were sourced by the client.



Other limitations were introduced by the budget, but deftly sidestepped. The unfinished white plaster not only introduces a beautiful texture to the flat, it also represents a significant cost saving on decoration. In the kitchen, the use of IKEA carcasses and cabinet doors minimises expenditure, but adding selected handles and pulls in black gives the scheme a striking individual look.



Final touches

Completed in December 2019, the flat shows how relatively small changes can have a huge impact on both a property's visual appeal and its functionality. By the time Russian For Fish had finished, the client had the perfect canvas. The addition of just a few personal works of art and objects brought the space to life. Now listed on Airbnb, it has enjoyed continuing popularity among short-term renters – especially those with an interest in architecture and design.

'While the space remains neutral and functional to suit Airbnb guests, the lighting and pops of colour in the tiling give it personality. Opening up the wall between the kitchen and living area and installing Crittall doors have transformed the feel of the space, allowing so much more light into the otherwise fairly dim ground-floor flat. When people visit they often comment on how much bigger it feels than they expected.'

– Emily, owner

For more info and images, please contact Emily Ward, emily@zetteler.co.uk.

The property is available to book on AirBnb: airbnb.com/h/newberyhouse

About Russian For Fish

Russian For Fish is an award-winning London-based architectural and design practice founded by RIBA-chartered architect Pereen d'Avoine in 2006. Now run by Pereen and co-director Nilesh Shah, the firm works on extension and new-build projects for both residential and commercial clients, and is especially adept at transforming compact spaces. Their work is characterised by simplified material palettes, contemporary and minimalist detailing, and a cohesive, sympathetic approach to surroundings. russianforfish.com | @russianforfish