

MARGARITA McGRATH AND SCOTT OLIVER'S PLANS FOR EXTENDING THIS TINY HOUSE IN NEW YORK HAD TO CHANGE AFTER 9/11. INSTEAD THEY FOUND THAT REVEALING THE BUILDING'S HISTORY AND BLENDING IT WITH INDUSTRIAL AND NATURAL MATERIALS CREATED A MORE SATISFYING PLACE TO LIVE

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PHOTOGRAPHY NGOC MINH NGO

A WINNING COMBINATION



this picture Slot House was designed around an old maple tree, with the windows at the front framing views of it. The couple could have legally built bigger, but decided to keep the tree and work with the original footprint of the property
above left Scott relaxes in the first-floor living room - the metal grate section in the floor allows light down into the bedroom below

You would never guess this house in Brooklyn, New York, is a renovation, let alone one that is around 200 years old. Its floor-to-ceiling windows and mix of industrial and natural materials make it look more like a trendy new-build loft, but by dutifully retaining original features, Margarita McGrath and Scott Oliver's home is more like a love story with the past. The couple, both architects, put in an offer in 2001 for what Margarita describes as 'a funny little house' with an old maple tree taking up a large chunk of the plot. The plan was to enlarge the tiny building – just 100sqm – and showcase their design skills. Then September 11 happened.

In the aftermath Scott was temporarily unemployed and the couple were unsure about job prospects, so they scaled back their ambitions and settled for levelling the floor, putting in a new roof and improving the insulation. But when demolition work on the building uncovered beautiful walls of hand-made bricks and a rustic cedar frame, they chose to do something much more interesting and strip the house back to its bones, to celebrate its historical character.

'I remember sitting on the beams upstairs, dangling our legs, and saying, "Maybe we could really do architecture here. We could make a space that we will really enjoy"', says Margarita. 'Rather than making it an investment, we made the house what it wanted to be.'

It's something they talk about a lot – this idea of listening to the house and letting it speak for itself. Instead of creating a space that was designed with__

this picture South- and east-facing windows in the first-floor living room provide ventilation and passive solar heating. Insulation has been added throughout the house to bring it up to current energy standards, with 3in-thick dense mineral wool batts behind plasterboard areas, dense fibre-glass batts in the ceilings and 1in-thick high-density boards externally

'RATHER THAN MAKING AN INVESTMENT, WE MADE THE HOUSE WHAT IT WANTED TO BE'

MONEY MATTERS

REMODELLING OF A ONE-BEDROOM DETACHED HOUSE IN NEW YORK, DATING FROM THE EARLY 1800s

HOUSE PRICE	\$330,000 (£230,769)
CONSTRUCTION COST	\$135,000 (£94,405)
TOTAL COST	\$465,000 (£325,174)
BUILD COST PER SQM	\$1,350 (£944)

KITCHEN	\$4,500 (£3,146)
BATHROOM	\$1,250 (£874)
OUTDOOR DECK	\$4,700 (£3,286)
GLAZING	\$1,200 (£839)
STAIRWAY	\$900 (£629)

CONVERSION RATE, JANUARY 2002: 1 US\$ = £1.43



a capital D, their guiding principle was to work with what they had. 'It was a conscious decision,' says Scott. 'We didn't want it to look too ostentatious.'

The result is a home that feels like it's made for living in, rather than looking at. It has much more light than it did before and makes the most of its diminutive proportions – a meagre 60sqm when you take away the 40sqm studio flat on the ground floor, which Margarita and Scott rent out.

Downstairs is the foyer and bedroom, with the window by the bed offering perfect views of the maple tree at the front. A ladder left over by the builder descends to a small basement, used as a utility room, and industrial metal stairs climb to the upper level. It's here, as you arrive upstairs, that the original brickwork is best displayed, bathed in light from new clerestory windows, like an archaeological find in a museum. The clerestory windows fill in the gap between where the old pitched roof used to be, and its new raised position, which has increased the height of the walls to a respectable 10 feet, rather than the original claustrophobic seven feet.

Proving that necessity is the mother of invention, Margarita and Scott have also added clever features to fit their space and budget. The security bars at the back door slide across to double as a ladder to the guest bed, ingeniously perched above the kitchen, and a wall panel in the stairwell is made from hollow birch-veneer doors stacked on top of each other, with one at the top placed at a right angle to create a table.

Throughout, there are multiple connections between the inside and outside, and upper and lower levels. Margarita and Scott did this by inserting a series of 'slots' (from which Slot House takes its name). The tall, skinny window at the front frames views of the maple tree; the clerestory windows along the wall face south, catching the path of the sun; a metal grille used for part of the floor upstairs allows light to seep down to the bedroom; and a skylight above the stairwell creates a shaft of light that reaches the basement.

Construction work cost around \$1,350 (approximately £944) per sqm, which is largely down to the amount of DIY the couple did, fitting in work between their jobs – Scott at a practice in New York, and Margarita as a lecturer in Virginia. 'Most people told us that doing a project like this the normal way would have been three times more expensive,' says Margarita.

The couple also saved money by hiring an inexpensive builder recommended by a colleague, sticking with the original plumbing, and retaining the building's original footprint, which meant fitting the stairway inside, rather than making it an external addition to the house – a decision they grappled with for some time.

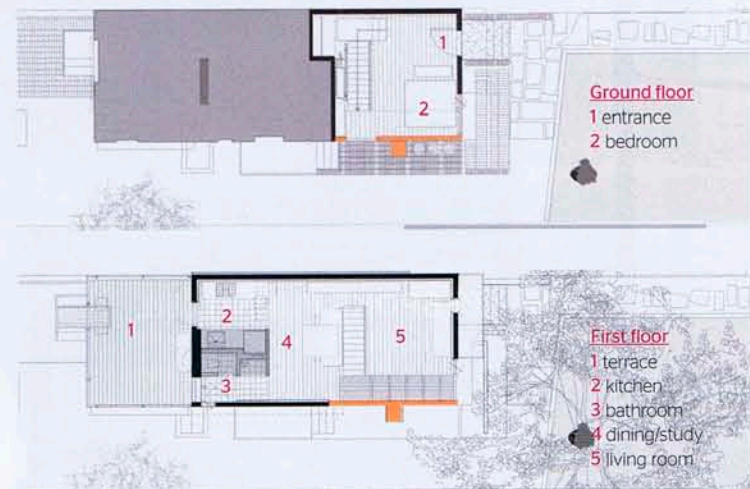
'Coming to terms with how modest it had to be was difficult,' says Scott. 'But once we agreed to keep the original footprint of the house, work with the plumbing where it was and put the stairway where it went, the design

top left Made from eight separately bought components, the living-room storage system is an example of Margarita and Scott's bespoke interior. The main sections are three metal shelving units, birch plywood sheets, a sliding door to turn one section into a pantry closet, and custom-made bookends **middle left** Slotting standard Ikea kitchen units into a bespoke steel frame lifts them off the floor, creating an individual look **far left** Cedar has been used for the terrace decking area **left** A glass ceiling above the shower in the bathroom lets in extra light **right** The ground-floor entrance leads into the bedroom; below the metal stairs to the first floor is a ladder to the small basement



BESPOKE FURNITURE

By using industrial and off-the-shelf products in inventive ways Margarita and Scott have created a bespoke interior on a budget. The stairs are from an industrial supplies company; the mesh encasing them is normally used for airport fences; a steel frame was made for the Ikea kitchen cabinets, and the upstairs storage system is made from a mixture of metal shelving units and birch ply sheets. If you're working on your own renovation, check out Re-use It Don't Lose It (07766 568 684; reuseitdontloseit.co.uk) and Retrouvius (020 8960 6060; retrouvius.com), which sell salvaged building materials, or approach manufacturers directly to see if they are selling leftover stock. Skilled tradespeople are also vital: The Guild of Master Craftsmen (guildmc.com) has an area-specific search function for a wide variety of tradespeople (01273 478 449; findacraftsman.com), or try Design Nation (020 7320 2895; designnation.co.uk) or Hidden Art (020 7729 3800; hiddenart.com) for designers taking commissions for bespoke pieces.



went pretty quickly.' The building work was completed in three months, but the internal finishing took over two years, partly because a lot of it was bespoke. 'We tried off-the-shelf stuff to save money and it never worked because nothing is 90 degrees in the house, so these things we bought wouldn't fit,' says Margarita. Instead, they used their architectural skills to work in an unusual, improvisational way, as though building a model. They did drawings for things as they went along and then sat down with tradesmen, who were given lots of freedom to build things as they saw fit. It sounds like a recipe for disaster, but they found it was more efficient.

'My dad was a contractor, so I knew how things worked,' says Margarita. 'A lot of times, it's the people making the stuff who have better ideas than you do, because they do it all the time. So we tried to take advantage of their knowledge – and it often saved us money because they did it the way they wanted to do it, which was faster and easier for them.'

By September 2005 the house was complete, and now Margarita and Scott have a snug home-sweet-home that gives them everything they need: a bedroom, a light-filled living space, a patio, a mezzanine guest bed, and their very own archaeological exhibit – all in 60sqm.

'You realise when you have a chance to occupy a space that you've made just how different it makes your life. We just sit and listen to music, or at our desk and enjoy the space. We're both happy and feel very fortunate,' says Margarita. And so do the neighbours, it seems, who have embraced this unassumingly modern conversion. 'Every time we go outside, even three or four years later, people stop and talk to us,' she adds.

And what about the house? What does it say? 'It's a modest house,' says Scott, 'so it gets a little embarrassed by all the attention.'★

above right The original hand-made bricks and cedar frame can be seen to great effect on the wall in the ground-floor bedroom

SUPPLIERS

ARCHITECTS

**MARGARITA McGRATH AND
SCOTT OLIVER, NOROOF**
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CONCRETE CLADDING

HARDIEPANEL BY JAMES HARDIE
(0800 068 3103; jameshardie.co.uk)

KITCHEN CABINETS

IKEA
(0845 358 3364; ikea.co.uk)

METAL STAIRS

TRY JOHN DESMOND
(020 8946 8295; johndesmond.com)

METAL FLOOR GRATE

TRY STACO REDMAN
(01634 723 372; stacoredman.co.uk)

LOCUST WOOD FLOORING

**TRY SOLID ALPINE ACACIA,
VANILLA WOOD FLOORS**
(0844 477 6480; vanillawoodfloors.co.uk)

BIRCH WALL PANELS

**TRY MORTON FLUSH DOOR WITH
MAPLE EFFECT VENEER, B&Q**
(0845 609 6688; diy.com)

CEDAR DECKING

TRY DECK SUPPLY
(01895 271 300; decksupply.co.uk)

TIMELINE

JULY 2001 Made an offer for the house	JAN 2002 House purchase completed	FEB 2002 Demolition work started	FEB-APR 2002 Design revised	MAY-AUG 2002 Construction work	JULY 2002 Work starts on internal fittings and fixtures	AUG 2002 Moving-in date	SEPT 2005 Internal fittings and fixtures complete
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