

# after THE storm

Ragi and Natalie Singh's radical extension and remodel of a 1970s home in Birmingham was beset by problems on site, but the result makes it worth all the hassle

REMODEL/EXTENSION | BIRMINGHAM | FEB 10 - JUL 11 | SIZE: 332m<sup>2</sup>  
HOUSE COST: £402,000 | BUILD COST: £355,000 (£1,069/m<sup>2</sup>) | VALUE: £950,000+

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### The Extension

The dining extension was originally designed as a pure glass box, but the cedar roof and cladding were later added to the scheme to create some privacy. The extension forms a courtyard area with the main house



### Rear Elevation

A single storey kitchen element was demolished and a new splayed kitchen now leads into a striking glass dining/living extension designed by Khoury Architects



**Kitchen**

Angled kitchen walls splay to become wider as they meet the dining area. Walnut cabinet fronts are offset by a dark grey island and thick white Corian worktops. Practical floor tiles have been laid over underfloor heating in this part of the kitchen



**Hallway & Staircase**

The existing metal and wood open-tread staircase was clad with ply and plastered to create a sculptural curved effect for a fraction of the price of a new staircase. Striking Vivienne Westwood wallpaper highlights the structure



**Living Room**

The living room overlooks the courtyard and extension through a wall of sliding glass doors. The hanging bubble chair injects retro glamour – a hint perhaps to the house's age



“Two days after our second baby was born, our builder walked off site and the lease on our rental house expired. We were homeless, with two young children, and all our money had gone into a half-finished building which wasn't even watertight,” recalls Ragi Singh. What had started out as an exciting remodel and extension to a 1970s house turned into a nightmare project for Ragi and his wife, Natalie, who are both lawyers.

The couple had purchased their run-down detached 1970s property as a fast way of moving up the housing ladder, and knew that an enormous amount of work would be needed to transform the boxy house into the kind of exciting, contemporary home they envisaged.

“I'd previously tackled a couple of renovations and built a five bedroom house from scratch when I was a professional cricketer, so I wasn't a total novice when it came to property. We wanted something really amazing, and kept pushing our architect more and more until we got what we wanted,” continues Ragi, who engaged local architectural practice Khoury Architects after approaching a number of possible designers.

Despite the fact that the house had not been maintained for many years, a bidding war had pushed the Singhs to pay nearly £130,000 over the asking price. For this reason, they felt they needed to work with the original brick house rather than knock it down and rebuild — although in hindsight, this would probably have proved a less expensive option.

Architect Andrew Khoury designed a striking rear extension and loft conversion to increase the dwelling from a four to five bedroom family house. The internal layout has been completely transformed both in plan and section, creating an exciting open plan kitchen/living area, overlooking a new enlarged courtyard, whilst the entrance hall is now a triple-height void containing walkways and balconies, and crowned by large rooflights affording clear views of the sky.

“Planning went through really easily, partly because the front of the house has remained more or less the same shape,” explains Ragi. “We sold our Victorian terraced house to fund the work, and moved into rented accommodation with our 14-month old daughter, Indira. It was exciting to think that the rundown house we'd bought was going to be totally reinvented, and we set to work clearing the overgrown garden — a job which took nine people to complete.”

In December 2009, shortly after moving into the rented accommodation, the couple discovered that Natalie was expecting their second baby and — unable to wait for their usual builder to finish building his own home in Spain — they appointed another contractor for their project, based on his price following a tender process. Work started in February 2010 and was scheduled to finish five months later. In reality, though, the project ran more than a year beyond the original deadline, and was only finally completed in July 2011.

“It was a total nightmare and so many things went wrong,” says Ragi. “We had to rebuild weak external walls, which cost an additional £20,000, and our first builder ordered and fitted lighter coloured roof tiles than the ones we'd specified in the contract. In addition, the builder kept trying to ask for more money, and continually refused to order the structural glass and bathrooms



until he received additional monies — despite signing a JCT contract which clearly showed he had agreed to supply these within his fixed price. Eventually, he walked off site two days after Anusha was born, leaving a shell that was not watertight or secure, which consequently meant that the house then flooded due to pipes bursting during a cold snap.”

The tenancy on the Singhs’ rental property had also expired, and the family needed to move in with Natalie’s parents in Northampton — a 90-minute commute from Ragi’s work. “We had no home, a new baby and very little money left to finish the project,” he admits. “To say we were stressed would be an understatement, so when a friend of a friend stepped forward and offered to finish the house for us we almost bit his hand off.”

Sadly, the second builder turned out to be even worse than the first. His promise to complete the work in three weeks became seven months, and he kept asking for money for items which then failed to materialise — including the glass balustrade and decking.

“He sounded really plausible, but then shut the site for three weeks in the run up to Easter 2011 and wouldn’t give us the keys,” Ragi recalls. “Although we won a court case against the first builder, we ended up paying thousands of pounds in costs and fees and didn’t see a penny of the £23,000 we’d been awarded because he’d gone into liquidation. To add insult to injury, even though the costs of the adjudication were awarded against the builder, I had to pay those as well because of the fact he went into liquidation.” ▶

### **Ragi & Natalie’s Suppliers**

<b>Architect</b> Khoury Architects.....	.....0121 236 9393 khouryarchitects.co.uk
<b>Sanitaryware and tiles</b> Porcelanosa .....	.....porcelanosa.com
<b>Cedar roof and cladding</b> James Latham.....	.....01384 234444
<b>Structural glass and sliding doors</b> Greenways.....	.....0845 310 0817
<b>Roof tiles</b> Marley Eternit.....	.....01283 722588
<b>Lighting</b> Lux Lighting.....	.....0121 236 7595
<b>Wood flooring</b> MP Moran (Kilburn branch).....	.....020 7328 5566



## LIVING WITH A GLASS HOUSE

**I**ntroducing masses of glass to the previously dark 1970s property has completely transformed the entire look and feel of the house. Windows have been enlarged, rooflights inserted, and the rear extension is effectively a glass box with a cedar roof.

The prospect of working with so much glass proved off-putting for several building contractors, who either did not feel they had the expertise to complete the job, or quoted ridiculously high sums for the project. To the front of the house, a small bay window has been replaced by an all-glass box. There’s a full-height panel of glass beside the front door and a sweeping skylight above the curving staircase, which has a contemporary glass balustrade.

To the rear, glass is even more abundant, with a wall of sliding glass doors opening from the sitting room and kitchen onto the decked courtyard area. The glass box was constructed in the snow, which was far from ideal as the silicon joints would not set, but the company returned later to fix any leaks.

“People imagine that so much glass won’t be child-friendly, but our girls have grown up here, so to them it’s home,” says Ragi. “Indira’s now three and Anusha, one, and they love playing out in the courtyard. Their friends are always asking to come over to ‘the party house’, as they call it, and we’re able to keep an eye on them from anywhere on the ground floor because of all the glass walls.”

### **Light**

By using lots of glass with big windows, a sweeping, sloping rooflight above the stairwell and transparent balustrading, Ragi and Natalie have transformed the internal feel of the previously dark 1970s home



**Front Elevation**

Ragi and Natalie liked the existing roof formation over three levels and this has been retained, with new roof tiles, contemporary glazing and kiln-dried pine cladding bringing the façade up-to-date

*What We've Learned*

**What surprised you most about undertaking a project like this?**

We ended up having to rebuild the two external side walls of the house because they'd been built in the 1970s using weak blocks — that cost us £20,000 we weren't expecting. Notwithstanding that we are both lawyers and had a watertight contract — but some builders still try it on!

**What was your best buy?**

I queued on the street overnight to buy our Knoll marble-topped Tulip dining table at a reduced price, which had been returned to the shop by someone who didn't like the smell of the marble. I ended up sniffing the table in the shop window — much to the amusement of passers-by.

**What is your favourite part of the house?**

To be honest we love all of it — the galleried entrance is fabulous and the courtyard is a favourite with the children.

**What advice would you pass on to others?**

Try to run the project yourself, and make sure you thoroughly check out any builders you employ. Also, have realistic expectations about the finished product. The finish of this house is actually really good now.

**Is there anything you would change?**

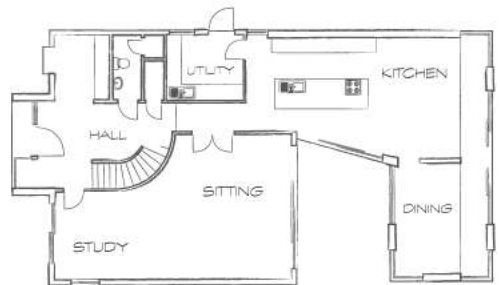
If money had been no object then we may have chosen Priva-lite glass - which turns opaque at the flick of a switch - for the hall skylight.

The Singhs' problems were still far from over unfortunately, and when their kitchen supplier went bust they ended up paying twice for the kitchen and appliances. There were problems with the huge glass rooflight in the hall installed by the first builder as well, and they needed to redo much of the work — including completely replacing the faulty rooflight.

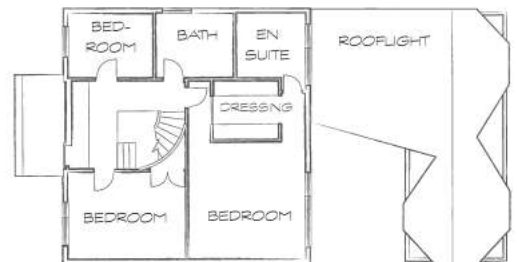
"It certainly wasn't a happy project, but now we're living here it's definitely a very happy home," says Ragi. "It's great when you overhear strangers talking about your house in a complementary way, and we certainly have the wow-factor we'd hoped for. Even more importantly, every bit of the design works." ■

**Floorplans**

A former study has been converted into a useful cloakroom area just inside the front door. The existing single storey kitchen was demolished and most internal walls were repositioned to create a more open plan layout, with the splayed kitchen leading out to the unusual single storey dining/sitting room. Converting the loft (not shown) has created two guest bedrooms and a bathroom at the top of the house; with three bedrooms, a dressing area, master en suite and bathroom on the first floor.



**GROUND FLOOR**



**FIRST FLOOR**