



**BEFORE AND AFTER: The Laus' house was transformed with an oriental-style extension and rendered brickwork**



**I**T SEEMS downright rude to call somebody's home ugly but when you subject yourself to a television makeover programme what can you expect? The owners of this particular bricks and mortar car crash couldn't care less though, thanks to the zen-like transformation of their home, star of TV architect George Clarke's Ugly House To Lovely House show on Thursday.

When Alex and Cindy Lau bought the former council house in south west London's upmarket Barnes in 2004 they couldn't understand why it was only £380,000. Having grown up in Hong Kong they were unfamiliar with any perceived council house stigma and snapped up the south-facing corner plot home.

Built after the First World War in the government's Homes For Heroes programme, the original house had generously proportioned rooms. But by the time the Laus bought it previous owners had built on two mismatched extensions, leaving the house looking lopsided and unloved.

Alex, who studied architecture before switching to industrial design, drew up plans to improve the look but kept running up against strict planning regulations, which is when he turned to London-based KSKa architects (020 8743 1984; kska.co.uk), whose motto is We Don't Do Ordinary. "As an industrial designer I am full of ideas but knowing how to make them work required architectural imagination, skill and experience," admits Alex.

Nobody would describe the result as ordinary, least of all the Laus. Before builders got to work their home was valued at £750,000 but that jumped to £1.8million after the transformation last year.

The idea that anybody can have a lovely home – even on a tight budget – if they invest in expert advice is the whole point of the Channel 4 show.

"A good designer can be invaluable in terms of being able to stretch budgets and do really clever things that people just would not know about," explains Matt Keeler, the architect the Laus turned to.

People who use their own designs may think they are saving money but, says Matt: "That is often a mistake because they would have got something much better if they had spent a little bit of money on an architect."

Alex is in full agreement: "Our plot was relatively large but an awkward shape and very open to the street," he says. "KSKa architects turned these disadvantages around with a clever design, ingenious space planning and ideas that have transformed our family life."

"The proposal to have an internal courtyard linking the main house with the new studio was inspired. It is now our favourite space where the family can sit outside without being overlooked." The new

# The style council



**A TV show spotlights how to transform an ugly house into a lovely home, reports DEBORAH STONE**



**EXPANSIVE: The rejigged open-plan layout maximises space and light and progresses out to an enclosed courtyard and into the studio that was previously a tatty garage used for storage**



**PEEK-A-BOO: Daughter Norah on the suspended staircase with Alex and Cindy, and the new courtyard**



studio was once a tatty garage stuffed full of things that wouldn't fit in the house but a living room extension helped to solve that problem and building a small front porch was "critical" says Matt, to give him space to rethink the layout.

"We took out the old stair and put in a new stair. The front porch gave us the space to do it. It is tricks like that which are required to make a project successful."

Knowledge of permitted development rights – work that does not need planning permission such as building a small porch – can also save time and money: "A lot of the success of the project was through the exploiting of permitted development rights," explains Matt.

**U**NDERSTANDING planning rules and knowing how to work with them, plus Matt's architectural skills and tricks of the trade, meant he was able to produce a contemporary design with an oriental flavour.

These include bamboo sliding screens, a suspended staircase of oak railway sleepers and a "peek-a-boo" bay beside the new porch to let in light and connect the new elements to the original bay windows. All the windows were updated with triple glazed glass and most of the external walls were rendered to hide the brickwork.

"One of the reasons people are reassessing former council houses is that, because they were built by local authorities, they were built to strict space standards," says Matt, who adds that a good deal of thought was given to the layout of the Barnes Avenue estate: "There are big green areas and the gardens are very generous," he says.

Neighbours on the estate are now beginning to copy some aspects of the house, in particular the windows and wall rendering.

"It's had a beneficial effect in terms of regeneration," says Matt, while Alex simply says the transformation is "inspired".