

In the Sunday Times on 27 July 2003, Victoria O'Brien said

'The smoothly sculptural central staircase bears echoes of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and yet the outside is a traditional brick facade spanning the width of three London mews houses.

From the front door looking upwards, you have no concept of the glass roofing inside, the airy head heights and loft-style open-plan interior. What was an unpromising, wedge-shaped 1,500sqft site, has been transformed into 3,000sqft of modernist, museum-quality living space, including an outside terrace next to a glass-walled rotunda, providing a rooftop studio for Michael Ani, who does what every man-child wants to do - he designs cars for a living.

After completing a masters in vehicle design at the Royal College of Art, Ani worked for various car companies around the world, eventually becoming chief exterior designer for Volkswagen Audi in Barcelona. He met Alicia in her native Spain, they married and moved back to England, then he set up his own vehicle design consultancy.

"When I bought this place, I was still single and living out in Spain, but looking for a project back home," says Ani. "I wanted to create a very contemporary space, but one that maintained some of the character of the original building, at least from the outside."

The property now is obviously more than a run-of-the-mill mews-house conversion.

The building style, incorporating a modernist vision within the rebuilt skin of a 19th-century brick facade, is considered so ground-breaking that it was included as part of Designs on Camden, a selection of 35 of the borough's most significant buildings from 1965-2001, and features alongside Foster and Partners' Great Court at the British Museum, no less.

What excited the judges about it most, it seems, is the successful harnessing of natural sunlight, with the glass roof and central staircase acting as "a huge light well".

Ani bought the site in 1995 for about £300,000, and spent three years going through planning and building works before moving in with Alicia. They now have a two-year-old son, Alex.

The original brick facade was almost entirely rebuilt in the same old London stock brick, and all the windows and doors were made new to mimic the exact look and specifications of the originals.

Demolition costs alone were £50,000, and the bill for glass, including the made-to-measure curved glass doors and windows of the round studio room, came to £40,000. The finishes are immaculate (Ani is a perfectionist by nature) and the interior has been opened up enough to feel free-flowing and spacious, despite containing a double garage, kitchen/diner, living and dining area, cloakroom, and laundry/utility room (in the point of the wedge) on the ground floor alone. The first floor has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a study, with the studio room (ideal for use as a contemporary chill-out zone) and outside terrace on the rooftop floor above.

The basic building costs added up to about the same price that Ani paid for the property in the first place, £300,000, which seems high, although the house has now been valued by local estate agents at £2.15m. Part of the building had originally been a falconry, probably built and added to in the 19th century, with two garages next to it and a one-bedroom flat above. A triple-width site, then, nearly 100ft long but so narrow at one end it seemed unworkable to most potential buyers.

"There was no time to apply for planning before buying the place, but I sat down with the architect, Justin Bere of bere:architects, and we came up with the idea of a big drum and a little drum," explains Ani.

"For some reason, it seemed to work. When you have a lot of constraints, you tend to end up with more creative solutions."

It looks something like a bicycle cog and chain when you see it in plan on paper, but the strangeness of the building's diagonal, tapering walls is successfully balanced inside by the vortex of the staircase and the large curving sweep of the main drum, which houses the kitchen with master bathroom above and, finally, the round rooftop studio room at the top.

"The whole thing works because there is a flow of soft shapes, merging into one another," says Ani. "I wanted to create something that was minimal and modern, but I certainly wouldn't have been happy with a square box - the odd shape of the site actually forced us to work harder and avoid that."

The cool collection of furniture inside also helps you to forget it is a mews-house conversion. One vastly proportioned, right-angled sofa by Minotti sets off the main living space downstairs, with original 1960s swivel chairs around the dining table, Bisazza copper mosaic tiles in the bathrooms, a Knowles & Christou mirrored dressing table and a Cappellini Rive Droite "Pucci" chair in the bedroom - the interiors equivalent of a pair of Jimmy Choos. The fabric of the linen blinds in the main living space is by Donghia - the Prada of the fabric world.

As if to prove his perfectionist nature, Ani bought up the last lengths of that particular Donghia fabric, from showrooms in Germany and New York, just so that the wave pattern could continue uninterrupted across the entire length of the window space.

The Heal's kitchen was bought before even the first brick of the building conversion had been laid - Ani saw it in the shop window and was convinced it was what he needed. The units have been fitted around a central stainless-steel and glass cooker.

In the end, the need to accommodate Ani's cars into the living-space equation provided an ideal solution to the kitchen layout - the bonnet of his Audi estate fits neatly into a space under bench seating that runs along two sides of the kitchen table. A slit window in the wall above the kitchen sink looks directly into the garage, allowing Alicia to check when hubby comes home - one of the many details ensuring the smooth transformation of this place from wow-factor bachelor pad into comfortable family home.