

## We future-proofed the house in case the kids move back home

One interior designer has created a fun-filled basement that can be repurposed if her teens return to the nest



Nichola McKerrow Todd in her home's new basement

JOSHUA BRATT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

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**I**n the old days, when a family upsized, they did so to gain more bedrooms. Times are changing, though. Parents have swapped offices for houses and children are living at home for longer — much longer. Layouts are evolving to reflect

this.

In 2020 Nichola McKerrow Todd, 53, an interior designer, moved her family from an end-of-terrace five-bedroom house in north London to a detached house, also five bedrooms, down the road. She and her husband hired an architect to do a loft conversion, large extension and a basement. But they didn't gain any bedrooms. What they wanted was what McKerrow Todd calls "social space".

And they've got it in spades. The house is a Tardis. It looks modest at the front, but it's a whole different world inside: a double-height front hall leads past a front room, home office and courtyard into a large open-plan kitchen/dining/family room, with high glass doors opening on to a 50m garden with an outdoor kitchen and fire pit. A new basement houses a cinema room, bar, DJ decks and gym.

"It was all about social space for us," she says over tea in the family room. "We were looking at so many houses in the area, but all they were giving us was more bedrooms — not much more of a footprint."



The kitchen, flanked by the courtyard; polished concrete floor by Lazenby

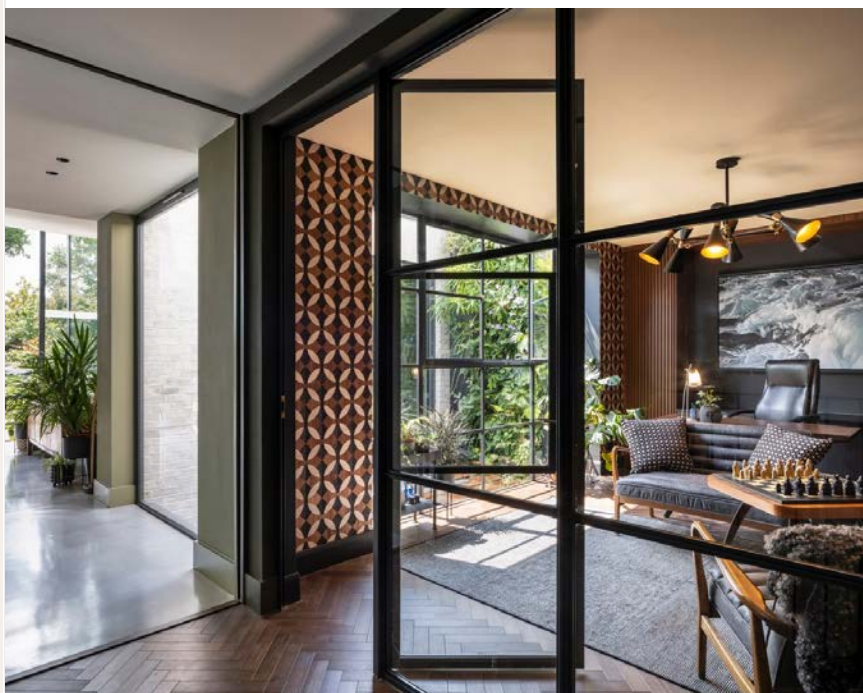
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They initially hired Mulroy Architects to put a basement in their old house. But then an agent told them about an Edwardian house coming onto the market with a long south-facing garden with plenty of room to extend — and a fragmented layout that could be knocked through to create those social spaces. "We've

got two growing teenagers,” she says. “We have lots of friends putting rooms in the garden as dens for kids to hang out in. We thought, we’d rather the kids came to ours, rather than hanging out in the streets. We wanted our house to be a hub. We thought, if we give enough space and it’s a cool place to hang out, this is where teens will want to come, and then we know where they are. In London, that just felt safe.”

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The couple didn’t initially plan a basement in the new house. But when they realised the upheaval the extension would require, they told the head architect, Andrew Mulroy he might as well dig down too. Mulroy has seen too many dark iceberg basements go unused, so he set out to make it enticing, building a double-height courtyard in the middle of it. “The key to a successful basement is good daylight and ventilation,” he says. “In a basement, if you have a window where you can see even a postage stamp of sky, your brain will say, this is bright enough.”



The basement gets plenty of use: the boys and their father are regularly in the gym; the teenagers are often in the cinema room watching horror films and sports; and the grown-ups entertain in the basement bar, where her husband, who works in the City, takes to the decks to practise his hobby: DJing (he's done several 50th birthdays).

• ['We bought a bigger home so our kids could move back in and save'](#)

But the basement has a far more practical long-term use. The couple future-proofed its design so that it can be converted into a self-contained flat for the boys when they are in their twenties. The high cost of housing has created a boomerang generation who return home to live with their parents in their twenties. So the gym has a full suite of electric points and a wall of wardrobes so that it can be converted into a bedroom, plus plenty of light and ventilation, as Crittall-style doors open into the courtyard. They've squeezed a shower into the downstairs loo next door, and the bar is fully plumbed with a sink and dishwasher; it already has a fridge, so could easily be converted into a kitchenette.





The courtyard living wall is by Tapestry Vertical Gardens

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The DJ booth and basement bar; wallpaper Timorous Beasties Fresco Old Gold

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“We’ve got a lot of friends with older kids, and they all come back,” McKerrow Todd says. “We just thought, once you’ve had your independence, it’s going to be really challenging to come back. The general idea was that the basement could be self-contained.

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“I do think it’s sad for the younger generation. It’s hard for them to get jobs when they graduate. In their twenties, they need to live their own lives. It’s a big adjustment for the parents as well. You just have to try to coexist, but in a practical way.” If both boys return home, the family also has the option of building a garden studio for one of them. “We’ve got the piping for water and electricity up to the end of the garden.”



The basement gym opens on to the courtyard

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The cinema room with a Ligne Roset Togo sofa in Alcantara Curry

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At the moment the two boys are on the second floor. Two bedrooms and bathrooms were added during the loft conversion, to make up for the two bedrooms that were removed on the first floor to accommodate a second home



office, a couple of en suites, a dressing room and a utility room.

They also lost some upstairs floorspace by creating that double-height atrium in the entrance hall. It's painted a dramatic shade: Little Greene's Invisible Green, which looks black in some lights. The colour choice was dictated by the compass: the front of the house faces north. "People often think that on the north side of buildings they should paint their rooms white to make it feel brighter," Mulroy explains. "But what happens on the north side is you get a cool blue light. If you paint your room a darker colour, it will actually make the room feel warmer."



The Buster & Punch 19.0 chandelier in heavy metal smoked bronze

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"It was going to be a dark space anyway, so we just thought, embrace it," McKerrow Todd says. The "chandelier" certainly brightens it up at night: made by Buster + Punch, it comprises 19 lightbulbs hanging from strings of different lengths. "The only problem is you need scaffolding to change the bulbs," she jokes.

The dark theme has extended to the rest of the house, but



McKerrow Todd has warmed up the blacks and dark greens with bronze-tinged wallpapers and brass lamps, taps and fittings. It's full of texture, with nods to the couple's Scottish roots: Timorous Beasties wallpaper, thistle and heather motifs and stag antlers.

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The family room is beside the courtyard; Arco floor light

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The back of the house, by contrast, feels light, lush and junglelike: the family room has an olive green BoConcept sectional sofa, sandwiched between the courtyard with its living wall and the Cortizo sliding doors on to the garden. The glass is tinted, to avoid overheating, and the ceiling slopes upwards so you can see the full height of two oak trees in the garden.

Their previous house had a pale palette, but this house marked a new beginning. McKerrow Todd recently launched her own interior design business, [No Ordinary House](#). She'd trained as an

architect in university, but life got in the way and she ended up working in marketing and raising the boys. The house is a showcase for the new business.

Mulroy says a ballpark cost for the project was around £255 a sq ft; McKerrow Todd is reluctant to give exact figures. “My husband and I come from normal backgrounds,” she says. “My husband walks into the house every time and goes, ‘We’re just so lucky.’ This is all the result of hard work over the years. We grew up in very standard homes, north of Aberdeen. We both come from families where we were the first generation to go to university.”



The kitchen is by Point 5 Kitchens/Quirky Interiors; Riva 1920 Infinity dining table with 675 Chairs by Case

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“What we like about this house is it’s not a big look-at-me house, it looks quite humble from the front. It’s all behind the scenes. It opens up as you come through, and when people see the courtyard, they go, wow. We’re just super lucky.”

If their sons end up living there a bit longer, lucky them too. Mulroy says an increasing number of clients are asking for layouts that accommodate grown-up children. “Culturally some groups already do this. We’ve done projects for Greek families in north London and actually it’s how they live already. Now other groups are catching up.”

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It's not an entirely unwelcome trend, according to Mulroy, who thinks it can be good for families to stay together longer, rather than being split up owing to work demands or housing costs. "I think the key is that everybody is quite happy to be part of the family as a whole, but there are times when everyone needs their own space.

## Before



## After





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**Sally-Anne Baron**



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Gorgeous. We did something similar. Bought a rebuild a year before our son went to uni. We went for 3 beds and an office (with a crittal wall!) on the main level and then a basement for socializing but with a Murphy bed for guests/ son when he's back. Teen daughter loves the space, and doesn't have...

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