

# I pushed open the gates and discovered...

Hidden from view, a derelict London dairy was waiting for this couple to turn it into their Parisian-inspired sanctuary, says *Emma J Page*

**V**ISION and courage in large doses are required to imagine living in a gritty urban space in East Dulwich that was once occupied by cows. But for serial renovators Beth Dadswell and Andrew Wilbourne, this unlikely backstory only added to the appeal. Sandwiched between a row of ordinary south London terraces, their chic home was formerly an unprepossessing dairy, then an ice cream store, and latterly a down-at-heel workshop.

Nothing indicates to the passer-by that beyond a modest metal-shuttered frontage lies a verdant jewel of a courtyard. "If there's an opportunity to take a peek through a gap in a gate, I can't resist," says Beth of her first glimpse of the unusual home she shares with partner Andrew, a graphic designer, and their son Louis, 12.

The fashion stylist-turned-interior designer was on her way home from a shoot when the site caught her eye. "I peeked through the gates and saw a derelict courtyard with a corrugated plastic roof and a crumbling building beyond. It was a commercial venture and so unusual that I knew we had to take a look."

**The sight that greeted the couple** when they finally gained access would have deterred many, but Beth knew exactly how it could be transformed. The faded grandeur of the front yard would be turned into a verdant garden, hidden from the street; the ground floor would be extended out for flexible living space, while the first floor, with its unique gambrel roof, would be exposed to the rafters and tweaked to house two bedrooms and two shower rooms.

"The most obvious choice was a double-height extension, but we were determined to preserve the raw beauty of the place and so our approach was less radical," says Beth. That softly industrial aesthetic is evident throughout, from the less-than-perfect cracked concrete flooring in the courtyard and rusty fittings repurposed to train plants up the walls, to the roughly polished plaster finishes within. The building's former rear refrigeration area is now a multifunctional snug, with Beth's office beyond, looking over



**A great family space:** Beth Dadswell, Andrew Wilbourne and son Louis at home



**Hidden treasure:** modest metal shutters conceal the verdant courtyard garden

another, smaller courtyard. With less square footage to play with than their previous home, Beth has been clever with her ideas, creating bespoke display storage in the open-plan living space, installing sliding pocket doors and ensuring that the snug serves variously as a TV room, crash pad for guests and music space for Louis to practise the piano and violin.

The wow factor undoubtedly comes in the form of tall, steel-framed glass doors that draw the eye from front to back, bringing the evergreen garden into focus throughout the year. "We like graphic shapes and styles, midcentury furniture and muted colours so that patina and texture stands out," says Beth, who has been finessing her chic-casual style for years.

The key, she believes, is to strike just the right balance. "It's about not over- or underdoing it. I don't like things to look too new or shiny."

Trusted vintage Robin Day chairs and a sofa have travelled with the family from house to house for nearly 20 years, slotting effortlessly here into a mix of washed linen, jute rugs, poured concrete flooring and brass-tipped bulb wall lights. And the couple's love affair with Paris is subtly expressed through simple touches, such as unlacquered brass door handles, which Beth describes as "jewellery for windows".

**The family has refrained from hanging too much on the walls.** Instead favourite artworks are propped around the house, many clustered in Beth's office, creating an easily changeable display.

"Moving here encouraged us to get rid of superfluous possessions and concentrate instead only on the pieces we love," says Beth. "It's all about hanging out as a family, whether we are eating round the table in the courtyard, which is like our third sitting room, or watching a film in the snug."

"Coming downstairs in the morning and seeing that huge expanse of glass never fails to connect me to nature. I could so easily have walked past this diamond in the rough and never known it was here."

"I guess the lesson is to take time to stop and look. You never know what you might unearth."

● Find Beth Dadswell at Imperfect Interiors ([imperfectinteriors.co.uk](http://imperfectinteriors.co.uk)).



**"Our oasis":** left, the courtyard is very private and the original dairy doors make a chic partition between the garden and the forecourt. The outdoor dining table has a ping-pong table top for impromptu games

**Pretty kitchen:** Beth designed the wall storage and hid appliances behind bespoke cabinetry (imperfectinteriors.co.uk). Wall tiles are Zellige by Mosaic del Sur ([zelligetiles.com](http://zelligetiles.com))

**Dining area:** original roof trusses were exposed and painted in the open-plan kitchen-diner, which has natural plaster walls, tongue-and-groove cabinetry and a polished concrete floor

**Master bedroom:** simple furnishings let features such as painted trusses and steel-framed windows speak for themselves. The bespoke linen-covered bed is from sofa.com and aged oak parquet flooring is from The Natural Wood Floor Company ([naturalwoodfloor.co.uk](http://naturalwoodfloor.co.uk))

**Beth's office:** there's a roof light, generous glazing and a view of the smaller rear courtyard garden. Beth designed it as a multifunctional space and it's big enough to be turned back into a bedroom

Photographs: *Rachael Smith*