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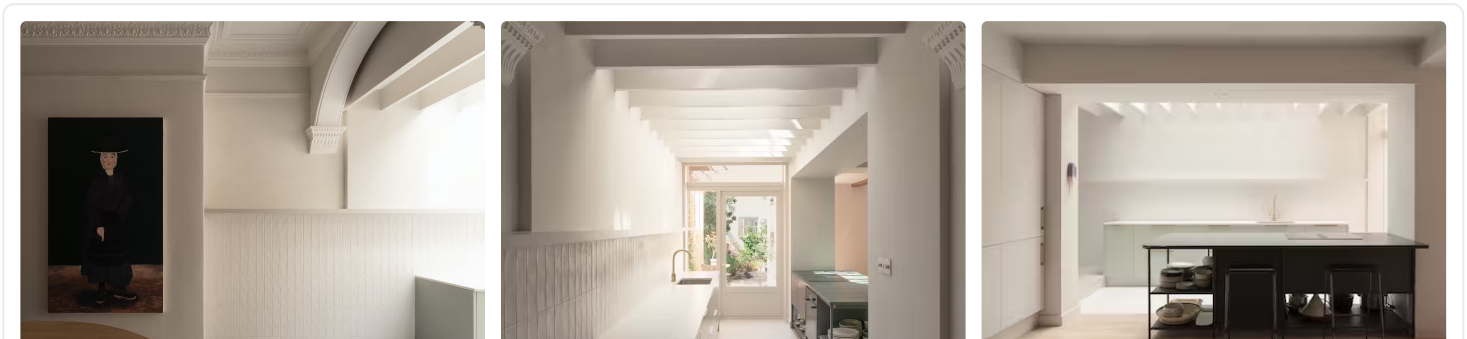
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A Dark and Dreary Welsh Row House Gets a Dazzling Reinvention

A renovation by Benjamin Hale Architects presents “a template for bringing Cardiff houses into the 21st century.”

Text by

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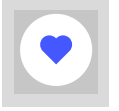
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Just as their American and Australian counterparts flock to New York or Melbourne to start careers, freshly minted architects in the United Kingdom often head to London to earn their bona fides. Yet many of these young professionals eventually realize that the day-to-day business of a global city isn't quite as glamorous as advertised.

For the Welsh-German architect Benjamin Hale, the realization that London architects, "rather than looking farther afield [for inspiration], were looking over each other's shoulders," compelled him to open his own practice in both the British capital as well as his hometown of Cardiff, Wales, where he felt he could exercise his creative license more unselfconsciously.

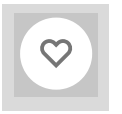


Before architect Benjamin Hale renovated this 1899 row house in Cardiff, Wales, for Myfanwy and Tom Shorey, a rear corner of the dining room led to a garden conservatory. By expanding and reprogramming the conservatory, Hale has connected the dining room to the kitchen.

Pierce Scourfield

Photo Categories: [dining room](#), [table](#), [painted wood floors](#)

At the start of the pandemic, as Hale began setting up his eponymous studio in Cardiff, homeowners Myfanwy and Tom Shorey were just finishing six years of saving for a ground-floor renovation in the city's Roath neighborhood. Constructed in 1899 and largely original in condition, the Shoreys' Victorian row house steps down from three floors facing the street to a single-story utility room in the back and has an L-shaped footprint.



Steps lead down from the reception room into the kitchen. A run of cabinets with an integrated sink directly abuts the threshold between the rooms, and this new wash/prep space terminates in a door to the rear garden.

Pierce Scourfield

Photo Categories: [kitchen](#), [terrazzo floors](#), [range](#), [light hardwood floors](#), [stone counters](#), [metal cabinets](#), [ceramic tile backsplashes](#), [laminated cabinets](#), [undermount sinks](#)

Because a previous owner had modernized the rearward kitchen without altering the building's overall layout, "everything was in the wrong place," Myfanwy, who manages a local art gallery, recalls of the deep, warren-like plan. "I had a vision of balancing what I needed and being sympathetic to the house."

Tom adds that that vision is not commonplace for Cardiff. "People are buying three walls and opening up the rear, and they tend to stick on glass boxes," says the travel entrepreneur. (He and Myfanwy also recently cofounded [Hunant](#), which produces fitted bedsheets patterned on traditional Welsh tapestry blankets.)

Italian terrazzo distinguishes the conservatory-cum-kitchen from the house's original footprint, which Hale floored in white oak. The architect worked with a local welder to produce the Cumbrian slate-topped cooking island seen in the foreground.

When the couple discovered Hale via Instagram, they felt instantly connected to his attitude toward historic homes. "Rather than knock something down and start again, I think you get a lot more interesting architectural language when you heal a building," says the architect.

The Shoreys then learned that Hale had recently settled around the corner, so Tom picked up the phone in October 2020. "I thought that, before we do anything, we should check that chemistry and make sure we weren't going to be treated like a number," he explains. Hale shared that he had also come back to Cardiff to enjoy hands-on participation in projects, and the husband and wife were sold. The trio drew and redrew the renovation in earnest through the holiday season.

Overhead, an original plaster archway meets new ceiling joists at the intersection of the dining room and kitchen. The joists modulate the daylight that enters the kitchen from an expansive new skylight.

Over the six years that the Shoreys had owned the row house, Myfanwy had been keeping notes about potential reconfigurations of the 1,200-square-foot ground floor. Hale confirmed and built upon the field research, noting, "Even with a limited budget, we could make surgical moves that opened up the house."

The architect left the historic front parlor and adjacent dining room relatively untouched, yet in the middle of the building he combined the kitchen and the rear parlor

into a generous space that has multiple zones for food prep, gathering, and individual retreat. By converting a garden conservatory room into a slightly longer volume that could accommodate circulation as well as sink-integrated cabinetry, Hale created a pair of routes from front to back: one straight line between the street-facing entrance to the kitchen, as well as a path that wends to the kitchen through the dining room and former conservatory.

Originally a scullery, this garden room connects to the back of the kitchen. The grooved timber wall conceals a powder room door.

Besides conceiving an all-new kitchen for the rear of the row house, Hale eschewed daylighting via glass box and installed a monitor atop exposed joists over the wash/prep area. "Back in London, I learned that diffuse overhead light is best for activities ranging from viewing art in galleries to cutting a tomato," the architect explains. Following on the heels of a recent historic heatwave, he adds, "The exposed joists also act as a solar refractor, so you're not getting overheating."

A series of folding doors separates the garden room from its namesake outdoor space.

In the very back of the house, Hale transformed the scullery into a garden room whose paneled walls and clay pavers meld durability and elegance. When a series of folding doors is opened, the room gives the impression of a garden nook; closed, it resembles another of the kitchen's quiet zones.

When the room's folding doors are fully open, house and garden flow into one another.

Tom says he had doubts that the renovated interior would yield as many experiences as promised. But since its completion this past January, he has gladly eaten those words. "We didn't want to entertain for six years, and now we want people to see the work," he explains. "And coming [from the garden] to the kitchen for champagne, going into the dining room through the kitchen, and then coming back to the garden for a whiskey, it's all worked fantastically well." When not hosting friends, Tom finds himself gravitating toward the garden room "to read a book in peace and look at the bird boxes."

The garden room is finished in clay pavers whose gray hues evoke the kitchen cooking island's Cumbrian slate surface.

Myfanwy echoes the sentiment, saying she's thrilled that the rear of the ground floor rotates between communal kitchen, relaxation space, and garden perch. She also foresees a ripple effect. "We've done this on a very good budget, so once more people

know about this project, I think they will realize the potential. It's almost like a template for bringing Cardiff houses into the 21st century."

Just outside the kitchen's rear entry, Benjamin Hale Architects created a pergola that aligns to the ceiling joists that top the wash/prep area inside.

A view of the Shoreys' rear garden captures Cardiff in summertime. Architect Benjamin Hale also designed the landscape.

Hale says that he hadn't set out to quash the glass-box movement. "I've never designed to a style or pushed a solution—if you listen to the client and the building, the best solutions generally reveal themselves," he demurs. "Myfanwy, Tom, and the building

spoke, and I think we've created something rather special as a consequence." Yet if the Shoreys' renovation does mark the start of a new phenomenon, then the U.K.'s next young architects may choose Cardiff to make a name for themselves.

Floor Plan of Pen Y Lan by Benjamin Hale Architects

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Project Credits:

Architect: Benjamin Hale, [Benjamin Hale Architects](#) / [@benjaminhale.co.uk](#)

Contracting and Carpentry: James White Construction

Structural Engineer: Western Building Consultants

Published

August 12, 2022

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