

# Time to get out with the new and in with the old

**Oliver Stallwood** meets Jeff Lowe, a sculptor who has used his creative skills to transform his home into a work of art

Being a sculptor by trade, Jeff Lowe has a different approach to creating his ideal vision – even when it comes to houses. This outstandingly refurbished 1860s converted warehouse on a vibrant cobbled mews in the heart of bustling Forest Hill took 20 years to painstakingly mould into what you see here.

The building, including the adjoining property (they have since been separated), was bought in the early Nineties for



**Showpiece:** Jeff Lowe in his Wenge hardwood kitchen. The Boucherie sign is from a Parisian salvage yard

£62,000. It was renovated by Lowe shortly after purchase, before a second overhaul that has just been completed.

Lowe says he likes to take a

more sensory approach than most property developers. 'I try to see a building as a piece of sculpture,' he explains. 'I like to work with it and change it over

time. It drives builders mad, they just want to finish it. But for me the building has to be

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inspirational.' The recent renovation took 18 months to complete. Everything was stripped back and replaced, from plumbing and electrics to insulation, and the dramatic mezzanine floor was added. Calling it a labour of love would be to sell the house short – the obsessive pursuit of detailing would have Lowe laughed out of the usual 'bodge it and scarper' builders meeting.

The pillars in the main room were saved from a Swiss library that was being demolished, and weigh half a tonne. Lowe liked them so much he ended up buying 25. The walls and five-metre-high ceiling was replastered and the ceiling roses

were made by a company that specialises in creating exact replicas of original Art Deco detailing. They matched the Art Deco lights, so were a must, says Lowe.

The joinery was created by a company in Faversham, Kent and London carpenter Tom Gibson made the showpiece kitchen from Wenge hardwood. Inspiration comes from an old-fashioned larder, so food could be stashed away when not being eaten. Then there is a bar area so people can socialise while cooking.

The zinc and glass 'boucherie' sign comes from a Parisian salvage yard. The kitchen has been finished in 'invisible green' paint; popular in Amsterdam, it's

a hue that is close to black – but not that close.

'It's virtually black, but it has a permanence about it,' adds Lowe. 'It's not frivolous and it seems to always last, it doesn't change through fashion.'

While the open-plan ground floor is designed to be communal and sociable, the upper floor is quieter and more intimate. Black tiles in the bathroom riff off the white palette, and deep oak flooring runs throughout. The balcony is from a French châteaux (where else?) and the doors open up to create an outdoors feel, says Lowe.

Originally Lowe had bought the 4,500 sq ft (418sqm) warehouse from a bankrupt lift engineering

firm, and while it needed a lot of work he knew he wouldn't get burned: the house had already been destroyed by fire. Part of the floor was missing, and the electrics and plumbing were ruined. But it had nice bricks and the slate roof was still there.

Having lived in a traditional house in Blackheath, south-east London, and recently divorced, he was looking for something better suited to his job. 'When I was in Portugal I had noticed people would walk ten yards and be at work thanks to these perfect work and living spaces,' he explains.

'Travelling can put you off,

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even if it is just a mile, and I wanted somewhere I could work and if needs be get up in the night and just sit and look at my sculptures. After I moved here, I encouraged like-minded people to do the same, and now there is a community of artists and creative people living all around.'

The temptation would have been to cram more rooms in, but Lowe wanted to be true to his vision and keep it open and airy, so he stuck with two bedrooms. 'Developers would divide it up, but to me it is about creating something inspiring,' he adds.

The house is filled with African sculptures from his own collection to add to the personal feel. With a project so close to his heart, and the fact that it is now up for sale, how would Lowe feel if someone wanted to completely change it?

'I'm not too precious,' he laughs. 'I enjoy creating the work and the process. It's the same with my sculptures – I'm not emotional about retaining them. When they are gone they are gone.'

The house is for sale for £1.2million on [urbanspaces.co.uk](http://urbanspaces.co.uk), a London specialist in unique properties.



**Location, location:** The converted warehouse is in a cobbled mews in Forest Hill. Inset, Black tiles in the bathroom look striking against the white walls and One of Lowe's sculptures, below