



# Make the littlest gems shine

Nicole Edmonds does extraordinary things with small dwellings — such as this former council bungalow in Moray, writes **Jenny McBain**

**P**ersuading housebuilders that small is beautiful is no easy task, but it is one to which Nicole Edmonds is committed. The rise in building costs should make us all reconsider how much living space we actually need, she says. But it is her completed projects that really make her case.

Edmonds, who runs her one-woman architectural practice from a former fisherman's cottage in the village of Findhorn on the Moray coast, has remodelled some tiny spaces, with striking results, including a former bothy and a traditional highland cottage.

Her most remarkable transformation is of a 1950s semi that started life as a council house. Edmonds, 47, was asked to come up with some creative ideas that would improve Iain Campbell's bungalow, situated just round the corner from her home.

From the outside, the building does not look that different from before. Edmonds explains: "Old buildings like this look best with a window that is authentic. We picked one that balances conservation needs with aesthetic concerns and a need for energy efficiency."

Campbell, a former town planner, was convinced the house — which he bought four years ago for £100,000 — had potential. Stepping into his open-plan living area, infused with daylight from three points of the compass, it is evident his hunch was correct.

"Everyone says town planners are frustrated architects," he says. "And I just love what Nicole has done. The house has so much space and light, and it's easy to get about."

The most impressive design feature is the circular wall that encloses the bathroom. Its smooth contours have a similar effect to a pillar, enhancing the space without breaking it up into boxes. Edmond hit upon the idea when trying to fit a downstairs lavatory into her own tiny cottage.

"When my parents last visited, they remarked that I could do with a downstairs loo. I was loath to eat into studio space, so I experimented with curves and found them much less intrusive," she says.

Other events have conspired to give Edmond's work an edge. In 1990, she was on her way to a job in Paris when she decided to make a quick visit to the Findhorn Foundation, a new-age community. She ended up staying for four years and spent a considerable amount of time doing hands-on building work.

There, she also designed a high-spec house made of old whisky barrels, integrating stone and wood.

"I always had this interest in materi-

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Edmonds designed this house from old whisky barrels



Campbell saw potential in the bungalow and asked Edmonds to come up with some space-saving ideas



The light-filled living room is split into two zones: an office and an area leading to a small kitchen

als and touching them and understanding how they go together," she says. "One thing I noticed when I was at architectural school in London was that there was a big rift between architectural practices and the builders on site."

"At Findhorn, I narrowed that gap. Having gone on site myself, done the work, got my hands dirty and learnt about what really matters, it has become easier to communicate with builders."

She has also been involved in cutting-edge research centred on the use of natural, nontoxic materials and recycled components.

Although many clients start out wanting every green gadget imaginable, Edmonds advises caution. "The materials and systems that are less visible actually have greatest importance. For example, if you put more investment into buying thicker and more efficient insulation, it's not going to make your house visually particularly different, but it will enhance your experience of living there. "I think the paybacks from these

invisible things are more worthy than some of the things that are getting promoted nationwide, such as photovoltaics [solar panels]."

While working on Campbell's bungalow, which has been thoroughly insulated, Edmonds experienced a growing respect for its designers.

"The house is essentially well built and practical. There is plenty of room for storage, and some of the original features, such as the internal doors, are lovely," she says.

The soundproofing is also effective. Campbell hears no noise from the family of five next door.

However, there was no getting away from the pokiness of the house. In its original form, a tiny entrance hall extended into a narrow passage, from which the rooms were accessed.

Edmonds did away with four internal walls. This leaves one self-contained room at the front of the house and another — the master bedroom — at the back. The living area has two zones. One is

used as an office space, spare bedroom and place to catch the evening sun, while the main living area links to a small, functional kitchen. French windows open from the kitchen to the garden and, together with a skylight, they bring extra light in to the property.

Adequate storage is vital to making a small space work.

"Some people are better at clearing out than others, but everybody seems to need storage," says Edmonds. "Fitting in those things in an efficient and elegant way so they contribute to a space is the challenge."

The total budget for the refurbishment was £60,000, so any ideas of purpose-built wardrobes had to be shelved. Instead, Edmonds created a small perpendicular extension to the master bedroom wall in order to create a hanging space, concealed by a curtain.

Campbell, who buys and sells china and glassware on the internet, has some fine examples of brightly coloured vases from the same era as the house. In the

bathroom, he has mounted posy bowls on the wall to great effect. Some similarly vivid pieces provide a vibrant display in the living room.

On all her projects, Edmonds says she tries to "ensure that even in a tiny space my clients can have a feeling of breathing and generosity that you wouldn't necessarily expect".

The ability to create an illusion of space is exemplified in a bothy conversion she designed several years ago. The structure measured just 16 ft x 30 ft, but Edmonds added a mezzanine bedroom and turned the space beneath the sleeping area into cleverly concealed storage. The kitchen is housed in a small, sympathetic wooden extension that doubles as a porch.

Once planning permission is granted, Edmonds will be undertaking an unusual building project on the Isle of Lewis. Stone from an old sheep fank will be used for both the walls of the house and to create a sheltered garden. Having deliberated on sustainable

housing, Edmonds believes we must consider upgrading more structures. She believes renovation and refurbishment are almost always more energy-efficient — in terms of the amount of energy it takes to create a serviceable structure — than building from scratch. Her conviction helped her win an award from the Inverness Architectural Association for "best new life of old buildings".

"My sense is we need to live more lightly on this planet," she says. "I feel we are custodians of this land, and we need to care for it. Covering it with vast amounts of concrete and steel and structures is not the way to go."

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