



Robert made the dining table from scaffold boards and legs. It's on wheels so that it can be easily pulled out to access the bench seating, which he also built. The three mahogany dining chairs were an eBay bargain that Francesca upcycled; they complement the trio of lights that illuminate the dining area. The pendant shades are from Made and the table runner is from Aldi. The photos on the wall come from a photography book that Francesca put in frames from Dunelm



*Good idea!*  
Look for cheaper alternatives to high-end worktops. This laminate design looks just like on-trend concrete but was a fraction of the price.

# We have a good reason to feel house proud!

In a true labour of love, Francesca Marchesini-Ashley and her husband Robert Ashley refurbished and extended their home themselves



Francesca Marchesini-Ashley and her husband Robert Ashley had been thinking for a while about moving from their home in Kent up to the Midlands to be closer to Robert's family, but they hadn't started to make it a reality until a run-down bungalow caught their eye. 'We were driving up to see Robert's daughter one evening when we spotted this bungalow on a large plot,' explains Francesca. 'We stopped the car and took a quick look from the outside. Robert's a

builder and he could immediately see the potential in the property, so we called the estate agent the next day.' Not long after this they found themselves the new owners of the two-bedroom bungalow. Although not to their taste, they moved in straight away and Francesca, who has a background in graphic and interior design, started working on plans for an extension that would add a large entrance hallway, a utility room and almost double the living space. ▷



▲ 'As the original house was built in the 1960s, we chose these slightly retro IKEA kitchen units to help tie the extension to the rest of the house,' says Francesca. The dark wood inserts on the IKEA Marsta unit fronts can be switched to different colours when the couple fancy a change. The Duropal Bellato Grey laminate worktop is from Solid Surface Kitchens Direct

◆ The laminate worktop looks just like concrete, but is much cheaper and easier to take care of. The chopping boards are from Flying Tiger Copenhagen. Francesca painted the trompe l'oeil artwork using acrylic paint on a wooden delivery pallet and then cut it to shape

## COME ON IN...



Feature Anna Tobin Photos Rachael Smith

**WE ARE** Francesca Marchesini-Ashley, I'm a designer who works for a lettings company, and my husband Robert Ashley is a builder and property developer.

**OUR HOME** is a 1960s two-bedroom detached bungalow in the West Midlands.

**MY BEST BARGAIN** was the dining room chairs that I bought on eBay for £70. I painted them and made them unique.

**A SHOP I LOVE** is TK Maxx, it's great for bargain hunting and picking up unusual items. I always come out with treasures that I didn't expect to buy.

**MY BIGGEST MISTAKE** was not to have demolished the house and started from scratch, it would have been cheaper.

**MY STYLE** is Scandi with a mix of vintage – and also a little eclectic.

**FOR INSPIRATION** I'm always looking at Pinterest, it's great for ideas.

**MY FAVOURITE ROOM** is the serene living space. I love the feature wall which we put so much care into designing and making.



FLOORPLAN

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▲ The feature wall unit opens up to reveal four deep storage shelves, while the space below the candlelit fireplace, also made by Robert, conceals the room's speakers. 'Robert's father painted the monkey on the wall, and I've popped him behind the tall plant to make him look at home in his natural habitat,' jokes Francesca. The plant pot is from Smith's Nursery

◁ 'We initially used a local architect that we found online, but in the end I actually drew up the plans and submitted them to the council myself,' says Francesca. 'It took nine months to get everything as we wanted and while this was going on we landscaped the front and sides of the house and renovated the interior of the existing property.' Once the planning permission came through the couple asked a structural engineer to draw up the building regulations spec and then they set to work on the build itself.

The original house covered 72 square metres and the new extension added another 55, so undertaking all the work themselves was a huge challenge. 'We built the whole thing together from scratch, until we got to the pitched roof, when it all became that bit too physical and stressful for me,' explains Francesca.

Made from pieces of recycled wood, Francesca and Robert designed the feature wall in the open-plan living space and made it themselves. It's positioned so as to be seen from the front door, making it the focal point of the whole house. The flooring is Quickstep Creo Virginia oak brown laminate from Flooring Supplies. The walls are painted white, and the beams are painted in Leyland's Matt Grey from Selco Builders Warehouse



'It would have been much easier to have gone for a flat roof, but we went for a pitched ceiling with exposed trusses to make the living area feel a bit different and much more spacious, but at that point I decided to go back to work and I left Robert to it.'

Francesca found a job with a local lettings agency but her evenings were spent designing the interior of their new home. Her first task was to choose the lighting. 'I think I found that the most tricky, because I had to envisage where everything would go when the place was still a building site but it was a good starting point to base the rest of the design around,' she says.

Francesca describes her style as a mixture of retro and Scandinavian and both these themes are found throughout the house. The focal point of the living space – and indeed the home, because it

'Robert made the dining table from scaffold boards and legs and we put it on wheels so that it's easy to move about.'

★ 'I bought the mahogany unit from a charity shop. I sanded, painted, wallpapered, and varnished it, then added new knobs,' explains Francesca. The Sunflower and Flora lampshade is by designer Naomi Sisson at Seed Home Designs. For a similar sheepskin rug, try B&Q



Good idea!

A pitched ceiling will cost a little more than a flat roof, but it adds drama and height to the room and should add value to your property too.



The couple bought their IKEA modular sofa years ago and freshened it up with cushions and throws. They have been arranged in a 'C' shape to subtly separate the seating area from the rest of the open-plan living space. Francesca found the 1960s clock at a local vintage fair. The copper cage light is from TK Maxx

was designed to be seen as soon as you walk through the front door – is the feature wall, which encompasses the fireplace and conceals speakers and a massive storage unit.

'I got the inspiration for this from a feature wall that I saw in a bar in Leamington Spa made from pieces of reclaimed wood,' says Francesca. 'We created a frame for the unit on the ground and then we played around with the different pieces of wood until we got the pattern just right.' So as not to detract from the feature wall, the couple chose simple handleless white IKEA units for the kitchen. And when it came to the rest of the furniture, Francesca and Robert largely either made it themselves, ▷





### Good idea!

If you have lots of colourful clothes, use them to add vibrancy to your bedroom with an open clothes rail.

‘My twin sister has a similar colour in her bedroom in her home in South Africa. It helps me to feel connected to her.’

▲ A vibrant feature wall painted in Colourcourage’s Earthy Malachite contrasts beautifully with the inky grey furniture in the master bedroom. ‘I added my mum’s hats to bring in a touch more colour’



### Good idea!

Inject a glamorous touch with floor-skimming curtains held back by an elaborate curtain tie.

◁ upcycled pre-loved pieces or reused what they already had. ‘I don’t believe in spending a fortune on single items,’ says Francesca. ‘Robert made the dining table from scaffold boards and legs and we put it on wheels so that it’s easy to move about. He made the coffee table, too; and in our bedroom he built a clothes rail out of copper piping. I think it’s good to repurpose things too, so we’ve reused our old IKEA modular sofa in the living room, just moving it around so that it’s configured differently and we kept the existing bath in the bathroom because there was nothing wrong with it – why would you replace it?’

The house is finally how Francesca and Robert envisaged it could look when they first drove by it by chance. ‘Our next project is to convert the loft into a master-bedroom suite,’ says Francesca. ‘But we are enjoying our well-deserved rest from renovating first!’ [YH](#)

▲ The dressing table, B&Q mirror and Homesdirect365 wire clothes stand, dressed with Francesca’s accessories, all add a vintage touch to the master bedroom. The curtains are from The Range



▲ Francesca’s eyelet curtains from Dunelm frame the window in the guest bedroom with colour. The neutral walls and floor are further lifted with a fun Dachshund motif duvet set, also from Dunelm. The green lambswool throw is from The Fine Cotton Company

➤ The couple kept the existing bath, but replaced the sink, toilet and wall and floor tiles. For a similar toilet and basin, see the Denver range at Bathstore. For similar wall tiles, try the beige travertine-effect tiles and golden sand square small tiles, both at Walls & Floors



## 6 IDEAS TO STEAL



Add interest to your ceiling with a colourful mix of pendant lights.

**Jackson pendant lights**, £59 each, Made



Use decorative tiles to create a feature splashback behind your hob.

**Antiqua Decor mix and match wall tiles**, £1.60 each, Walls & Floors

Make your clothes part of your décor with a clothes rail.

**Arnie blue metal clothes rail**, £18, Habitat

Create your own sofa layout with a modular sofa.

**Zania six-piece modular corner sofa**, £1,649, DFS



Mirrored furniture will add a touch of glamour to your bedroom.

**Angelina silver mirrored console dressing table**, £204.95, Melody Maison



Create hidden storage with decorative or vintage suitcases.

**Natural stained-wood vintage-style luggage box**, £39, Gisela Graham

