

Light Box

BY HATTIE KLOTZ PHOTOGRAPHY BY GORDON KING

With an eye for style, Jane Nicholson turns a minimalist white box of a house into a warm and elegant home with a distinctly Parisian sensibility



Ottawa may be thousands of miles from France,

but there's a classic Parisian apartment hiding in New Edinburgh. In reality, it's a house, but the feeling is distinctly 1930s Paris, with herringbone floors; elegant, airy, 13-foot ceilings; and impressive attention to detail.

When Jane Nicholson and her husband, Peter, bought the former industrial building in 2003, it was a modernist, minimalist white box. "Is this really what you want?" asked Peter when Jane first toured him through the stark 1910 space. Her answer was an emphatic yes. It took the visionary decorator and restoration specialist just three months to transform the old building completely in both spirit and style.

"It was a tired, modern house covered in white tile," says Jane, "but it had a beautiful footprint. I knew it just needed to be refreshed." While "refreshed" was a definite understatement, Jane Nicholson was passionate about the potential of her find. Indeed, Nicholson has always had a passion for old houses.

Previous projects have included the restoration of a house in Montreal's Westmount neighbourhood and an apartment in L'Héritage du Vieux-Port, a 1920s beaux-arts building also in Montreal. And in 2003, Nicholson formed the one-woman company Mrs. Nicholson Inc., with the goal of buying and restoring historic properties in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia. Her first project was the rescue of the abandoned Annapolis Royal Train Station, swiftly followed by a historical restoration of the Ruggles-Munro House, an 1818 Georgian home. (Nicholson recently won two awards from the Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia, one for each property.)

Opening spread: The double-width herringbone floors impart a distinctly French feel to the ground floor, while the column capitals suggest an Egyptian influence. The library is visible in the background **Below (left to right):** The leafy garden offers a fabulous outdoor entertaining space; Jane Nicholson waters an amaryllis on a table laden with design books; A Thomas Pheasant Constellation mirror focuses the eye above the honed-granite fireplace **Facing page:** Jane re-clad the steel girders to give a slightly Egyptian feel, echoed in the stair banister





“The whole notion of being able to rescue something is deeply engrained in me. I’ve always recycled. I also believe that there’s beauty in everything”

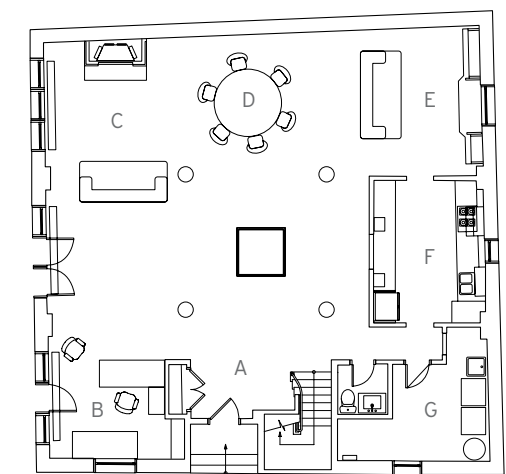
Facing page: A Fortuny light hangs low over the dining-room table, which stands in front of a large landscape by Jacques Payette. The painting is flanked by split Chinese screens, found in Montreal. Above: Light-filled like the rest of the house, the Shaker-style kitchen, with granite countertops and checkered linoleum floor, has a simple, classical feel

Nicholson arrived from

England with her family in 1956 at Pier 21 in Halifax. “We had just three suitcases and a cardboard box,” she remembers. “The whole notion of being able to rescue something is deeply engrained in me. I’ve always recycled. I also believe that there’s beauty in everything.” That sensibility stood her in good stead in the days and months after she took possession of her square, mostly white house in New Edinburgh.

The first thing Nicholson did was hire an architect and a builder. “I always use an architect,” she explains. “First, because you need to have a good cop and a bad cop in your relationship with your contractor, but also because you should always have another pair of professional eyes.” Nicholson chose Linda Chapman as her architect and Rex Engel as her contractor. “I’m a nice woman, I pay on time, and I don’t change my mind,” she told him. He replied, “If she’ll do it [Linda Chapman], I’ll do it.” And so the deal was done.

During the renovation, Nicholson made sure to be on-site every day. “You have to be if your house really matters to you,” she says. “For most people, it’s the biggest investment of their life. And if you do this, your contractors will respect you because they’ll know you care. You’ll get better service and respect.” Nicholson also keeps a history file and a red book for each of her projects. In the red book, she notes telephone numbers and keeps a daily diary of what happens at the construction site. She even jots down how her builders like their coffee, adding, “I believe in cake. At least twice a week, I brought cake.”



MAIN FLOOR

A Entrance B Office C Living room D Dining room
E Library F Kitchen G Storage room



“An interesting house is an amalgam of all sorts of things. It’s all about adding layers to a house through the difference in age of the things you choose”



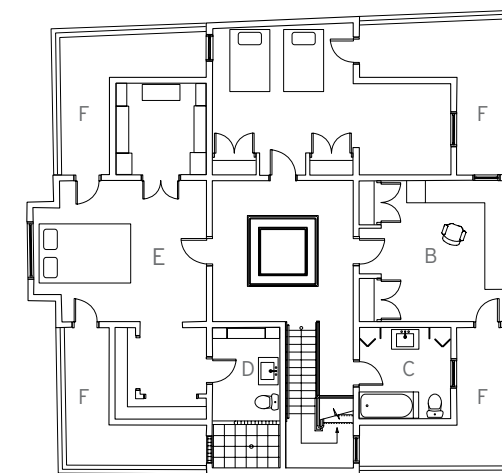
While the foundation of the house was solid,

Facing page: Both bedrooms, an office, and the guest bathroom open off the central atrium. Original stained-glass panels remain above the doors **Right:** Tucked away in a corner on the ground floor, Jane’s office is a riot of colour and creativity

Nicholson knew she wanted to change the sensibility of the space completely. But before beginning the more cosmetic changes, she created a lighting plan with her architect. “Lighting is so important, and it’s important to get it right,” she says. The lighting helps to delineate the different areas of the square, open-plan ground floor. Though centred around a large bamboo plant that grows in the central atrium, the space divides naturally into several “rooms”: two seating areas — one casual with a television and library and one more formal — as well as a dining room, a kitchen, a small office area, and an entranceway.

The installation of more than one mile of crown mouldings gave the space a classical look, while Nicholson went for a faintly Egyptian feel in choosing the column capitals. In the kitchen, she installed simple Shaker-style cupboards and a classic checker-pattern linoleum floor in tones of beige, cream, and black.

But while the underlying look is classic and neutral, the Nicholsons’ personalities shine through with the treasures scattered throughout the house. Flanked by Chinese screens, a major landscape painting provides the focus in the dining area, while a candelabra that belonged to Jane’s British grandmother graces the sideboard. A gold and glass coffee table found in a flea market and an English-inspired Georgian table the couple bought from the side of the road add further layers of interest to the room as a whole. Classic and contemporary share space; there is no stuffiness here. Two sculptures — Nadelman’s *Cow* and *Mary’s Mom* by contemporary favourite Joe Fafard — add modern, lighthearted touches. “An interesting house is an amalgam of all sorts of things,” says Jane. “It’s all about adding layers to a house through the difference in age of the things you choose.”



SECOND FLOOR

A Bedroom B Office C Bathroom D Ensuite bathroom
E Master bedroom F Balcony



The second floor revolves around the central skylight,

with two bedrooms, one bathroom, and a third room — now used as an office — opening off the atrium. Each room has access to a small balcony with views over the Ottawa skyline. Jane plans to refurbish the balcony floors with cedar this summer.

The master bedroom with ensuite bathroom is an exercise in elegance, painted in soft tones of cream. Huge walk-in closets — any girl's dream — flank either side of the room. The bathroom, with floor-to-ceiling tiled shower and glass wall, is hidden from view around a corner. Here, Jane has incorporated a clever touch — the tap for the shower is offset, allowing the user to turn the water on to heat up without getting wet. There's no full-length mirror in the bathroom. "Peter said he didn't want to have to look at himself," says Jane. Instead, she filled one wall with a large pastel by Bachinski while hanging a small shaving and makeup mirror on the other.

The guest bedroom boasts mahogany twin beds with frames that came from the Hotel Nova Scotian in Halifax, along with the bureau, upholstered by Jane. A classic gold-leaf Italian pearwood chandelier hangs overhead, lending a faintly exotic, fairytale-like ambience to the room. It's so pretty, you want to settle in for 100 years like the proverbial Sleeping Beauty.

The shape of the house — an almost perfect 41-by-42-foot square — is echoed in the garden and garage, which combined are nearly the same size. With the help of Tim Kearney of Garden Creations of Ottawa, Nicholson has created a magical small city garden with a stone terrace and a huge mirror along the wall of the garage. The mirror reflects the garden and lots of light back into the house through the floor-to-ceiling French doors that line one wall, visually doubling the size of the space.

While an interesting house may be found in the layers, a successful house that works is one where the owners pay attention to details. The Nicholsons have created an elegant, warm home that is as comfortable for two as it is for entertaining 50. Jane Nicholson's eye for detail, balance, and quality is what makes her own home — as much as her outside projects — a prize-worthy success story. **END**

Above left: The master bedroom with ensuite bathroom is an exercise in elegance, painted in soft tones of cream. Huge walk-in closets (not shown) flank either side of the room. This view shows the door to the balcony. All the rooms on the second floor have access to balconies **Above right:** Jane has created a dreamy guest bedroom by pairing beds from the Hotel Nova Scotian in Halifax with a whimsical gold-leafed chandelier