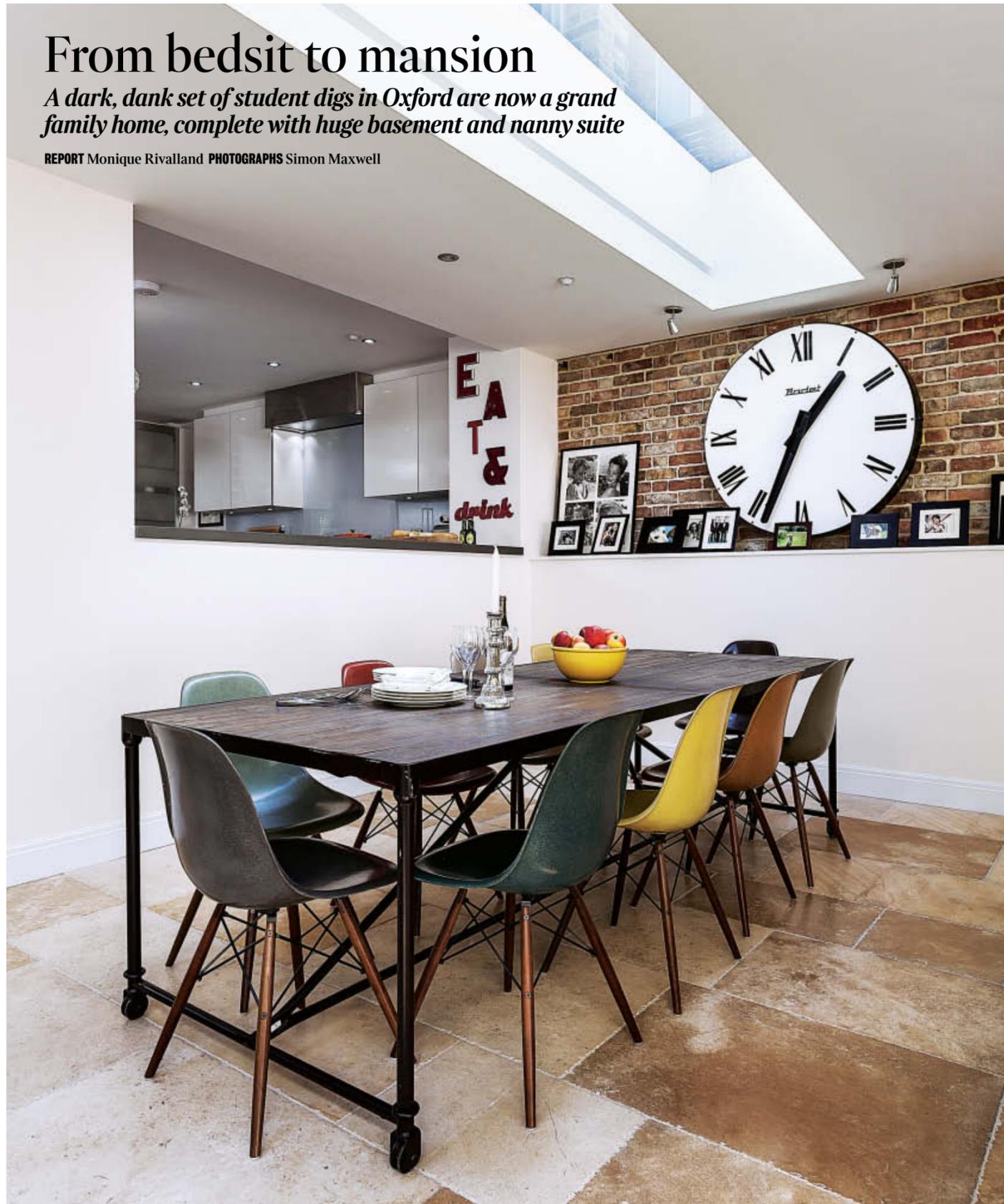


# From bedsit to mansion

*A dark, dank set of student digs in Oxford are now a grand family home, complete with huge basement and nanny suite*

REPORT Monique Rivalland PHOTOGRAPHS Simon Maxwell



Opposite: the open-plan living area with railway clock. This page: the extension into the garden



Clockwise from top:  
the kitchen; the sitting  
room; Jeanne Flynn and  
daughter Grace



**S**tanding in her bright, five-storey Victorian house, Jeanne Flynn describes it as she first saw it five years ago. “Dark and nasty,” are among the words she chooses, closely followed by “dungeon” and “bedsit” – and she isn’t far from the truth. The property belonged to Oxford University and housed a warren of grimy student flats that hadn’t been updated for more than 40 years.

Although majestic on the outside, and set on one of Oxford’s most prestigious roads,

inside it was riddled with “partition walls and random bathrooms stuck in weird places. But I knew the bones of the house were there,” she says. “You could see the proportions were gorgeous, and the ceilings were high.”

Originally from America, Flynn and her husband, Tim, came to London in the Nineties – both lawyers at the time – for what was meant to be a one-year project. “That was 20 years ago,” she says. “There was a moment, after I fell pregnant with my first son, when I turned to my husband and said, ‘I think we actually live here. We’re not just camping any more.’”

Having swapped law for interior design after becoming a mother, Flynn used the move to Oxford as an opportunity to find a property ripe for transformation. The first thing she said to local firm Riach Architects was, “OK, it’s a big house, but it’s not big enough.” Interior walls came down, a huge skylight was installed above the main stairwell and the lower ground floor was extended into “what in America would be called a ‘great room’”. Flynn “blew it out” into the garden by 750sq ft and then dug out a basement of the same size beneath it.

The architects had told her that, “Big ➔

basements may be the trend in London, but it's not really the done thing here." But Flynn was determined to have a space to which her children – Jack, 17, Chase, 15, Zoe, 14, and Grace, 12 – could disappear for some mutual privacy. Now the basement is a teenage haven, with a snooker table, graffiti'd wall and a three-tiered cushioned structure with a home cinema. Most importantly, there's a polished cement floor that is "basically indestructible" and gets "more and more beautiful with spills and cracks".

Every inch of the property has changed. The top two floors were restructured into five bedrooms, and a nanny's suite was fitted downstairs. There was no proper kitchen – neither the students nor the Victorians placed much importance on cooking space. "But these days it's the heartbeat of the house," says Flynn. The kitchen forms part of the living area that spans the entirety of the lower ground floor.

It is here that Flynn and her family spend most of their time, which is reflected in the relaxed feel: the floors are a hard-wearing flagstone; the dining chairs are Charles Eames originals (Sixties fibreglass versions from a dealer in Amsterdam); on the wall is an oversized railway clock Tim picked up at "what he calls an antique shop and I call a junk shop".

A local antiques dealer helped Flynn source much of the furniture, including, one floor up, the canary-yellow velvet chairs around their "more formal" dining table, where they eat at Thanksgiving. But mostly the table is utilised for homework, and Flynn uses what would

**'It was full of partition walls and random bathrooms stuck in weird places. But I knew the bones of the house were there'**

traditionally be the sitting room, "where people have beautiful furniture that nobody ever uses", as her office. "That way," she explains, "you're not stuck up in a tiny box of an office upstairs thinking, 'Why am I spending 75 per cent of my time in the worst space in the house?'"

From Flynn's desk you can look out over the "green roof" above their extension, which she covered in sebum, lavender and grass. "From this viewpoint it looks like a continuation of the garden," says Flynn. It's just the peaceful yet urban existence she was seeking: "It's a little bit more removed, a bit quieter, a bit slower paced, although if you want the excitement of the big city, it is right there at your fingertips."

For Flynn, it's all about balance: striking accessories such as her bright red Tolix-style stools and copper pendant lamps mean her house is as chic as it is a robust family home – and as playful as it is traditional. But one thing it isn't is reminiscent of a bedsit. ■



From top: the dining room; Chase, Jack and Zoe in the basement; the main bedroom

