

Leading Light

GEORGE AND YOLANDE HESSE run their business, Back to Front Exterior Design, revamping other people's homes. Yolande works just like an interior designer but on the outside of a house, and has a talent for seeing beyond the immediate facade and visualising potential – producing perspective watercolours to illustrate her ideas, and scale drawings of the internal and exterior layouts for planning permission. The couple, who started out working from their own revamped home, now have a showroom in Farnham where an extensive library of exterior products may be viewed including guttering, roofing materials, lantern lights, weatherboarding, porches, and even bespoke trellis. They also offer a window and door design service.



The makeover

Meet the couple who can transform the external appearance of a home by realising its true potential.



DESCRIBE YOUR OWN HOME

GEORGE: "Yolande and I decided to down-size the family home after suspecting that I could be made redundant. We'd been living in a large five bedroom house with a big garden and a fairly hefty mortgage, and chose to play safe nine years ago by purchasing a smaller property in Farnham with the intention of making immediate improvements. Buying the house seemed like a backwards step for us at the time, but we had absolutely no idea just how much it would transform our lives."

The bland 1960s house (right) was an uninspiring, boxy property with large picture windows, concrete roof tiles and ugly facing bricks. Windows were rotten and the garden was a bare canvas of lawn, weeds and scrubland. We produced hand-drawn plans for the proposed alterations, replaced the concrete roof with natural slates and swapped the single glazed windows for smaller painted double glazed sash windows. The brickwork and tile hanging were painted and we curved the front path and added soft planting for a totally new look."



PAINTING THE UGLY FACING BRICKWORK and vertical tile hanging with three coats of magnolia Dulux Weathershield created the impression of timber weatherboarding for a Cape Cod feel. Yolande and George chose extruded aluminium ogee gutters and downpipes for their front elevation to complement the traditional windows and refurbished front door. In contrast to the Cape Cod style of the front elevation the rear of the house has been designed in a rather more contemporary style, with large expanses of hardwood framed glazing and two sets of French doors leading out onto the patio garden.





mavericks

ABOVE AND RIGHT A typical 1970s house before and after the Back the Front treatment. BELOW Well-designed accommodation along with a remodelled exterior, including weatherboarding, a new roof covering, and new windows was the brief for this dated but well located home.



Before



Before



Leading Light



Before



What can you say – just a deeply mediocre little bungalow (far left) – you can see them everywhere! The property was given an Australian-style veranda with the roof raised to accommodate some additional rooms. The result is a completely different looking home.



This dated 1960s house has been transformed with a clean and contemporary look.



Before

DID YOU DO ANY OF THE WORK YOURSELVES?

YOLANDE: "We quite enjoyed getting involved, and not having a main contractor meant there were certain jobs we had to do ourselves, such as fitting the new roof insulation. We're both quite practical, though, so we knew we could tackle a lot of the work ourselves. I am the daughter of an engineer and an artist, and have inherited skills from both – in fact, I learnt to lay bricks at the age of just seven!"

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO SET UP THE BUSINESS?

GEORGE: "As predicted, I was ultimately made redundant from my job and felt that the time was right for a complete career change. Over the years so many friends had commented on the dramatic improvements we'd made to our own homes that we decided to set up a business offering a comprehensive architectural design service for other people's houses. It was the best thing that could have happened because the phone did not stop ringing and we had to quickly come up with a company name and a price list to meet demand. Now we're inundated with responses from clients eager to give their own homes a radical exterior makeover."

SO HOW DOES IT WORK?

YOLANDE: "Initially people will usually send us pictures of their property, together with a list of requirements and an approximate budget and we will quote for the appropriate design service. Once our quote has been accepted a measured survey will be arranged and that will be followed by our design visit. We undertake approximately 33 schemes each year, of which most require planning approval, and we also offer a postal service – which is ideal for clients beyond economic travelling distance of Farnham. At the design meeting the client's requirements are discussed carefully and our proposals will then follow over the next few weeks. These may need fine-tuning and further consultations and then – once the scheme

meets our client's approval – we submit it to the planners with water-colour visuals. All planning schemes are monitored through the planning process, with periodic progress reports back to our client, and to date Back to Front Exterior Design has a 100% success rate for approvals."

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR INSPIRATION?

YOLANDE: "I grew up in Australia and love architecture, so wherever I go I'm always gathering ideas which I can draw upon at a later date. I look at an ugly or disproportionate house and something will quite literally pop into my mind. It's very instinctive, but some of the most inspired ideas can arrive out of the ether! I'm not aiming to be original, it's more important to do what's right for the building – particularly with the Georgian era where everything was carefully designed to a specific geometry. Mixing various styles can be jarring, rather like listening to a piece of jazz which suddenly breaks into hip-hop. I prefer to give a house a unified appearance which ties everything together."

WHAT'S THE MOST INTERESTING PART OF YOUR JOB?

GEORGE: "We love the incredible variety of properties we work with – from a semi-detached farm cottage to a rambling mansion; a stone built property or a little bungalow. It means that we're constantly looking for new solutions to different problems. We believe that everybody should get something special that will make them feel that the whole exercise of spending money on design, going through the planning process and dealing with builders has been worthwhile. It's sad when people employ a designer or architect who doesn't pay enough attention to the shape and proportions of a property and hasn't looked at the details."

WHAT DO PEOPLE TEND TO REQUEST?

YOLANDE: "At the moment it's popular to want to link the house to the garden so that inside and outside spaces are blurred, using glazing and



Before

This ordinary house in a great village location was given a completely new exterior with an interior to suit the demands of modern family life. The owners resisted the temptation to cut corners and used high quality materials and fittings – producing a unique property.



Before



folding/sliding glass doors. In Australia, the theatre room now replaces the more formal sitting room, and this concept is also becoming popular in England. Dining rooms are virtually redundant and now everybody seems to want a spectacular open plan kitchen/dining/living room where they can cook, entertain and relax. The most popular wish-list is for a spacious kitchen with an island, and a table that's large enough to seat at least ten people, with a sitting area where the children can be watching television or doing their homework. These open plan spaces need to be kept clutter-free, so a separate pantry and utility room are fairly essential."

DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS?

GEORGE: "Natural materials such as timber doors, clay roof tiles or slates are almost always the best choice, because they tend to mellow and improve with age. One of the first decisions we made for our own house might seem like complete financial madness. We proposed replacing the existing concrete roof covering with natural Spanish slates, and added frost-resistant clay finials and ridge tiles as finishing touches – despite the fact that there was nothing structurally wrong with the roof at all. Such a bold move might appear to be a pointless waste of money, but we realised that – no matter how hard we worked on the rest of the house – the ugly roof would always let it down. Doors and windows also play a vital role because windows really are the eyes to a house and are frequently badly positioned, too numerous or too few. Often the original casements have been replaced with ugly, plastic framed units or glazing bars have been altered. Small things can have great impact, and a few carefully considered alterations can transform a house and turn it from an eyesore into a desirable home."

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Before



ABOVE All the basics were already there in this property – all that was lacking, according to George and Yolande, was a carefully thought through exterior design to update the property. LEFT AND BELOW This 60s style property has been given a new lease of life – and balconies from where to enjoy the views.

