

Jacqui Poncelet's house features clashing patterns and textures. The small Indian chair was bought from Gordon Reece in London. **Top right** Poncelet at work in her house. **Bottom right** the steps that lead upstairs are laminated with images of India, taken by Poncelet; flexible shower cables have been used to disguise wiring for the kitchen lights



Nothing quite prepares you for what you find when you walk through the nondescript aluminium-framed glass door of a small Victorian terrace house in a lively street in Peckham, south-east London. As its owner, the artist Jacqui Poncelet, opens her door you are immediately transported into a surprisingly modern space with a magical, hidden garden.

Poncelet recalls that when she first set foot in the house six years ago it was vile. 'I went round with a friend who isn't squeamish, and she was looking very queasy by the end.' There was a brown rat that looked completely at home wandering around, and the banister rails came away in your hand. It was like being on a comedy set.' Nevertheless she bought the house because it had no features such as fireplaces, special mouldings, original windows or floors, leaving her free to do whatever she wanted.

Known for her sculptural work, Poncelet was considered one of the most innovative and avant-garde ceramicists of her generation, although she no longer works in clay and now describes herself as more of a fine artist. She is currently designing intricate cut-out rubber screens, the prototypes of which have been put to good use replacing window dressings in the sitting-room of her house. According to her friend, the ceramicist Carol McNicoll, who studied with her at the Royal College of Art in the 1970s, Poncelet is someone who never stops making things. It is her combination of textural materials and different bits and pieces that make everything she touches so special. She has a studio in West Norwood, where she goes when the work process is noisy or messy. 'The danger of working at home is that your day begins at 7am and ends at midnight,' she says.

Initially the house was in too much of a state for her to attempt any of the renovation work herself. Instead, she chose the architect Ken Taylor of Quay 2c after she saw his home and studio, and liked the imaginative way in which he worked. His brief was to make a space that 'I could either live or work in and where I could never have too many

'I was once accused of loving my garden more than my house, but as far as I'm concerned it's all one space'

plants,' she recalls. High ceilings and lots of light were vital. What never ceases to delight her is the skylight Taylor installed that catches the last of the evening sun, framing the sky and trees. 'I love inventiveness. I had a wonderful person called Michael Tye building the house. He trained as a sculptor and his attitude cemented the relationship between myself and Ken, because the three of us worked together on most of the design.' Tye was also responsible for the lights in the kitchen,



WHAT LIES BENEATH

An unassuming-looking terrace house in Peckham hides a quirky and ingenious design
By Gabi Tubbs. Photographs by Polly Eltes

The orange two-seater sofa came from Designers Guild, the little Italian sofa is from a shop at Honor Oak in London that imports 20th-century furniture from abroad. **Opposite, clockwise from top** Poncelet's love of plants and interest in the environment made the sedum roof a natural choice; most of the plants in the garden were chosen for their perfume as well as appearance; the bedroom is a minute but immensely practical space that floats above the dining and studio area. The bed cover was a present from her daughter



and the shelving made from pieces of guttering.

An unadorned lobby filled with bikes and detritus leads into a welcoming dining area that at times doubles as a design studio. On the far wall, a glass sliding door leads into the lush flower and herb garden. Narrow steps lead to the upper floor, dividing the dining and kitchen areas. Upstairs the tiny bedroom, which houses no more than a double bed and built-in shelves, is suspended from the ceiling, appearing to float in space above the dining-room. Also on the first floor is the bathroom where Poncelet has retained the house's original sugar-pink sink and lavatory. 'I know most people would have thrown them away but I like a challenge and I think they look great, especially with the floor that I had made. The image is from a photograph I took in India.'

A great lover of pattern, Poncelet tries to create situations where pattern and colour combine without being overwhelming. She currently has white walls, but this doesn't mean she always will. 'I thrive on change, so I like an environment that you can alter by moving the furniture and rugs around to make it feel like a new space.'

Poncelet's influences were formed early on in her life, and are strongly derived from her background. Her father was Belgian, her mother



'I thrive on change so I like an environment that you can alter by moving the furniture and rugs to make it a new space'

British, and she grew up between two different aesthetics – Belgian 19th-century excess and British Modernism.

Her passion for plants, her desire for a bigger garden, and her keen interest in the environment made a sedum roof for her home a natural choice. Locals are entertained by the sight of her weeding the roof, although it doesn't need much maintenance – some watering, feeding and weeding, no mowing. She laughs as she says, 'I was once accused of loving my garden more than my house. As far as I'm concerned it's one space, and the more inviting the garden is for birds the happier I am.' She has now come up with a plan to extend her garden further. 'I've seen a building in north London with a system for vertical planting, so it's totally covered in plants. That is my idea of heaven.' ■

