



# THIS LIFE

## Ian and Thea McMillan

Determined to create a home that would be accessible to all, including their daughter in a wheelchair, two Edinburgh architects came up with an ingenious solution. And it all hinges around a Glasgow dancefloor...

Words Emma Leask Photography David Barbour



[Left] The ramp snakes through the house, linking the different levels and making every corner accessible to all. [Above] The exterior is partly clad with cedar shingles; this little recessed area opens on to the street and a favourite spot for morning coffee. [Right] Thea, Greta, Bee and Ian

It's said that brilliance is born from necessity, and that's certainly the case at Squirrel Cottage, a pioneering barrier-free, fully accessible home in the heart of Edinburgh's seaside suburb, Portobello.

Despite modernising their previous two-storey Victorian house, architects Ian and Thea McMillan and daughters Bee (11) and eight-year-old Greta, who has cerebral palsy, were finding its inaccessibility increasingly difficult.

As fate had it, Thea got chatting to local mechanic Arthur Harris, who sympathised with their predicament and offered to sell the couple a plot next to his workshop. After a site visit, the deal was done in a day. "It meant everything to us to stay in Portobello where Greta is known and loved," says Thea. "She was born here and ►





has lived here all her life; the children in her class know her and the fact she uses a wheelchair is not a big thing. If we had to move to a new community, we'd lose all that."

With a three-storey copper-clad tower inspired by Frank Gehry's early houses, a reflecting pool, bright red feature walls and Eames, Jacobsen and Louis Poulsen design classics throughout, the house certainly doesn't look like stereotypical wheelchair-friendly design. The only hint is a boardwalk-style ramp meandering through the home, which adds a nautical feel.

Despite a tight 215m<sup>2</sup> plot, the couple rejected the obvious solution of just sticking a lift in. "A lift would create an immediate inequality where Greta uses the lift and we use the stair," explains Thea. "The house should be for everyone – inclusive architecture – so we built the whole house around a ramp, enabling Greta to play with her friends at home just like any other eight-year-old."

As well as changing Greta's life, the rest of the family have discovered that moving around a house via a ramp is a lot of fun. "Bee hangs out with her 11-year-old friends sitting on the window sill and ramp railings. Little children enjoy scooting up and down in ride-on cars, and when we had a party our friends were dotted halfway up the ramp chatting," says Thea.

For Ian and Thea, the fact that people experience a different – and positive – way of moving around



[Above and below] Two views of the kitchen, where the girls love to bake. The cabinets are from Ikea, the large globe from Habitat and the three smaller ones from Copenhagen. A tide clock hangs on the wall. "It's important to know what the sea is doing when you can't see it," says Ian. [Right] A corner of the study



their home is the entire point. "The wider impact of an inclusive house like this is that people understand that accessibility need not be about constrictions, but can be a delight," says Thea.

Inspired by the sociability of Dutch architecture, the house is open plan and spirals around the ramp, creating several interesting levels. "For a child who cannot move around independently, the connectivity of the spaces becomes all the more important. If Greta is in the living room, there are six different spaces that we can be in and move between, and she is still able to see, hear and communicate with us," says Thea.

The ramp itself, taking up almost a third of the floor space, is a thing of beauty. Made from 28mm-thick maple, its past life was as a dancefloor in Glasgow. "It's 50 years old, and I like the idea that perhaps my parents once waltzed on it," says Ian. "It was a huge labour of love building it but in the end it worked out more cost-effective than laminate flooring."

Externally, the front of the house stands right on the

street so they 'stole back' outdoor space by designing a recessed entrance with a small fountain. Next to this, a Danish-influenced breakfast area with a sliding glass door opens directly onto the street. "The Danish have planning regulations about how much transparency a house should have to the street front – allowing people to interact is

considered very important. I think it's vital for a building to engage with the street and that we don't all live in submarines in a city," says Ian.

Thea agrees: "It's nice to have a space where I can sit outside with my morning coffee and chat to people passing by."

Despite the European influences, the house is very Scottish, with Caithness stone, paving flagstone offcuts from the streets of Edinburgh and red cedar shingles from Inverness. The striking copper tower suggests whisky distilleries, its shape inspired by the brick kilns in

Portobello. The living space makes reference to Scottish blackhouses in its form and is designed to have a wildflower meadow sedum roof.

With Venetian Red walls and Tom Dixon pendant lights, ►

*"The wider impact of an inclusive house like this is that people understand that accessibility need not be about constrictions, but can be a delight"*





[Above] This space, with its corner window that thrusts right out into the garden, is a sunny spot to sit and read. [Right] The Venetian-inspired courtyard has a reflecting pool. "It's a breakout space to get away for a quiet chat," says Ian. [Below] The family's fine collection of chairs includes two Eames classics, the LCW and the rocker



the kitchen is a stylish space where baking is a regular family event. "Greta slots under the bench top in her supportive chair and we all bake bread together," says Ian. The Bosch fridge has pull-out drawers and the Neff oven has a door that slides underneath.

Just off the ramp stands a piano, adding unexpected character to the sleek stainless-steel worktop and white gloss cabinetry. "It's actually a very efficient use of space because the stool sits on the ramp in the circulation space," says Ian. "That said, because of the slope, we had to cut two legs off the piano stool, so it's a bit like a haggis."

Next door, the open-plan sunroom – thanks to its corner entrance and red velvet sofa facing the reflecting pool – feels peaceful and secluded. "It's a great spot for reading or quiet time away from everyone," says Thea.

The ramp inclines through the kitchen, living area and study before meandering round to the bedrooms and physio area. It's the main circulation route, although there is a small staircase tucked away near the front door. "We call it the service stair," laughs Ian. "We never use it – everyone prefers the ramp."

Thea's study presides over the living area and kitchen rather like a stage with a specially designed desk and bookshelf

dividing the space. To enter the study, one must exit the building into the courtyard and re-enter through another glass door – Thea jokes it's her 'commute' to work. "I had initially wanted the study to be completely surrounded with some kind of opening but we felt the view to the back courtyard was a really important one so we didn't want to block it off. It feels great because I can sit up here enjoying looking at the house and being part of the space without feeling I should be doing housework – I'm contained and focused."

By using models to get the children involved during the design process, they discovered spaces difficult to see on a drawing. The ramp's 'leftover' spaces have been used very efficiently – such as Greta's therapeutic Snoezelen, housed in a nook under the ramp, and a folding louvre which cleverly opens to create a laundry pulley for drying washing over the stairwell.

In the bedroom, double doors with a Juliette balcony overlooking the living areas have made Thea's life much easier. "Our bedroom is secluded, yet we just open the doors to be connected to the rest of the house again. If Greta isn't well or has a lie-in, I can work in my study and hear exactly when she wakes up, which means I don't have the anxiety of continually going up to check on her."





"The wood used for the ramp is 50 years old and was once a Glasgow dancefloor. I like the idea that perhaps my parents once waltzed on it"



### BEST BIT

"Architects do tend to collect books. We have literally thousands and we read a lot," says Ian. "It's nice to stand on the ramp browsing the shelves, then sit in the corner chair or window seat and read."

A stroll up the ramp past bookshelves naturally pauses at the 'book nook', dreamed up at design stage when Ian took a scalpel to his model and cut a corner seat out of solid wall. With a window seat opposite, it's a sunny spot for socialising or having a quiet read. At foot level, a slither of wall is cut out, giving tantalising glimpses of the kitchen below and a sense of seclusion yet connectivity.

The ramp ends at a wet room, which has a two-metre-wide sliding door and walls clad with Jura limestone. Across the landing is the girls' bedroom with a high-level play deck for Bee. "Obviously a lot of the house design was relating to Greta, so it was important for Bee to have her own space to retreat to away from everyone," says Ian.

Finally, the 'crow's nest' room with sea view at the top of the copper tower is primarily a wine-drinking space – and ongoing project.

Passionate about designing spaces which are not just accessible to all, but richer because of it, the couple were inspired to start their own architectural practice ChambersMcMillan. "Housing design shouldn't be restricted to being just for the able-bodied or a wheelchair-user – the boundary needs to become ►

[Far left] In the living room, a Morso wood-burning stove is unusually elevated to eye level, while the leather Balzac chair was a bargain from Gumtree. Thea's desk and computer are just visible. [Left] The ramp's wooden planks were once a Glasgow dancefloor; Thomas Heatherwick Spun chair is much loved by the children. [Below] A two-metre sliding door provides easy access to the wet room







## WHAT WE LIKE

We bought a beautiful sky-blue Krenit bowl at our **favourite second-hand shop**, Retrograde, in Copenhagen last summer. We love to visit the city's flea market too. Cedar shingles have the **best smell** – it reminds me of our home.

Whenever we're **seeking inspiration** we walk along Portobello beach. Our morning coffee stop is the Beach House Café – the sea view is so relaxing after the school drop-off.

The opening sequence of Woody Allen's *Manhattan* always makes us **feel good**.

**Best cocktail?** An Aperol spritz, on Campo Santa Margherita in Venice, hits the spot.

We gave our girls a **spinning chair** called Spun by Thomas Heatherwick for Christmas. It's a family favourite and Greta loves the freedom of movement it allows her.

Anthony Green is our **favourite artist**. He is also a family friend – we have one of his wonderfully rich prints, a wedding gift, in our bedroom.

The Skylark restaurant and bar in Portobello High Street has got to be **Edinburgh's best-kept secret**. It's Manhattan meets Portobello.

**Absolute necessity?** Sunlight and water.

Carnethy 5 hill race: the near-vertical descent off the 1,900ft-high Scald Law is literally breathtaking and the **ultimate adrenalin rush**.

more blurred," says Thea. "In Denmark every change in level has steps and a ramp combined and it works for everyone including bikes, buggies and wheelchairs. Why shouldn't everywhere be accessible to everyone?"

It's a view that seems to have struck a cord. Despite the Portobello Community Council objecting to the house at the planning stage, the couple were touched to discover that 48 local people – some they didn't even know – wrote letters of support for the planning application, arguing that Greta should have a wheelchair-accessible house so she can remain in the community.

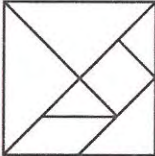
For financial reasons, the couple had to finish the building work themselves. Faced with the enormity of the task, Ian put out a plea for help via Facebook to the local Portobello Dads network. Again, the couple were blown away by the generosity of the local community, when just hours later 40 local dads – some they'd never met – turned up at the house to help. "It was very touching and in many ways it made it feel like a community build," says Ian.

The house has proved a huge success for family life. "It gives us great joy seeing Greta enjoying the spaces of our home inclusively," says Thea. "Most of the children and adults who visit say to us, can we not put ramps in all our houses?"

At a final build cost of £250,000, it's also proved that designing inclusively can be cost-effective and Ian and Thea's manifestation of 'architecture for all' should be supported and applauded. ■

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