

# smartlife

THE LIFESTYLE-TECHNOLOGY BIBLE **international** CEDIA vol9 iss2 £3.95



## HIGH DEFINITION LOWDOWN

Everything you ever wanted to know about HD but were afraid to ask

## THE CONNOISSEUR'S GUIDE TO GASCONY

One journalist, three days and a bottomless supply of Armagnac – welcome to tourism the SmartLife way!

## I SHOULD ROCOCO

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we have

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# holey moley!

TAKE ONE CONVERTED CHURCH, THROW IN A BEVY OF HEAVENLY SOUND TECHNOLOGY, CROSS FINGERS AND HOPE THAT RICHARD HALL CAN MAKE IT THROUGH THE NEXT FEW PAGES WITHOUT SAYING ANYTHING BLASPHEMOUS...



Hyper-modern tech meets centuries-old tradition in the bathroom



Original features and salvaged materials have been used throughout the kitchen

**R**egardless of whether you're a fervent believer or a resolute atheist, it's hard to deny that there's something uniquely powerful and humbling about religious architecture. Many of the churches that dot the landscapes of Britain are still standing centuries after they were originally built, often using antiquated construction methods that could be brutal on those that did the heavy lifting back in the day. In contrast to the philosophy that seems to inform so many of today's modern buildings, these ageing houses of worship were truly built to last.

As we all know, however, church attendance is nowhere near what it used to be in this increasingly secular society. The potential implications this might have for the spiritual and moral well-being of the nation, we won't go into here (*Thank God for that – Ed*), but certainly one upshot is that more and more of these magnificent buildings are being abandoned and left to languish in a state of disrepair.

## I am the resurrection

Such was the case with St. Martin's, a dilapidated 18th century church situated in the town of Tipton just north of Dudley, which caught the attention of one Dean Marks. As he tells it, "*When we discovered St. Martin's, we knew it was the right one. The building had been empty for years, the tower had been lost to bombing during the war, but its sheer size was exciting. It was huge.*"

Smitten with the possibilities it presented for carrying out the ultimate home conversion (and being an accomplished builder, determined to carry out as much of the required work as he could personally), Dean set about first acquiring the building itself, which he managed to do by bartering down the original asking

price of £25,000 to an impressive £12,500. That, however, was just the start; before any renovations could begin, there was still the thorny issue of planning permission to negotiate. This proved to be a torturous process, one which effectively mired the project in limbo for a total of four years.

Still, once the all clear was given, things could finally proceed – albeit within the limits of some pretty stringent building restrictions. For one thing, the church's Methodist layout of a gallery running around three sides supported by a series of columns couldn't be altered in any way. Whatever Dean had planned, it would mean having to work around those columns when it came to room sizing and location.

Happily though, despite these constraints, he was ultimately able to fashion a sizeable dwelling with no less than six bedrooms, an indoor swimming pool and even a glass-roofed observatory on the top floor. The result is a pretty drastic transformation by all accounts, but Dean was careful not to break with building's rich historical heritage completely...



This certainly won't be the  
"lost supper" to be had in here...



The preserved stained-glass windows have been used to brilliant effect, particularly in one of the upstairs bedrooms

## Born again

Where possible, he attempted to incorporate features and materials from the building's former life in some rather unusual ways. Often, one of the first things to go in the average church conversion are the dozens of pews frequently left lying around by the previous tenants, but not here – the pews have been spruced up, reused and re-purposed as wall panelling and work surfaces in the bespoke kitchen. Various skirting boards and architraves have also survived the makeover, together with perhaps the most striking retained feature of all; the gorgeous stained glass windows that let dappled light in on the dining room, bathroom and main bedroom.

In terms of looks then, it's quite the stunner – and sounds pretty good too. You see, there was something else that needed adding, something in keeping with Dean's painstaking efforts to preserve the building's character: Amina's Plaster In-wall speakers, capable of blasting out any tunes of the owner's choosing while remaining completely concealed from view. "When I came across the Aminas, I thought they were amazing,"

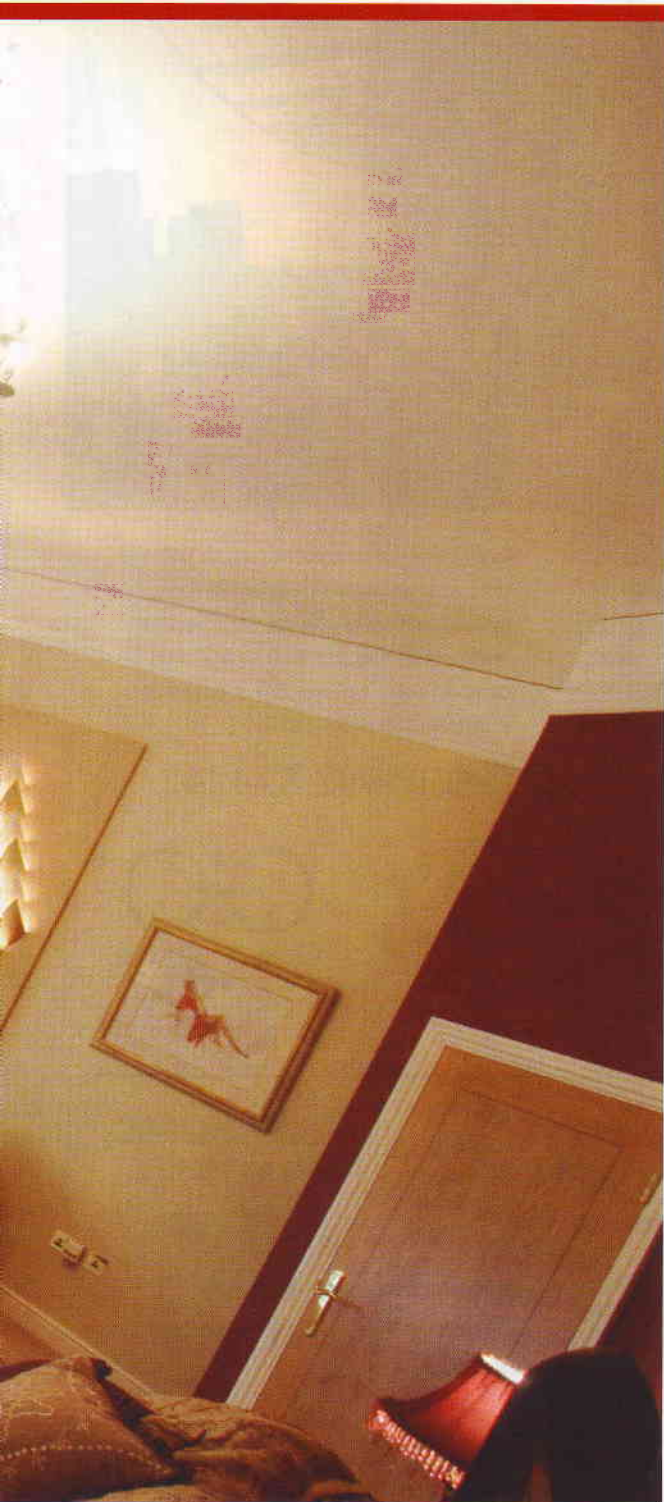
he recalls, "A totally invisible loudspeaker! I just knew I wanted them in. This was going to be my dream house, and I wanted to make sure that it had all the bells and whistles when it was done."

## Divine inspiration

It turns out that 'them' translated to a total of 16 pairs strategically located throughout the house in various walls and ceilings. As Dean explains, "We had a pretty good idea in which rooms and whereabouts we wanted them, so when it came to first fix we just laid the audio wires in at the same time. After speaking to Amina, they suggested we just put in the dry wall and ceilings and then retrofit them.

"When I installed the speakers, it was just a case of making sure that each one was flush with the plaster board. We used some joint tape around the speakers so that it overlapped with the plasterboard and covered the join. A plaster skim layer later and they were done. Now that we've decorated, it's impossible to tell where they are. All you can hear is the music."

Indeed you can. The trick to how the Aminas work is that they employ a vibrating composite flatpanel backed up by a solid



state exciter, which together translate the output from a connected amplifier into precisely rendered vibrations that sweep through the air. Moreover, no matter how hard they're cranked, these movements remain almost imperceptible, ensuring that even at a raucous 105dB the covering plaster won't crack.

As well as looking as neat as can be, the other bonus of course is that they're perfect for use in damp environments such as bathrooms and kitchens, where they'll happily reside without having to worry about the risk of moisture damage or even the need to keep them clean – something that Dean was eager to take advantage of.

## Amen

Having been given a whole new lease of life, this former house of the holy now bristles with some of the most forward-thinking sonic hardware that the 21st century has to offer, while still managing to maintain a healthy respect for its past. Suffice to say, were Jesus himself to come back and get a cutting-edge smartpad of his own, it would probably look a lot like this (*I've got my eye on you, Hall – God*).

Contact: [www.amino.co.uk](http://www.amino.co.uk)