

# Living on a prayer

*The soaring ceilings and striking architectural features of this converted church in the Netherlands really strike a chord*

*Words Sarah Baldwin Photography Cornbread Works*



*left Adding roof lights to the vaulted ceiling has transformed the dark chapel into a bright, impressive space. The floating black steel staircase leads to the mezzanine above. The kitchen, by Bulthaup, is sleek and functional*

**T**he most time that many of us spend in church these days is the occasional Sunday service, midnight mass on Christmas Eve, and perhaps a wedding or christening. Not so for one couple in Utrecht, Netherlands; their chic contemporary home is in an old Catholic chapel. It took just over a year for Dutch architect Zecc (+31 30 273 1289; zecc.nl) to transform the disused building into a home that, in keeping with its ecclesiastical roots, can only be described as awe inspiring.

And it's these very roots that influenced the design. 'We wanted to maintain a sacred quality in the chapel,' says architect Marnix van der Meer. The owners wanted to preserve the grandeur of the original building, so the brief was to create one living space in the chapel itself, with a bedroom and bathroom in the side →

## Conversions are about converting not destroying, and this house pays homage to its past, present and future



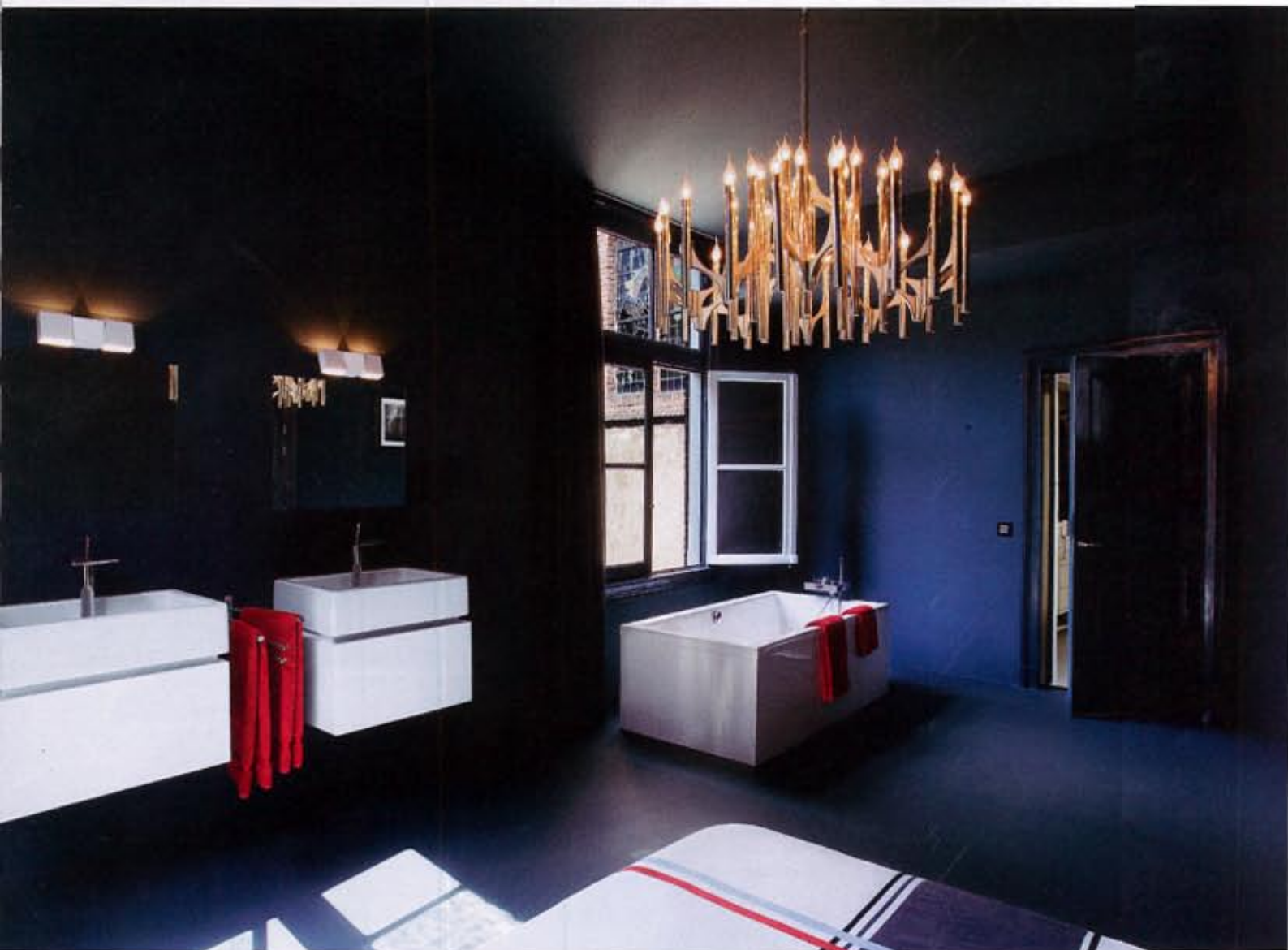
annexe. Organising the single expanse was one of the biggest challenges of the build; it feels hugely spacious thanks to the soaring ceiling that's almost 15m high. And keeping the enormous organ (it still works) provides a fabulous focal point, which puts the space in perspective. A mezzanine juts asymmetrically from the base of the organ to create distinct living zones; it houses a study space upstairs, with a kitchen and dining room below.

It's not just the grandeur that has been preserved; the original structure of the church can be seen throughout the building. The leaded stained-glass windows cast colourful shadows on to the whitewashed interior and the original cross and stone frieze around the arch have been restored. The owners have also reused the old church pews to make large and imposing dining

furniture. 'It all makes you feel in awe of the space and small as a person,' says van der Meer.

But it's not all dramatic features and vaulted ceilings. Zecc was careful to make it a liveable space. Introducing daylight into the dark chapel was a challenge solved by fitting roof lights in the nave and introducing a large stained-glass window behind the original altar, inspired by Dutch artist Mondrian. In contrast, dramatic dark colours teamed with high-quality sanitaryware give an opulent, moody feel to the bedroom and bathroom annexe.

A new take on old traditions is what defines the house. After all, conversions are about converting not destroying, and this house pays real homage to its past, present and future. **GD**



*right* Original church fittings are visible throughout the house, with the vaulted rafters supporting a glamorous chandelier – the P-light by Angelo Mangiarotti for Porro  
*left* The huge new window, inspired by the art of Mondrian  
*below left* This spectacular chandelier – bought in the Fifties by the monks who used the chapel – adds an opulent touch to the moody blue of the bedroom and bathroom annexe

