



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



Are home extensions really such *Grand Designs*? **Vicky Halls** investigates...

So many people these days are building extensions rather than moving house, giving them the space or the change they need without the demands of buying and selling in a challenging market.

One such family I visited recently carefully planned such an extension that incorporated a large, modern glass box on the back of the house and the creation of a massive kitchen and family room with a light and airy feel. Sadly the one member of the household that wasn't consulted was the resident Siamese...this is how his story *may* have unfolded.

Thai, a four-year-old house-bound Siamese, was perfectly happy with his home. He loved to sit on the window sill in the kitchen and watch the great outdoors – and that scary cat from Number Seven – from a position of height and relative safety.

One day, without warning, the kitchen door was sealed up and all his worldly goods were moved upstairs to a spare room. He didn't see that favourite part of his world again for three months. This felt like an eternity to Thai; strangers were in and out of the house during the day, everything had a strange smell, there was a lingering dust in the air and constant vibration. He turned to his family for reassurance but they seemed distracted, moody and inconsistent. Thai started to feel very uneasy and found it hard to fill his day with any degree of pleasure.

Then one day, having reluctantly adapted to his shrunken world, something quite dramatic happened. The plastic seal came down, the kitchen door opened and he was suddenly exposed to a frightening new world. Where the kitchen used to be there now was a large expanse of shiny floor and an uninterrupted view of the garden. It was hard to tell what was home or outside any more. Where could he hide? How could he protect himself from the cat from Number Seven?

Thai did the only thing that he could think of under the circumstances. He systematically went round and anointed each glass panel along the perimeter with small sprays of urine in a desperate attempt to restore some sense of security in this newly-created danger zone. He also sprayed a shiny new – and very pungent to Thai's sense of smell – leather sofa, the only possible camouflage in this barren wilderness.

A comfortable compromise

This was where I came in, as the owners had visited their vet regarding this distressing state of affairs. I had the difficult task of explaining to them that, despite the obvious beauty and light of their new glass box extension, it certainly wouldn't have been something Thai would have drawn up with the architects.

Thai had lost the sense of a divide between outside (dangerous) and inside (safe) and therefore felt that he could no longer ensure that the cat from Number Seven would not penetrate his defences and annihilate him forever. Thai was showing his emotional response to this new, scary environment by using a means of communication appropriate to the circumstances of conflict and threat. Depositing small amounts of pungent urine provides the individual with a personal scent reassurance in dangerous places. We had to change this perception to enable cat and human to live in harmony once again.

I had to make the glass box feel safe. What Thai needed was a reinstatement of some form of solid divide between him and the enemy and some clutter to hide behind to observe without being seen.

He wanted a high perch where he could act as lookout without being attacked. However it is practically impossible to ask someone to cover expanses of glass and introduce clutter when they have just spent a fortune on "light and minimalism", just to please the cat. We therefore settled on decorative, opaque plastic film. This adhered via static rather than adhesive, so no mess, on the lower part of the glass panels.

The owners also chose a tasteful piece of cat furniture with scratching pillars and a few strategically-placed storage boxes, all of which were appropriately anointed with synthetic feline facial pheromones* (Feliway®, Ceva). This would provide Thai with sufficient clutter to render him invisible, when necessary, and therefore impervious to harm.

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the FAB's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For further information regarding these please visit her website: www.vickyhalls.net Vicky also hosts a cat behaviour Facebook Group and you can join in the cat discussions by searching for 'Vicky Halls Cat Behaviour' from within Facebook.



Cats can be unsettled by home improvements

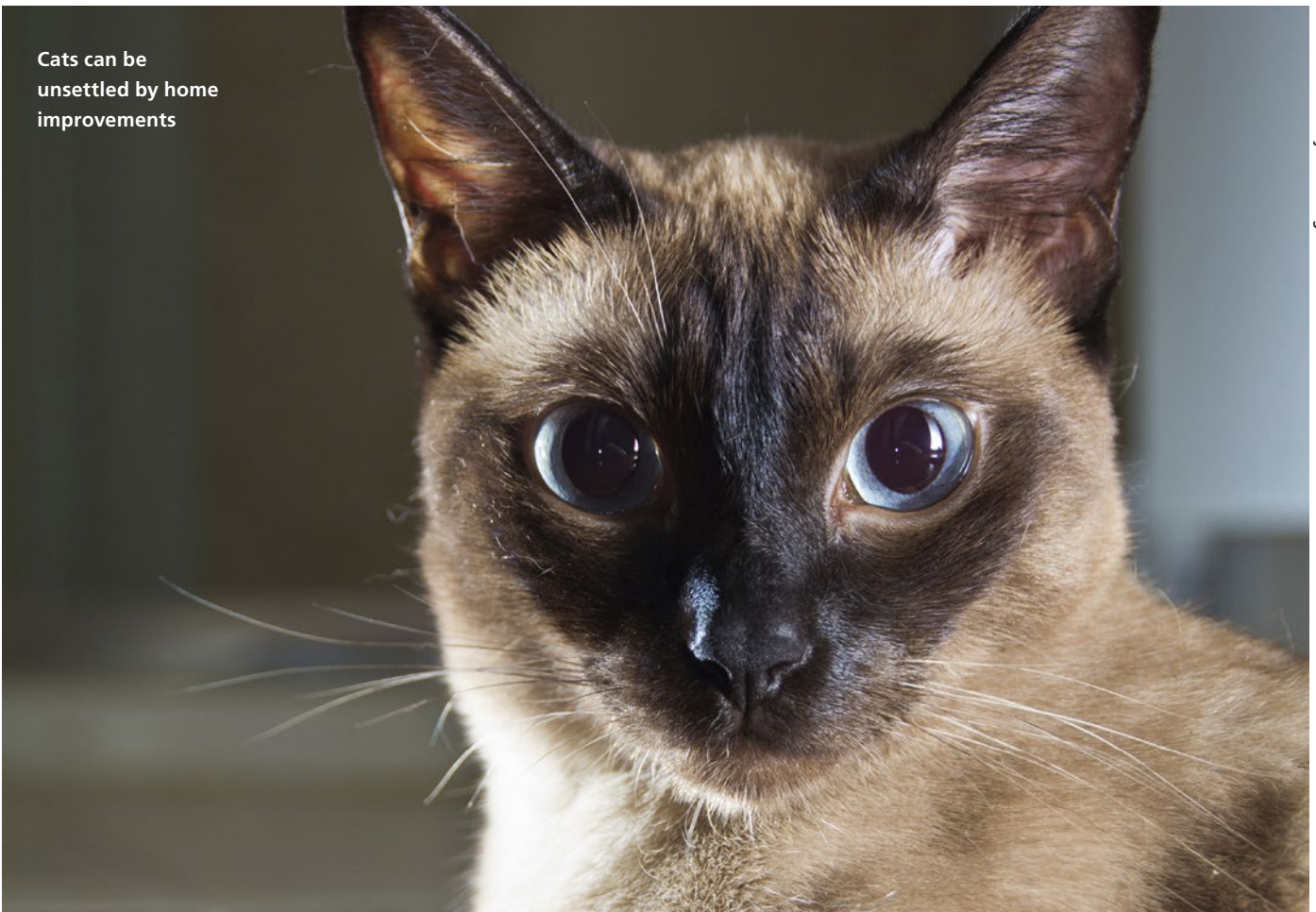


Photo: istocklibrary.com/Dong808

We cleaned areas that required it and restored a predictable routine for Thai around feeding, cuddles, play and general entertainment. The couple also installed various non-harmful deterrents in their garden; feeling it was probably one angst too many for Thai to see the neighbours' cat on a regular basis. Over the next few weeks Thai adjusted well to these modifications and, as he felt more secure with the new environment and routines, he returned to his previous exemplary behaviour.

Assumptions of adaptability

This doesn't mean however that all cats will find minimalistic living impossible or that they will dissolve emotionally at the first sign of a DIY catalogue. They are incredibly adaptable creatures and will soon find a way to work with (or around) their new environment. However I don't think this means we should take advantage of their inherent adaptability, I think we should consider their sensitivities when we plan *any* building work or changes to our homes.

There are many things you can do to help your cat adapt:

- Decorating work and new flooring represent a major change to your cat. The smells are strong and unfamiliar and the texture underfoot will feel strange. Make the transition more gradual by laying old rugs or pieces of old flooring or carpet over the new for a few weeks until your cat has become accustomed
- If building work or decorating is a short-term project and it is being carried out in a room or part of the house where your cat spends a great deal of time, consider a little holiday in a cattery during the disruptive period
- Set up a single room or safe area away from the commotion for more long-term structural work. Keep all your cat's important resources – litter tray, feeding bowls, water, toys, bed – in easily-accessible places and maintain his or her daily routines
- If your cat goes outdoors, garden makeovers may also be challenging. Are you changing or removing his favourite toilet site? If so, consider providing an alternative, suitable outdoor area or provide him with an indoor litter tray.
- Don't forget the significance of changes in your neighbours' gardens too; this may also be an important part of your cat's territory and therefore potentially a concern. Whatever he can't enjoy in your neighbour's garden now should be provided for in yours! A small area of ground in a discreet corner, dug over with 50/50 sand and compost, would be ideal
- Familiarity is the key so, when it is time for your cat to see the new environment, make sure there is something that he recognises as familiar scent is the key to a calm re-introduction
- Beware! Some cats thrive on the excitement and novelty of household disruption but it may be worth any tradesmen keeping an eye out for their equipment and tool bags; the cat may not be quite *that* thrilled and demonstrate the fact with pungent urine!

* The feline facial pheromones are chemicals released from glands in the cat's face that are used to mark territory as safe and secure.