

DESIGNERS' SECRETS

SITTING ROOMS

In a new series, we take a room-by-room approach to explore what makes a comfortable, ergonomic and stylish home, drawing inspiration from the private spaces of interior designers

FEATURE EMMA J PAGE

Though there are few rules that cannot be bent when it comes to decorating – apart from staying true to one's own personal expression – it does help to turn to the experts for guidance. Specialists, whether interior designers, craftspeople or tastemakers, have a wealth of experience that encompasses both imaginative thinking and the ability to avoid costly mistakes. Perhaps nowhere is that more evident than in their own homes. When a designer creates a scheme for themselves, they are often obliged to deal with more pressing constraints, whether those are economy, time or architecture. And therein lies a wealth of inspiration.

Perhaps one of the most dynamic rooms in the house is the sitting room – a place to host and to re-energise. 'I've always liked a formal layout and informal "planting",' said the late American tastemaker and decorator Nancy Lancaster, the unexpected doyenne of classic English style. 'First get the structure right, like the bones in a face, then plant it like a crowded shoe. If you have a strong layout, you can let the plants seed themselves all over the place.' It is a wise philosophy that designers still adhere to today, resulting in spaces that are colourful, comfortable and playful, whatever a room's limitations. Here, some of our best-loved designers share their secrets.



RIGHT Martin Brudnizki, who has created a jewel-box effect with the 'extreme aesthetic' in his drawing room.



Layer colour and pattern Martin Brudnizki, interior architect

'I wanted it to feel like sunshine in a box,' says Martin Brudnizki of the drawing room in his ground-floor apartment in a Grade II listed country house in West Sussex. Pattern, colour and treasured objects abound in this self-confessed fantasy of English Arcadian life.

The rule about the necessity of designing around a single striking visual anchor is broken in this space; instead, the eye is drawn from one decorative detail to another, whether a sofa upholstered in Pierre Frey's Flamestitch, curtains in a Braquenié toile, or a portrait by Johan Zoffany, which hangs above French slipper

chairs upholstered in Christopher Moore chintz.

The key to this style is to commit fully to a sense of abundance. 'It's an extreme aesthetic, but that's the point,' says Brudnizki. 'The idea was to create something layered, generous and full of stories.'

Contrasting colour and pattern used in this way often works better against mid-tone to dark walls to enhance a jewel-like effect. Here, Edward Bulmer Natural Paint's Naples Yellow does the trick. 'It has this wonderful ability to shift with the day: bright and buoyant in the morning, and by dusk, glowing like candlelight. As a result, the room is the heart of our home – it's where we read, entertain and spend long evenings with friends.' ▶

ABOVE The classic furniture arrangement helps give shape to this eclectic space. The Wickham armchairs by And Objects are upholstered in Jean Monro's Cecelia Toile and the oversized mohair-topped ottoman is by Christine Baumann.



Elevate architectural details

**Philip Hooper, joint managing director,
Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler**

Off the ground-floor hallway of his Georgian house in Somerset, Philip Hooper's sitting room-cum-library is a paean to peace. 'Even though there is a TV in here, I like to use it as a reading room,' he explains. 'Books are a major part of my world and it's a true luxury to have them all to hand in one space.'

Fortunately, the Georgian bones of this room were well-preserved, featuring high ceilings, original doors, fireplaces, cornices and architraves. 'All we had to deal with was questionable decoration, so the biggest challenge was peeling away the layers to get back to a plain surface,' he continues.

Enhancing original architecture like this is all about scale. 'Large rooms become comfortable by using the right furniture size and putting it all together so that it chimes with my mantra – you have to have somewhere to put a drink down, somewhere to put your feet up and a light to read by,' says Hooper. 'You also need to throw in something unexpected, such as the odd explosion of colour or a playful object – like the hand-painted lampshade.' In the alcoves, a shade of red – Little Greene's Heat – was chosen to accentuate the colours of the spines and to emphasise the beauty of the interior architecture. Walls painted in Little Greene's Bath Stone provide a soft contrast to an inky blue-finished bookcase.



Bring nature inside

**Suzy Hoodless,
interior designer**

'Timeless materials chosen to last' was Suzy Hoodless's mantra when decorating the sitting room in her London townhouse. Complementing this was a desire to pay homage to nature, albeit in an elevated, painterly form. 'The wallpaper is my Pines of Kernow design, created in collaboration with Adam Ellis Studio,' she explains. 'Inspired by the Monterey pines that surround our family retreat on the Cornish coast, it captures the warmth and spirit of that landscape in rich, earthy tones, which is ideal because, being west-facing, the room gets bathed in beautiful evening light.' Each mural is bespoke and scaled to the room, bringing depth and character to the space.

Furniture, collected over many years, has been chosen for its quality and longevity rather than belonging to a particular period, which is key when it comes to avoiding a museum-like or overly static look. Hoodless wanted the space to feel relaxed and inviting, somewhere her family of five could gather informally, yet also flexible enough to seat visiting friends or extended family. 'It is design-led but never precious,' she says of the scheme. 'Every seat has a side table close by – because we all need a place to rest a cup of tea or a cocktail.' Lighting helps this room transition from day to night: there are table lights on a 5-amp circuit, floor lamps and a pendant. 'The room is modern in spirit, deeply comfortable and above all, considered,' she adds. ▶



THIS PAGE A Danish sofa in Backgammon flame stitch fabric from George Spencer Designs adds depth to this space with its tonal patterning. OPPOSITE Crisp architectural detailing is contemporised by a monochrome charcoal drawing by Tony Bevan.



'We love socialising, so we just wanted to be able to seat as many people as possible in a relaxed, convivial way'

Jodie Hazlewood

Consider zoning

Jodie Hazlewood, curator and furniture designer, The House Upstairs

ABOVE A mix of vintage pieces and furniture from The House Upstairs creates a relaxed look. The walls are in Stone Blue, the ceiling in School House White and the windows in Hague Blue, all by Farrow & Ball.

Sometimes, a room's original purpose becomes altered or distilled over the years, especially in period properties that have been subsequently divided into separate dwellings. In cases like these, the challenge is to create a scheme that feels both ergonomic and naturally suited to its role. Often that means reappraising layout and potentially altering flow. Jodie Hazlewood's first-floor sitting room, once a bedroom in a Victorian mansion, is a case in point, having first had a change of purpose in the 1960s.

'We knocked through into the kitchen to create a really big living space,' she says. 'It has great ceiling

height – over three metres – and it's a large, well-proportioned space. Our biggest concern was zoning it into a couple of seating areas. We love socialising, so we just wanted to be able to seat as many people as possible in a relaxed, convivial way.'

Replacing the gas fire with a reclaimed marble fire surround, she also removed old carpet, sanded floors and had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves built around the entrance to the kitchen (behind the sofa on the left), adding plenty of storage. The finishing touch is a rug bought in Marrakesh that gently pulls together the room's seating zones.



Make neutrals interesting

Philippa Thorp, interior designer, Thorp Design

For the snug in her Grade II listed Hampshire house, Philippa Thorp wanted to channel a sense of calm and simplicity in this neutral scheme. Good bones, tall windows and original shutters help to facilitate this kind of look because existing architectural detailing introduces natural depth.

'When I renovated the house, I fabric-lined every room with beautifully textured finishes and the walls were hung with art I loved,' she says. 'That creates an easy sense of movement.' In the snug, Thorp used a fabric walling in stonewashed linen for a neutral but warming effect. Antique armchairs and lamps add character, while new joinery along the back wall conceals the television.

'This room sits adjacent to the kitchen, so it doubles up as a relaxed space for my three daughters to sit and unwind, but can also be made more formal by closing the joinery unit up, making it a lovely spot for guests,' she continues. A sisal rug with leather binding adds a rustic note. 'Don't be afraid to layer. The warming neutrals in this room include creams, beiges, browns and soft pinks.' ▶



ABOVE Artwork, including *Flo Flo: La Comédienne* by Charles Mozley hanging above the fireplace and, on the right, pieces by Hampshire-based artist Michael Vaughan, add dynamism to this serene space.



‘My biggest tip for anyone creating a softly contemporary living room is to mix textures and eras freely’

Georgina Cave

Introduce contemporary notes Georgina Cave, interior designer, Cave Interiors

Schemes that take their cue from the surrounding architecture have a cohesive look. In Georgina Cave’s garden-facing sitting room, imposing, full-length Crittall windows set the tone for a crisp, contemporary scheme. The starting point for the design was a pair of 1970s Habitat leather chairs sourced from The Decorative Fair in London.

‘Their rich, vintage leather and sculptural form bring warmth and depth, sitting well against the original windows, which had in their past life been painted a neutral taupe instead of the now more correct blackish tone,’ says Cave. ‘I often find that anchoring a space around one or two truly loved pieces helps every other decision fall into place. In this case, we wanted to create a scheme that balanced comfort with personality, celebrated craftsmanship and reflected our personal style.’

The room is decorated with cherished possessions as well as repurposed pieces such as mohair curtains and an existing sofa reupholstered in a textural linen for the base and a vintage velvet from George Spencer Designs for the seat and back cushions. ‘My biggest tip for anyone creating a softly contemporary living room is to mix textures and eras freely – let contrasts breathe,’ says Cave. ‘Combining old and new makes a space feel as though it has evolved naturally over time.’



A mid-century glass coffee table and a Berber rug ground this sitting room.



ABOVE Colour-washed in Edward Bulmer Natural Paint’s Dutch Orange, this space is inherently cosy. The antique mirror is from Ebury Trading.

Embrace atmosphere Stephanie Barba Mendoza, interior designer

The London sitting room of Mexican-born interior designer Stephanie Barba Mendoza features a clutch of global influences, inspired by her heritage and that of her Austrian-born husband, plus a love of travel. Warm umber tones, sinuous shapes, tactile finishes and painterly elements combine to create a richly atmospheric feel, gently infused with a 1940s sensibility.

‘The room was originally painted a blue-green, with the fireplace featuring a hand-painted, yellow-toned, tortoiseshell effect,’ says Barba Mendoza. ‘But when we renovated, I wanted to give it a facelift. We chose the terracotta tone instead for its inherent cosiness and the fireplace artist returned to add more layers to the tortoiseshell theme, giving it a mahogany cast.’

The designer embraced her love of pattern and colour, offsetting the richness of pieces like the teal velvet sofa with undulating shapes and organic finishes, including the curvy lines of an antique mirror and an oversized plaster pendant. ‘We mixed vintage and contemporary for a mood that celebrates past and present,’ she says. ‘It’s a great space for evenings in front of the fire with family.’ ■

PHOTOGRAPHS (BRUDNIZKI DRAWING ROOM) © JAMES MCDONALD; (BARBA MENDOZA) © KENSINGTON LEVERNE



‘We mixed vintage and contemporary for a mood that celebrates past and present’

Stephanie Barba Mendoza

A blush pink sofa with a gentle curve echoes the circular shapes and rounded edges of this atmospheric scheme. The Oyster Shell plaster resin pendant light is from WP Sullivan and the curtains are in a C&C Milano fabric.