

‘London is anything but uniform’

From richly decorative to quietly rebellious, Londoners’ homes are nothing if not surprising. **Emma J Page** steps across the threshold of rooftop apartments, brutalist estates and subterranean new-builds to unearth a wealth of creativity

What are the essential ingredients for a London interior? How we live in the capital as opposed to other international cities such as Paris, Rome or Madrid may boil down to a uniquely British predilection for throwing out the rule book when it comes to design — thanks in part to some big personalities who’ve paved the way, from the English country-house style of Colefax and Fowler in the mid-20th century to the soft modern schemes of Terence

Conran a few decades later. Just as the city blends Victorian and Georgian housing stock with new builds, social housing, tower blocks and landmark post-war estates, so its interiors are a fusion of decorative influences pulled together with a free spirit. Despite being known for its period housing, London is anything but uniform. Behind every terraced house lies a deeply individual home; beyond each former industrial space, an eye for adaptability, and behind every high rise or Victorian house conversion, a desire to live among the fray. On first glance, unlike our European neighbours, it can be hard to spot any decorative follow through or theme behind our front

doors — botanical prints blend with stripes, primary colours with neutrals; mid-century furniture with classic, sleek glass extensions with marble mantelpieces. It’s not a look that’s overtly pulled together but there’s an undercurrent of cohesion running through. Few homes are as playful or culturally rich, riffing on international design ideals as well as what’s on the doorstep. Perhaps more than any other capital, London is noted for its preference for houses over apartment dwelling. The result is street after street of tall, narrow homes rather than horizontal, one-level living. Consequently, channelling in enough light and reorganis-

ing once sectioned-off layouts to accommodate partially open-plan living are the main preoccupations of city dwellers. Many design choices are conceived as an antidote to London’s often flat, grey light. Glass extensions, whether steel or wood-framed, welcome in valuable additional daylight, while sunshine yellow, apricot and

blush pink decorative accents are a recurring motif. As if to combat the occasional harshness of urban living, an abundance of florals and botanics is also common. It reflects a desire to live outside the city, in nature, while still being within its embrace. Despite the new apartment blocks springing up all over the capital, there’s a renewed attachment to earthiness, to the outdoors and to reflecting nature in textiles and textures.

Whether colourful, pared-back, contemporary or traditional, what unites the schemes in the homes that we enjoy spending time in is a sense of warmth, hospitality and comfort, underpinned by an unapologetic personality hit. City dwellers sometimes have to go to extra lengths to achieve that, contending with spatial and economic issues, while coming up with imaginative ways to handle the sometimes-stifling urban sprawl. Londoners — and those they welcome from around the world — are particularly resourceful when it comes to creating individual schemes in often repetitive settings. Recently, the capital’s interiors have favoured a return to the playful look it has long flirted with: blowsy florals, clashing colours, vibrant prints and plenty of frills and fringing. Add to that a preference for natural materials including timber, rattan or marble and a delight in the exotic, from Ikat designs to bold geometrics, and you have something approximating London living: loose, imperfect and just a little bit rebellious. All of this and more is explored in London Interiors, which celebrates some of the city’s most inventive homes, including these.

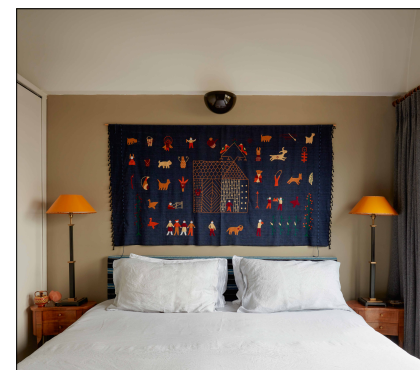
New wave: architects and partners David Hills and Deborah Saunt have made concrete the cornerstone of their one-bedroom unit. ‘It feels urban in finish yet almost rural in setting,’ says Hills



Rule breaking



Artistic



Rooms with a view: Tom Morris, top, has a top-storey flat in the Barbican with views to the south

of St Paul’s Cathedral, left, and interiors that reflect his love of collecting found pieces

COSMOPOLITAN

The relaxed family home of Spanish jewellery designer Sandra Barrio von Hurter is inspired by the colour confidence of artists such as Frida Kahlo and Georgia O’Keeffe. But it never takes itself too seriously. Vintage olive oil cans have been repurposed as playful lamp bases; a Brazilian headress is framed above a fireplace; a ceramic salamander from Ibiza lounges lazily on the coffee table. Tomato tins filled with flowers or pencils are studded throughout and walls of art, prints and family photos create plenty of visual interest.

“Here, I mix things up in a way that I probably wouldn’t in Barcelona,” says Barrio von Hurter. “I look around and see that metal coexists with rattan, vintage pieces with abstract prints, ethnic textiles with floral. To me, that’s a very London thing and I enjoy that ‘undone’ look.”

ARTISTIC

“It’s the bravery of the architecture that I admire,” says journalist-turned-interior designer Tom Morris, whose apartment sits on one of the Barbican Estate’s top storeys with a double aspect view that takes in St Paul’s Cathedral to the south and the Estate’s gardens to the north. Over time, his interiors have adopted an “anthropological feel” in homage to his love of found pieces, collections of treasured ceramics, vintage prints, wooden furniture and mid-century shapes. “There’s something inherently ‘London’ about the estate,” he believes. “It’s in the textured façades, the haphazard cascades of planting, even the smell of the concrete.

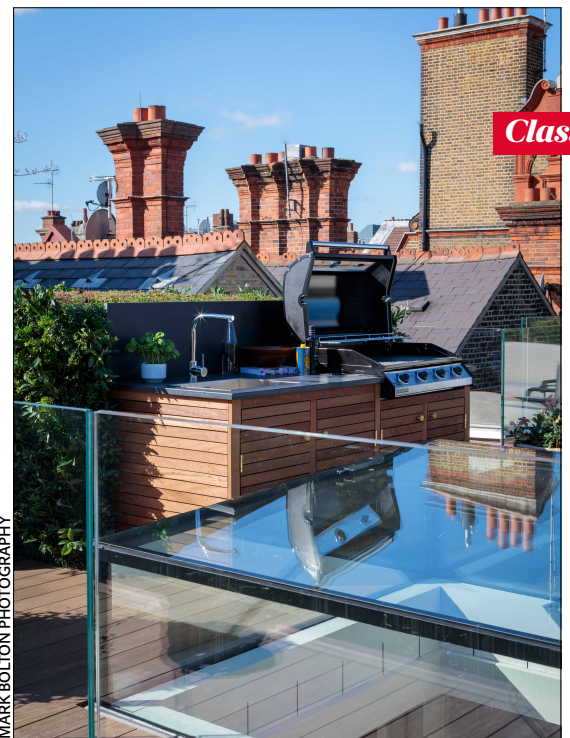


Cosmopolitan

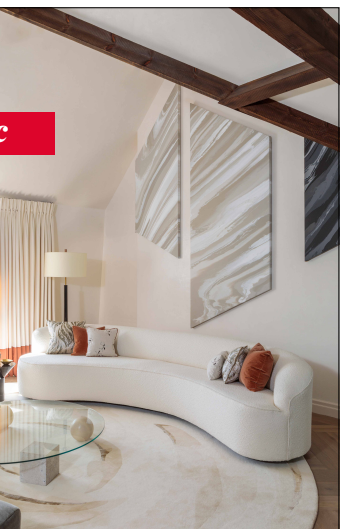


Eclectic

Mismatch: Designer Cath Beckett’s west London Victorian flat combines vintage with high street



Classic



Going Dutch: left and above, interior design firm Kitesgrove’s Dutch Revival apartment in Pont Street, Chelsea

I usually start by asking myself what would be the obvious decorative approach — and then I go and do the opposite

materials that spans metal, marble, glass and polished plaster, complemented by soft velvets, warming boucle, textured linens, tactile fluted finishes and gently curved furniture. Interior design firm Kitesgrove drew inspiration from British makers, such as Sebastian Cox, who provided the bespoke ash desk in the entrance hall, and Annette Nix, who designed a circular rug in the sitting room. Inspired by Spain’s plazita interiors, where every room accesses a central courtyard, the rooftop garden is the jewel in the crown of this reworked eaves space.

ECLECTIC

Nothing encapsulates a sense of eccentric London more than the colourful, print-laden home of Cath Beckett, one half of the design duo behind interior design firm Yellow London. Her west London Victorian flat is put together

with a playful eye, combining vintage with mid-century, heirloom with a dusting of high street. It all adds up to an interior that riffs on classic English style (think mismatching chairs, fringed cushions and skirted dressing tables) while being rooted firmly in the moment, thanks to daring colour combinations and an unconventional eye. “I usually start by asking myself what would be the obvious decorative approach and then I do the opposite,” says Beckett. The coloured papered walls and ceiling of her joyful dining room is a case in point.

RULE BREAKING

The brainchild of architects and partners David Hills and Deborah Saunt, this partially lowered, one-storey dwelling experiments with a new way of living: one that embraces fluid space, dissolving boundaries and a cohesive finish, inside and out. Made entirely of concrete but clad in white render with chamfered mirror corners, the building has the effect of blending into its landscape. Inside, simple mid-century shapes including pieces by Hans Wegner and Kai Kristiansen punctuate the space, complemented by graphic angular lighting. “Our home takes its cue from modern European villas,” says Hills. “What’s unusual is that it feels urban in finish and yet almost rural in setting. It blurs that boundary between city centre and suburb. Using one prominent material as generously as possible — in this case concrete — results in an appealing kind of expansiveness.”

● *London Interiors* by Emma J Page, £50 (Lannoo Publishers) is out now



Euro vision: Spanish jewellery designer Sandra Barrio von Hurter is inspired by the colours of artists like Frida Kahlo