



# BOX CLEVER

Virginia Howard's minute London flat is a miracle of inspired design. By Dinah Hall

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBIN MATTHEWS  
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It's a good job Virginia Howard goes to the gym every morning - because she certainly can't get much exercise in her flat. The maximum number of strides you can take, from her bed at one end of the flat to the drawing-room window at the other, is thirteen. It would be

hard to swing a gerbil here, let alone a cat. In fact should we even be calling it a flat? Mightn't 'Knightsbridge cupboard within a credit card's throw of Harrods', in estate agents' parlance, be nearer the mark?

But then, if it isn't a flat, how on earth has she managed to squeeze in a hallway, a bed-

room, a bathroom, a kitchen and a drawing-room, without the merest hint of claustrophobia? The answer is not necessarily that she's a decorator - though she is of course, which is not, let's face it, particularly surprising in this neck of the woods. 'Oh dear, I know,' she apologizes; 'every second person you meet around here is a decorator.' No, the answer probably lies more in her personality. She herself believes clients should appoint decorators as much on the basis of how they get on with them as what they see on paper, and perhaps it is appropriate that Virginia is an optimist; you would have to be, to take on an awkward, wedge-shaped studio and envisage making it a fully functioning, comfortable home.

'It's really terribly practical,' she emphasizes, not for the first time. This is not something you have to keep saying about ordinary-sized homes, but then even they are not always particularly practical. The good thing about planning a tiny space is that it does concentrate the mind wonderfully - and, indeed, Virginia embarked on the whole enterprise in the spirit of a challenge. 'I wanted to prove that you could make a successful *pied-à-terre* without ending up with a bed in the living-room.'

ut what is most remarkable about the is the way that Virginia has not allowed rationality to swamp aesthetics. Most people presented with a cupboard to live in start thinking in terms of space-saving models - beds that fold in to the wall and other items of Sixties mythology - and end up with a utilitarian small space dotted with jets and Ikea furniture.

Virginia's space-saving gadgets are in just as clever, but rather more elegant. A chest of drawers, for example, which is well-suited to the sitting-room, hides a multitude of sins. Pointing to the ottoman, Virginia comments, 'you wouldn't believe it: I've got crammed into there.' This is not she calls a 'Gollut special': upholstered with a Greek rug on top, beautifully finished inside, it is a design made specially for decorator Christophe Gollut, whose work Virginia shares and whose inspiration she is constantly crediting. The fake leopard-skin stool, which adds a perfect touch of decorative decadence to the sitting-room, would have been a leopard-skin skirt if Christophe had not intervened: 'I think I thought it wasn't right to walk around with furnishing fabric on my bottom.'

As for Gollut, she says, who inspired her to be braver in her use of colours, though not that, she adds, is a lesson in simplicity. 'The room is so small,' she says of the sitting-room, 'you have to use just one colour.' The colour scheme is based on two beautiful old wall pots bought in Morocco, which had been stored in her previous flat waiting for their moment to pose in life. So the walls are lined in a pale yellow damask which she has also used for the curtains, while the hall outside is painted in a slightly deeper yellow, with the bed mahogany-effect woodwork by the artist Douglas Berryman.

The kitchen, cleverly hidden behind the red damask walls of the sitting-room, is cribbed from Christophe'. This is the



**OPPOSITE AND ABOVE** The colour scheme of the drawing-room, with its damask by Ian Sanderson, was inspired by a pair of Moroccan vases, one of which stands to the left of the window. The kitchen (above) fits into a cupboard, but is fully equipped. Sofa cushions and the upholstered ottoman were made to designs by Christophe Gollut. **LEFT** Bedroom walls are in a red Paisley design by Ian Sanderson. The prints are French, eighteenth-century

*'I wanted to prove that you could make a successful red-à-terre without ending up with a bed in the living-room'*

single person's kitchen, complete with dishwasher for the glasses you drank champagne or mineral water out of the day before. Or, if you are really pushing it, the cups. Virginia seems horrified by the notion that she might want to cook, but there is of course an oven, should she ever feel the need. 'But Harrods is just the road,' she exclaims. 'And anyway, I'm on a diet.' □

**RIGHT** The bathroom is reached from the yellow hall. The wall lights are from Besselink & Jones. The Venetian mirror was specially made to cover holes made in the wrong place for lights. 'Even designers make mistakes,' says Virginia Howard

