

Interior alchemy

It was only after dispelling a ghostly presence that the interior designer Virginia Howard was able to start reorganising the space in this London flat, introducing neutral schemes with hints of pink

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DRAWING ROOM (both pages) A marble fireplace from Jamb is flanked by two Beaumont & Fletcher sofas covered in Claremont's wool/silk 'Toile Chenonceau'; the Acres Farm club fender is in Jane Shelton's 'Sienna Red' from Simon Playle. Cushions in 'De La Tour' silk by Paolo Moschino for Nicholas Haslam enliven 'The Rampart Sofa' from Soane; on the wall above it are Cox London's 'Hanbury' lights. A mid-century chair in the style of Robsjohn-Gibbings is covered in pale pink 'Kemble Linen' from Lewis & Wood. The custom-made jute rug is by Tim Page Carpets





STUDY (left) In a nook off the drawing room is a small study with built-in shelves and lots of storage. The colour here is a reprise of the raspberry pink of the dining area. **DRAWING ROOM (bottom left)** For the curtains, Virginia chose 'Strié' in old white, a silk linen from George Spencer Designs. The coffee table, on one of the owners' collection of kelims, is a reproduction of a French mid-century piece. *The Three Fates* by Henry Moore hangs between the windows. **DINING ROOM (opposite)** By a door leading to the drawing room, watercolours by the South African artist Irma Stern are displayed above a bamboo-effect sideboard designed by Virginia

‘There’s a creepy feeling in here – I think there might be a ghost,’ said Virginia Howard’s client about the main bedroom of this west London flat. Virginia and her client, who, with her husband, owns homes in Verbier and St Barths, had spent two years searching for the perfect London base.

Virginia was sure that they had, at last, found it – a first-floor lateral conversion in a quiet garden square, in a smart area of London. So the possibility of a ghostly presence came as a bit of a blow. Undaunted, Virginia approached the local vicar, who informed her that his church no longer goes in for exorcisms. So she called in a beautiful society woman with past form as a ghost-buster, who worked her magic, wafting through the flat in a flowing white dress, and announced that the bedroom should be turned into a bathroom. Luckily, this seemed to do the trick – though the sense of something other-worldly had vanished, the reorganisation of the space was just beginning.

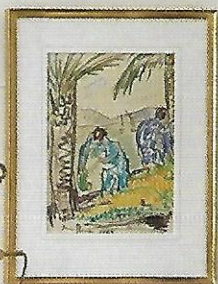
In a design career that has lasted more than 25 years, Virginia has designed every type of interior, but she is known mainly for bringing old country houses to life. So this commission was a dream. ‘It’s not often that I get a completely free rein to change spaces around and do the architectural detailing,’ she says. The layout of the flat was completely transformed: three bedrooms became two and an immense amount of storage was created, most of it hidden behind panelled doors.

For the design of this panelling, Virginia ignored the more florid style of the 1880s, when the house was built, in favour of a slim recessed beading, in the style of the eighteenth-century architect Sir John Soane. This detailing outlines many of the panelled doors, which conceal wine fridges, a laundry room, a cloakroom and a sophisticated electronic control system that connects all the owners’ homes.

From the hall, lined with Old Master drawings and twentieth-century etchings, a pair of double doors can be flung open to reveal the dining area, with a curved banquette set under a window overlooking the trees of the square’s one-acre garden. Fabrics in patterns of raspberry pink and cream for the cushions, chairs and roman blinds make a vivid impression. The airy kitchen, to one side – a simple design by Virginia – is enlivened with touches of yellow in the form of jars by the potter Tanya Gomez, highlighted by clever lighting by DesignPlusLight.

The double doors through to the drawing room are pocket doors, concealed in the depth of the wall. ‘These are almost my trademark,’ says Virginia. They lend an air of country-house grandeur to a room, which, though impressive in scale, is intimate and relaxed in feel. Virginia has kept the room light, with a base coat of the wife’s favourite ‘Temple’ from Paint & Paper Library on the walls. ‘Though the colour needed to be





FABRICS IN PATTERNS OF RASPBERRY PINK AND CREAM
MAKE A VIVID IMPRESSION IN THE DINING AREA



KITCHEN (*both pages*) A curved banquette makes the most of the bay window. The upholstery, in Lelièvre's raspberry pink 'Mogador' velvet, complements two linen fabrics: 'Borgia Rojo' from Claremont on the blinds and Christopher Moore's 'Aquitaine' from Turnell & Gigon on the chairs. Yellow jars by Tanya Gomez, from Joanna Bird, stand out against the neutral tones of the kitchen units



HALL (left) Old Master drawings are combined with twentieth-century etchings. Fine art advisers Corfield Morris sourced the Georgian lantern and mirror. BATHROOM (bottom) Virginia designed the vanity unit with its chrome fittings, including a mirror and lamps with gathered linen shades



dulled down with a specialist paint finish,' says Virginia. 'It was too pink for this space.'

Textures play their part in the mainly neutral scheme – from the gleam of silk velvet on the central ottoman, to the hand-woven jute carpet, from the chunky linen of the sofas to the bright sheen of silk cushions. A Queen Anne walnut bureau meets mid-century chairs and a nineteenth-century maritime painting faces state-of-the-art hi-fi equipment.

The little study off to one side of the room, which reprises the raspberry pink palette of the dining room, was initially intended for the husband, but is now his wife's domain. 'We've both had to make compromises,' he says with a smile. 'My wife has to put up with my music.' He points to a pair of giant speakers in the drawing room that, he says, 'give a really good sound'.

Touches of pale pink appear in the chairs and bedcover of the main bedroom, against walls of greenish grey, with linen curtains in the same shade. And beyond it is the new bathroom, formerly the bedroom from which the ghost was removed, all white marble, cupboard-lined walls and custom-made chrome. Its embroidered linen curtains part to reveal a tiny formal garden of trained ivy obelisks – arch and urn – designed by George Carter, which shields them from the neighbours.

Back in the drawing room, which the owners love for its calm and its generous space, they reflect on the process of making the flat. 'We all got on extremely well,' recalls the husband. 'Every centimetre was discussed in detail – I think that's why it is such a success.' It is also why, with all the world to choose from, they are very happy to come back to London □

Virginia Howard: virginiahoward.co.uk



MAIN BEDROOM (opposite top right and this page)

The walls are painted to match curtains in 'Darya' from Chelsea Textiles, an embroidery on grey-green linen. 'Delphine' linen by Kerry Joyce is seen on the bench. Three watercolours by Irma Stern hang above the bed. Vaughan's 'Taranto Column Table Lamp' is topped with a gathered shade in 'Donatello' linen from Nicholas Herbert

