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Chelsea charmer

When David Mlinaric was presented with an ill-served London townhouse, he brought in expert former colleagues and an array of British artisans to reinstate its Georgian character, while transforming it into an elegant family home

TEXT DAVID NICHOLLS | PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON UPTON

SITTING ROOM This first-floor room feels light and airy thanks to its large Victorian-style windows, which were installed by Interfusion. Hugh Henry of Mlinaric, Henry & Zervudachi designed the rug, which was made by Veedon Fleece. The scagliola 'Charles Coffee Table' is from Francis Sultana and the blue steel 'Papillon Side Table' from Tom Faulkner



SITTING ROOM The mirrored chimney breast is a feature that is repeated in other rooms. **ENTRANCE HALL AND STAIRCASE** Brass **sconces** from Soane flank a **'Versailles Console Table'** from Tom Faulkner. The stone-effect paint finish on the **walls** is by Maybank. **GARDEN ROOM** Emery & Cie **tiles** pick up on the green banquette. The **'Anders Light'** above the table is from Pinch. **DINING ROOM** A **rug** designed by Hugh and made by Veedon Fleece tones with **walls** painted by Maybank and **'413 CAB' chairs**, a 1977 design by Mario Bellini for Cassina. The **chandelier** is from Cox London

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David Mlinaric is explaining how many of the houses in Chelsea have, over the years, had their architectural guts ripped out of them. The culprits, he says, were often the rich people who moved to the area to bask in the glow of coolness that creative people like David imbued it with in the Sixties when he lived and had his studio there, in Tite Street.

Such was the case with this Georgian townhouse, which is part of a particularly lovely terrace not far from the King’s Road. ‘Everything had been taken out of it,’ the interior designer says. ‘All the details, all the mouldings, the relationship between one room and another that you would expect to find in a house like this.’ What makes it particularly shameful is that the house is among the oldest private residences in Chelsea, which was still largely rural when it was built in 1790. Thankfully, however, the house now has an owner who, when he bought it in 2015, had the good sense to ask David for his opinion and his help. ‘I explained that, to my eye, it was all wrong,’ he recalls. ‘The most important thing is to get the shell right. Then you can decorate how you like.’

He makes it sound so simple. Although, considering the cast of top-tier professionals brought on board to give the house its mojo back, it probably was. Joining David, who is largely retired at this point, were Hugh Henry and Jason Roberts from David’s former practice, Mlinaric, Henry & Zervudachi. ‘To some degree, we reverted to form and worked in the way we did when David was with the company,’ explains Jason, now a director of the business. ‘He was the boss, Hugh did the decorating schemes and I worked on the interior detailing, coordination of services and overseeing construction.’ Meanwhile, Antonio Bilancio of Garnett & Partners was the architect implementing the design.

The owner is a Spanish property investor, who has lived in London for 30 years. Crucially, he was familiar with the designers, as he was working with them on a long-term hotel project. This well-established relationship meant that a shorthand was in place

between client and design team; there was also a huge amount of trust. While he is far too modest to have his name printed on these pages, the owner was keen to make sure that credit was given where it was due. ‘It has been an honour to work so closely with some of the finest British artisans,’ he says. ‘I passionately enjoy working with so many brilliant and creative individuals – David, Hugh and many more. These British artisans and artists truly understand the attention to detail that is required in order to create excellent final results.’

As David stated, the first thing was to get the shell right. This meant reinstating appropriate door panels and mouldings, as well as architraves and skirting boards. A heavy oak staircase was replaced with one that is far lighter, more elegant and closer to what would have originally been there. Although not slavish period reproductions, these additions are certainly in the spirit of the architectural style. They feel right.

So, too, does the way that the rooms have been decorated. The dining room at the front of the house has walls stippled in a cheering golden ochre colour. A mirrored chimney breast, polished marble floors and curtainless windows conspire to create a gloriously bright and beautiful room. Meanwhile, a combination of the iconic ‘Golden Oak’ chandelier in brass from Cox London, leather ‘413 CAB’ armchairs by Mario Bellini for Cassina and a rug with an abstract design by Hugh Henry makes it impossible to classify the space as simply modern or traditional.

Two routes will lead you to the back of the house on the ground floor: the entrance hall on one side and, on the other, a long, double galley kitchen, which connects the dining room to the garden room. The latter space extends across the full width of the house and is a singularly lovely room. Not a glass box tacked on to the back, but a simple extension that has been designed to blend with the house, right down to the small-pane lunette window overlooking the terrace and a sunken garden below. The view outside is of lush shades of green, which melt into the colours of the garden room – from the green velvet-upholstered banquette windowseat and the plentiful houseplants to the square tiles in shades of cream, blue and green, suggesting a pixelated scene of the English countryside.

While the children have a covetably large playroom in the lower of two basement levels, there is a more grown-up sitting room on the first floor. It spans the width of the house and has three almost full-length windows. It is an elegant space, with good art and subtly cool furniture. On one side of this room, a stubby passageway (that doubles up as a bar area) has been created, connecting to the snug next door.

The elegant sitting room continues the decorative grammar established in the dining room below it. Another rug designed by Hugh sets the scene; the mirror-clad chimney breast amplifies the sense of scale and light; and the chimneypiece is the same contemporary-classical design, but in a different marble.

The sense of harmony continues in the main bedroom on the floor above. Here, too, the lightness of touch can be seen – from the comfortable mixture of antiques and contemporary design to the mellow shades of copper and cream on the walls, curtains, bedcover and velvet-covered armchair.

More than anything, the lesson here is that creating an interior that is beautiful and that works well does not have to be about reinventing the wheel. Sometimes, it is simply a matter of making sure that the wheel is not missing any spokes and has not buckled under the weight of time. ‘It feels like a good family home. It’s all very nice, isn’t it?’ says Hugh with typical understatement □

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Mlinaric, Henry & Zervudachi: mhzlondon.com



STUDIO The ‘**Harbor Armchair**’ was designed by Naoto Fukasawa for B&B Italia. **MAIN BEDROOM** International Marble supplied the golden Siena marble used for the **fire surround**. The **wall lights** are from Valerie Wade and the ‘**Willow Floor Lamp**’ is from Porta Romana. Antonio Citterio’s ‘**Kalos Armchair**’ for Maxalto is covered in copper-coloured velvet. **MAIN BATHROOM** Inspired by the Bath & Racquets Club in Mayfair, the **walls** are clad in Green Onyx marble sourced from International Marble. **DRESSING ROOM** Woodstock Furniture built the **joinery** in rippled sycamore