

MIXED DOUBLES

THE CREATIVE HARMONY BETWEEN ARCHITECT AND DECORATOR RESULTED IN THE DRAMATIC TRANSFORMATION OF THIS LARGE LONDON HOUSE

The drawing room is divided into two seating areas, each arranged around new bespoke matching marble chimneypieces made by Jamb after a neoclassical design. A late-Regency chandelier from Mora & Upham hangs centrally. Below it, the large 'Mattaban' wicker dog bed is by OKA



It's rare to find an architect and interior designer working together as easily and supportively as does this remarkably tight-knit duo. Architect Mike Fisher and interior designer Ngila Boyd have worked together for over 12 years and this is their fourth house for this owner. The conventional divisions of workload do not readily apply here, nor is there, on Mike's part, the frequent, architect's disregard for the role of the interior designer. He is the first to acknowledge that architects often neglect the level of detail needed to make an interior space work properly. He is also strong in his praise for Ngila, who, he says, 'thinks in many ways like an architect'. The two often sit for hours drawing, sketching and playing with ideas, pushing and supporting each other through the design process.

Dubbed 'the brute', this vast Kensington villa has been dramatically transformed – the result of a three-year project and literally thousands of drawings. Acres of pink marble flooring, skip-loads of outdated technology, and a sparkling gold and smoked-glass lift that dominated the grand entrance hall all had to be removed. 'It was a case of back to brick,' says Ngila. She and Mike were inspired by the challenge and took their perfectionism to extraordinary levels. They thought nothing of moving the back wall of the house in order to shrink the drawing room, as 'the ceiling was far too low for its size,' explains Ngila. On the front façade, all the crude stucco was removed: Mike and Ngila scanned archives and walked the streets researching the correct



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE TOP In the drawing room, ponyskin-covered stools stand on a richly coloured antique Ushak carpet from Shabaz Alfridi. In the dining room, silver-leaved mirrors were made by Carvers & Gilders to designs by Ngila and Mike. The dramatic staircase rises through five floors. In the vestibule, radiator covers were inspired by Chinese Chippendale fretwork



CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN PICTURE Standard holly trees in Versailles planters flank the doors to the swimming pool - which is flooded with light from a double-height clerestory. The painted cast-iron urn in the hall - from Blanchard - was originally intended for the courtyard. The basement kitchen and family room are separated by a studded leather folding screen. The kitchen, by Bulthaup, is made of walnut veneer and stainless steel. In the dining area, Philippe Hurel chairs surround a glass-topped table by Tecno. In the family room, Oriel Harwood busts stand on pedestals. Outside the poolhouse clerestory is a statue of Mercury





mouldings. Architecturally, the main aim was to bring in light and maximize space, creating a comfortable house to live in and an easy flow between rooms. 'Removing the lift was the least-complicated procedure but perhaps the most spectacular transformation,' says Mike. 'It had cut out virtually all light and any sense of architectural drama.' Today, light filters down into the hall from the windows in the spiral staircase and the skylight, four-storeys above, creating a sense of theatre in this deliberately austere central space. During parties, bagpipers have piped from the first-floor landing to accompany reels below.

Double doors lead off the hall into the drawing room, dining room and a minute, but perfect, morning room (once the downstairs cloakroom), which acts as a more intimate sitting room. In the basement is the family's main living space: a huge room combining dining and sitting areas which lead on to a sleek kitchen, separated only by a leather screen. The layout was copied from the owner's previous house. He liked the way it had worked: 'Everything can take place down here (including dinner for 40) leaving the floor above for high days and holidays.' Upstairs, a rabbit warren of 10 bedrooms has been reduced to six, including the main bedroom that stretches the length of the house, with a jewel-box-like dressing room and enormous bathroom.

'The shell came together quickly, it was the detail that took for ever,' says Mike. And it is the detail that makes the spaces sing. Every cornice is bespoke, specifically designed by Mike to be in keeping with the period but unique to this house. Mirror glass is used extensively – in alcoves, as slips in shutters and in the pediments above doors – combining with conventional, wall-hung mirrors to reflect light round the interiors. The level of attention to the woodwork is staggering and sets the tone for the interior; everything was drawn from scratch. Examples include the concave vanity cabinet in the main bathroom, inspired by a similar one seen in Italy, and a pair of whimsical cabinets in a spare bathroom (modelled on a cabinet seen in the background of an old Russian portrait). Almost all the chimney-pieces were made by Jamb to Mike and Ngila's designs. 'It is about knowing where to spend the money,' says Ngila. In the main bathroom, an inexpensive marble laid in a spider-web pattern – also used for the architraves and skirtings – looks fantastically grand. Mike and Ngila balked at replacing the concrete staircase with a stone cantilevered one, but were happy to commission two craftsmen to carve the beautiful, mahogany hand rail on site.

When it came to colour schemes and furnishings, Ngila was virtually given carte blanche. 'There's no point having a dog and

barking yourself' was the owner's philosophy. 'It's a question of learning to trust, and letting Ngila's imagination run.' In fact, the only instance in which Ngila did not get her way was with her choice of dark purple for the dining room. What results is a wonderfully warm, muted palette, varied in colour, yet balanced in tone. No room is painted the same colour, even in a suite of rooms, and all the colours were specially mixed by Papers & Paints. The owner's furniture – apart from the dining table and his collection of pictures – was all sold with his previous house, so Ngila had no misfits to contend with. Reproduction pieces from The Parsons Table Company sit alongside Russian and English antiques, whimsical pieces from David Gill, specially commissioned mirrors from Carvers & Gilders, and wonderful antique chandeliers from Mora & Upham.

This is a house that is undeniably grand, but there is nothing pompous. Inspiration may have come from Palladian/classical villas/churches, chateaux, even – in the case of the double lanterns on the stairs – from the Pavlovsk Palace in Russia, but rather than pretentious references, these are flashes of artistic observation, subjected to Mike and Ngila's usual attention to detail and incorporated playfully into the imaginative and harmonious mix □

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OPPOSITE LEFT In the Lilac Room, lilac-and-white-striped silk by Oakshott is used for the curtains and the cushion pad of a Regency bench; the mirror in the adjoining bathroom is by Oriel Harwood. A spare bedroom (right) is decorated in a rich, masculine palette: the tall bed head and valance are in 'Lilies' by Nicholas Haslam. In the large main bathroom (this page above), a pair of white basins from The Water Monopoly and a freestanding bath contrast with the dark glow of the polished acero limestone floor. In the main bedroom, a dramatic brèche violette marble early-Georgian-style chimney-piece by Jamb provides a focal point. A pair of French chairs is covered in 'Monuments d'Egypte' by Pierre Frey

