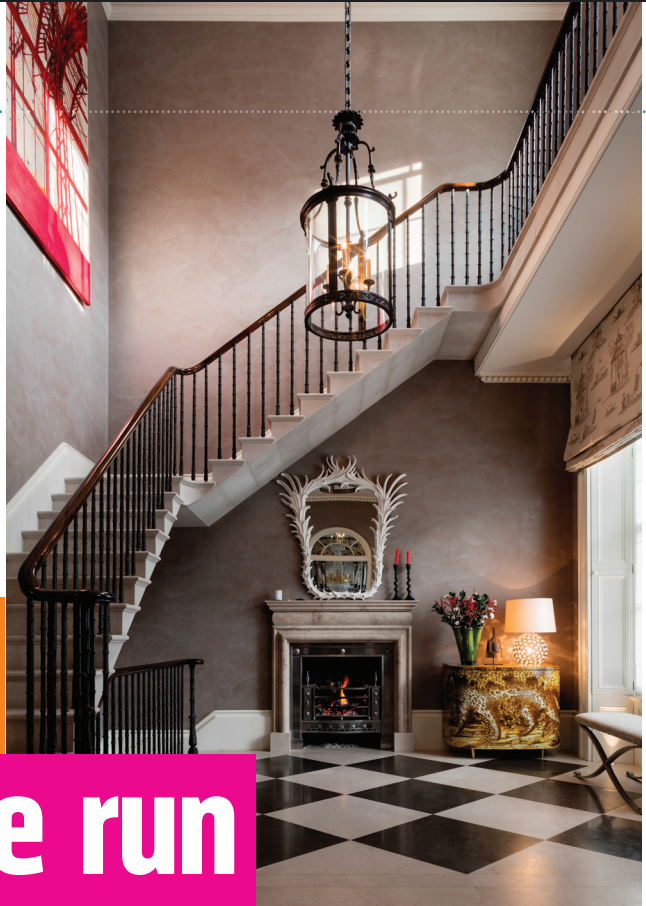


Remember when the super-rich lived in beautiful houses? The aristocrats of yore had such good taste that, even today, plebs still pay to gawp at their stately homes. The decor of modern-day plutocrats pales by comparison – quite literally. Oligarchs and hedge-fund billionaires have spawned a numbing interiors aesthetic best described as six-star hotel bland: an anodyne, could-be-anywhere luxury. It's a sterile blur of beiges, glossy marbles, forgettable art (German to match the furniture), steely (chosen kitchens, multistorey basements, gyms with screens blaring CNN and coffee-table books that remain unopened. As the adage goes, money can't buy taste. Only now it seems it can. Mike Fisher, the British architect, interior designer and founder of the Chelsea-based Studio Indigo, renovates houses for the global elite – average budget £5m-£10m – but creates luxury homes that put the romance back into being rich. "I don't want interiors to look like a hotel. I'm sick to death of beige and cream," says the Devon-born Fisher, 52. "I make spaces that are interesting and dramatic, with character and identity. I have a story with everything. I take people's houses and make a gallery of their lives. It's difficult with Russian oligarchs: they come to London and have no history – their history is in Moscow – so you create that history. You take them shopping, buy the things they like, and mix them all together so it doesn't look overly designed. I design houses that I would want to live in myself."



The architect and designer Mike Fisher creates ravishing, romantic interiors for the super-rich – and he's taken his work home with him, finds Hugh Graham. Anyone for a £13,700 commode?



clients want something different these days. This is by the Dorset cabinet-makers Halstock, who work in amazing woods. It has a shimmering effect, it looks like snakeskin.



A good fit, then, for the animal-print rug in the adjoining sitting room, where the eye is drawn to a burnt orange velvet sofa. "I love strong colours. I have a house in Cape Town, and there you can get away with creams and whites. But in our northern climate you need warmth, texture and colour."

Welch on a crucifix from a notorious 1970 magazine shoot, induces a smile, as does the artwork in the adjoining living room: Saturday Night, a voyeuristic photograph by the Korean artist in Sook Kim, featuring hedonists in various states of undress in a Cologne hotel. "I wanted a conversation piece; it's not for children."

The floor of the entrance hall, left, uses the same limestone as Chatsworth House. The living room, right, the bathtub in the master ensuite is by Water Monopony, above; the £170,000 vellum dressing room, top right



GET THE LOOK

- Halstock dressing room, £170,000, and kitchen, £70,000; halstock.com
- Fornasetti cheetah-print console table; hollyjohnsonantiques.com
- Oyster-shell dining-room commodes, £13,728; simonorelledesigns.com
- Bronze hall lantern, £10,500; markransom.co.uk
- Oriol Harwood mirror, POA; francisjutana.com
- Stainless-steel four-poster bed, £13,416; danielspring.co.uk
- Chinchilla throw, £6,493; rubell.com
- Russian chandelier, £12,500; moriaandupham.com
- Hall floor, Hopton Wood limestone, £240 a sq metre; britannicus-store.co.uk
- Todhunter Earle Anemone lamp £1,762; bestandlloyd.com

The lacquered ebony chest is a decadent piece of deco – "Lutyns said every room should have a bit of black in it." But it's the all-white dressing room that oozes golden-age glamour. Fashioned from vellum, for £170,000, the streamlined oval space evokes a 1930s perfume ad.

The fantasy film set continues on the lower ground floor: a 42ft pool tiled in slate, with silver streaks that sparkle like diamonds, and nymphlike statues emerging from the water. Instead of a ladder, he put in a staircase, "so that my dogs could walk into the pool."

Next door, the media room is notable for its floral fabric stag's heads from South Africa. Fisher may be British-born, but considers South Africa his adopted home; he spends a couple of months there every year. Otherwise, he's a rolling stone: he's lived in 20 houses in the past 20 years, and attributes this restlessness to his army father, who moved the family every two years. "I don't get emotionally attached to my homes. And as a designer, I start to see faults in the houses I do for myself. And the only way to fix those faults is to start again."

It's hard to imagine a fault in this dream pad, but he's found one: "The entrance hall is so grand, you expect the rest of the house to be even bigger, so I suppose there's a disappointment in the rooms beyond."



Andrew Baskby, Francesco Ferrarini

The Notting Hill home features lavish textures such as the chinchilla throw on the master bed, right. The project architect was Andrew Richards and the interior designer was Christiana Syrris, both from Fisher's Studio Indigo



It's a first-world problem if ever there were one. And the mind boggles when the mimes, without irony, that he "can't afford 'proper art' like my clients". But this is not a man who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and you can't help but admire his achievements. "My parents almost bankrupted themselves putting me through public school," says Fisher, who is remarkably down to earth for the design world, with an encyclopedic knowledge of the decorative arts, an air of self-deprecation and barely a hint of sweetie-startling in his demeanor. "I'll never forget the sacrifices they made. They gave me aspiration. The problem with this country is a poverty of aspiration. You can do anything you want as long as you're prepared to work for it. I wasn't clever. I was knocked down frequently. I picked myself up and worked hard."

He admits it "seems obscene" that people spend £300,000 on kitchens ("That's more than my parents' house"). Yet he loves London because it attracts "the most successful people in the world". Must-haves among his clients these days include "exaggerated door heights [13ft]", lavish dressing rooms, lighting designers ("Sally Storey can completely transform an interior") and two kitchens ("I empathise with Ed Milliband").

High-end clients also flock to Fisher because he is a rare one-stop shop: architect and interior designer. "If I want control over the house, I have to be both. I have to get the space right first – if I get it right, the interior design falls in to place. At architecture school [Dundee], I knew I was weird because I was the only one who took both. Architects' Journal and House & Garden."

For super-rich clients, however, it seems the most sought-after trend today is originality. "They don't want to walk into someone's house and find they have the same lights. It gets harder and harder to find things that are original: 'Oh, that's a such and such. I know where you got that from.' So you pay a designer to create something personal to you."

Bland on the run

That's good news for the taste-challenged masters of the universe, judging from Fisher's own elegant, exquisitely curated house in Notting Hill, west London. Fisher, a self-described "working-class poor boy made good", bought the 1840s villa three years ago for an undisclosed sum (it was listed in 2009 for £11m), and proceeded to spend more than £4m renovating the 7,500 sq ft property, where he lives with his partner and two cocker spaniels. He gutted the interior and opened up the layout (seven bedrooms have become five), but preserved the Victorian detailing, and filled it with an intriguing decorative mélange: neoclassical urns, art deco furniture, Russian chandeliers, retro 1970s coffee tables, pop-art photography, historical paintings, animal prints, Louis XV chairs, funky mirrors, and texture, texture, texture (rich velvets, pearly veneers, elaborate shagreen). Part John Soane, part Coco Chanel, with a hint of Andy Warhol and some African exoticism, it sounds like a jumbled design museum, but it all falls together effortlessly.

The grand entrance sets the tone. The monumental, 24ft-high room has a classical staircase and chequered

Derbyshire limestone floors similar to those at Chatsworth. A regal bronze lantern from an old bank hangs from the ceiling. But amid the period grandeur there is a whiff of camp: a lacquered chest emblazoned with a Fornasetti chestnut print, a glittering crystal-hall lamp; a neo-rococo Perspex mirror. It's all brought up to date by some edgy art.

This great hall was created by bashing through the former poky layout. "Most London houses are so thin, you have to breathe in as you enter," Fisher says. "The original house had stairs up the middle with two narrow rooms on either side. But I wanted to walk in and breathe out. I create vistas and a sense of generosity of space."

Mirrors and glass doors add to this airy effect, and light ripples off lustrous surfaces such as the oyster-shell commodes in the dining room. These are topped by lamps sculpted from petrified wood. Most of his lamps are created from random objects – African pottery, chunks of jade – by the artist La-Lou; at this level, it's a faux pas to have furniture that's not bespoke.

The dining room flows into a kitchen that's sleek but not clinical, thanks to the luminous eucalyptus cabinets. "Most

Beyond the pale Fisher, above, opts for bright colours and touches of humour. 'At this level, it's a faux pas to have furniture that's not bespoke,' he says



Part John Soane, part Coco Chanel, with a hint of Andy Warhol and some African exoticism, it sounds like a jumbled design museum, but it all falls together effortlessly