

The Good Life

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SINGULAR VOICE

The young owner of a London mansion enlists designer Rafael de Cárdenas to reimagine its interiors in strikingly original, uncompromising fashion

TEXT BY CHRISTOPHER MASON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON UPTON
PRODUCED BY CARLOS MOTA
STYLED BY MICHAEL REYNOLDS



Designer Rafael de Cárdenas created the distinctive interiors of this London home. In the entry hall, a cascading light fixture by Hudson Furniture hangs above a Pierre Cardin table and Jules Leleu armchairs clad in a Lolèvre velvet. The sculpture and its Macassar-ebony base are by Anselm Reyle, the artwork above the mantel is by Jim Lambie, and the candelabra in the fireplace is by Lindsey Adelman Studio. For details see Sources.



In a quiet street in west London, there's a five-bedroom mansion whose charmingly retro Arts and Crafts-style exterior offers little indication of the exuberant modernity within. Beyond the front door a slender, dark-paneled vestibule leads to a dramatic double-height entry hall where a gleaming fiery-orange abstract sculpture by Anselm Reyle stands on a sleek Macassar-ebony plinth—a dazzling 21st-century sentinel. And there isn't a scrap of William Morris wallpaper in sight.

The owner, a philanthropic young heiress, purchased the residence in 2009, captivated by its generous size, abundant windows, and big garden—novelties in a city of skinny up-and-down townhouses. Built in 1996, the home had rather traditional interiors that didn't particularly suit the woman's taste. Seeking something more adventurous, she hired Manhattan-based designer Rafael de Cárdenas after admiring his work at the buzzed-about restaurant Charles in New York's Greenwich Village.

It was a bold move. Rafael de Cárdenas Ltd./Architecture at Large had only been in business for a couple of years, swiftly gaining attention for impressive commercial work that incorporated arresting geometries and vivid colors. At the time, Cárdenas had completed two relatively small residential projects, including an apartment for actress Parker Posey. Undaunted by his brief résumé, the owner of the London house invited Cárdenas for a tour. "When we met, we just clicked," she says. "I liked the idea of working with a designer who was definitely on track but who wasn't a superstar yet." (Her confidence seems prescient: Cárdenas is now overseeing major projects from New York to Paris to Beijing, and he has since doubled the size of his Manhattan team.)

A passionate collector of contemporary art, Cárdenas also advised the client on her acquisitions. "Art is the quickest way to change the vibe of a room," he says. At his urging she bought the Reyle sculpture in its distinctive color, the only iteration in that hue from a series of eight. He also introduced works by Tauba Auerbach, Yayoi Kusama, Jim Lambie, and Donald Moffett. "Collecting art is a family tradition," the client says, "but Raf's the one who started me thinking of it as a cohesive whole."

Assenting to some of Cárdenas's proposals required a leap of faith, however, including his notion of transforming the oak paneling in the entry hall by ebonizing and liming it to emphasize the grain. "Many people told me I was crazy to stain all this wood black," the homeowner recounts. "But I loved Raf's vision for the house and that was an integral part of it." →



Among the challenges of designing for the L-shaped house was its miscellany of broad and narrow rooms. Without tearing down any walls, Cárdenas turned the eccentric configuration to his advantage. "making each space its own world," he says.

In the long, thin living room, he clad the walls in pale-violet linen with metallic accents, imbuing the area with a jewel-box luminescence. The dining room, furnished with a commanding copper-leaved cabinet by Pedro Sousa, is sheathed in a silk wallpaper hand-painted with a profusion of delicate cherry blossoms. The effect is one of being transported to a Japanese garden.

Throughout the three-story house, many of these "worlds" are linked by the same light blue overhead, which evokes the sky. "I always paint ceilings blue," Cárdenas says. "I find cool tones serene and soothing." Providing another common thread are the deep-purple doors between the rooms, all lacquered to a high gloss.

Before attaining his master's in architecture at UCLA, Cárdenas worked as a menswear designer at Calvin Klein, and he prides himself on delivering couture interiors. Virtually all the furnishings in the London home are bespoke or vintage. The living room

is appointed with a customized Madeline Weinrib rug, vintage Gilbert Rohde slipper chairs, and a Tommi Parzinger daybed. For the kitchen Cárdenas devised the matte-finished cabinets, with a subtle raised angle on the fronts, as well as every brass knob and handle. "Raf has difficulty finding hardware he likes," the homeowner says. "So he had it all specially made."

On the second floor, in the master suite, the bed tucks into a recess lined with custom-embroidered silk featuring an opalescent jungle pattern. On the top floor—previously a dark, cramped attic—Cárdenas installed additional dormer windows to create light and breezy guest quarters; the guest bath is an especially eye-catching space, with white-tiled walls embellished with blue-quartzite birds that appear to flutter around the room.

In a world where instant gratification is the rule, few things are more luxurious than living in a place where everything has been exactly tailored. Such prodigious care is time-consuming, and the project took a full two years to complete. "Sometimes I get upset when work drags on," the client says. "But I like that Raf won't rest until it's perfect." □



Above: in the living room, Christian Liaigre bookcases face Gilbert Rohde slipper chairs, a Tommi Parzinger daybed, and a De La Espada floor lamp. A Nicholas Krushenick painting hangs above an Hervé Van der Straeten console from Ralph Pucci International, which displays a lamp designed by Philippe Starck for Flos; the silk-on-paper wall covering is by Starck, and the rug is by ABC Carpet & Home. **Right, from top:** At the opposite end of the living room, Cárdenas installed a vintage striped settee from Alan Moss and a leather-top cocktail table by Blackman Cruz; the painting is by Yayoi Kusama, and the carpet was custom made by Madeline Weinrib. A Donald Moffett painting overlooks chairs by Cappellini and a Hungarian Art Deco games table from Szalon in the living room; the vintage floor lamp is from Todd Merrill Antiques.