



At home with Tom

Our regular design columnist is a talented designer in his own right, so this month we turn the tables and point the questions at him...

DNA: When did you first realise you had an eye for design?

Thomson Carpenter: My father is an architect. He runs an international practice with offices in both the Middle East and the UK. From a very young age he would take me on-site to see construction projects he was working on. I became obsessed with buildings and design. I created minute dream homes out of cardboard and I even had a dolls house which was, needless to say, impeccably decorated.

How did this develop into becoming your career?

My family's main home is a crumbling 17th Century house in West Sussex, deep in the English countryside. With my parents spending a lot of time abroad, I was sent to boarding school nearby. On the weekends (without permission) I would sneak home to demolish a wall, remove some doors or re-position light switches.

Fortunately, my parents were very understanding.

Gradually, people began to see that I had an eye for interior design and (informally) started asking me for advice on their own homes. In 2007, I moved to Sydney and met the American decorator Thomas Hamel, a prodigy of New York's Parish Hadley.

Thomas took a gamble, employing me in his Woollahra firm, where east-coast WASP style was order of the day. In 2011, four years later, I returned to England to set up on my own as a designer.

How would you describe your signature look? Has it changed over the years?

My look is probably best described as paired-down traditionalism, sort of old-school British with a few quasi-modern pieces thrown in for good measure. However, while the overall aesthetic is pretty classic, due to my constant travels and extensive time living abroad, I am able to bring a few unusual and indeed unexpected nuances to my interiors. Ultimately, I believe a house is to be lived in and while I strive for an elegant finish, it needs to be comfortable – luxuriously soft fabrics, oversized beds and giant sofas.

If you had one piece of advice for someone about to decorate a property, regardless of whether they have a small or large budget, what would it be?

Take your time! Rome wasn't built in a day and neither should your home. Read design magazines, look in shops, at friends' houses and constantly be on the lookout. Keep a camera handy. Be ready to take pictures of everything and anything you find interesting, whether it's a flower arrangement in a hotel, a table lamp in a shop or a fabric pattern in a street market. Then take these snippets of inspiration home and slowly but thoughtfully incorporate them into your finished scheme.

As for employing an interior designer, do you see it as a luxury for the wealthy or is it now more commonplace, a little like going to the dentist for example?



Employing an interior designer is still a luxury and while it is becoming more commonplace, it is not for everyone. A designer has no place in helping you select things from IKEA! Having said that, if you do have a certain budget and a specific look in mind, a designer can help save you from making costly mistakes and ultimately, the finished look will likely be more polished and thought out.

Do you have any tips for someone looking to employ a designer?

Again, take your time. Look at the designer's portfolio. You may not like everything they've done in the past, but as long as you like the overall look you're on the right track. Also, make sure you get along. Designers and clients spend a lot of time together, often in very personal spaces (i.e. your home) so it's vital you build a strong working relationship.

And for someone thinking about embarking on a career in interior design?

Take time to gain experience, whether through a professional qualification or by working within a design organisation.

Who has been your greatest source of inspiration over the years?

It would have to be the great architects of England's classic age – like Sir Christopher Wren and Sir John Soane. Their use of scale, proportion and symmetry made for the most elegant compositions and continue to be a great source of inspiration.

For more go to thomsoncarpenter.co.uk and thomashamel.com

ABOUT THE HOUSE

The house is a Grade 2 Listed 17th Century manor-house set within a 700-acre park, deep in the West Sussex countryside. Very "beamed" and very much adapted over the years, the property has belonged to the current owners for about three decades but they decided a year ago that a complete renovation was required. Over the past 12 months, the house has been completely gutted and reconfigured, with new room lay-outs, walls removed and erected, a new kitchen installed, new bathrooms added and a conservatory installed. Floors have been lifted and replaced and although the owners wanted to retain a good collection of antiques, carte-blanc was given to the decorator with everything else. The result is a luxurious albeit comfortable family home, traditional but with a strong use of colour and ultimately, a very liveable house. Materials used have included raw linen, silk, cashmere, reclaimed French limestone, sisal, Calacatta marble and oak. Specific brands used include Ralph Lauren, Fox Linton, Jamb, Nicholas Haslam, Plain English, Water Monopoly, George Smith, Porta Romana, Vaughan, Soane, Threads, Beaumont And Fletcher and Colefax And Fowler.