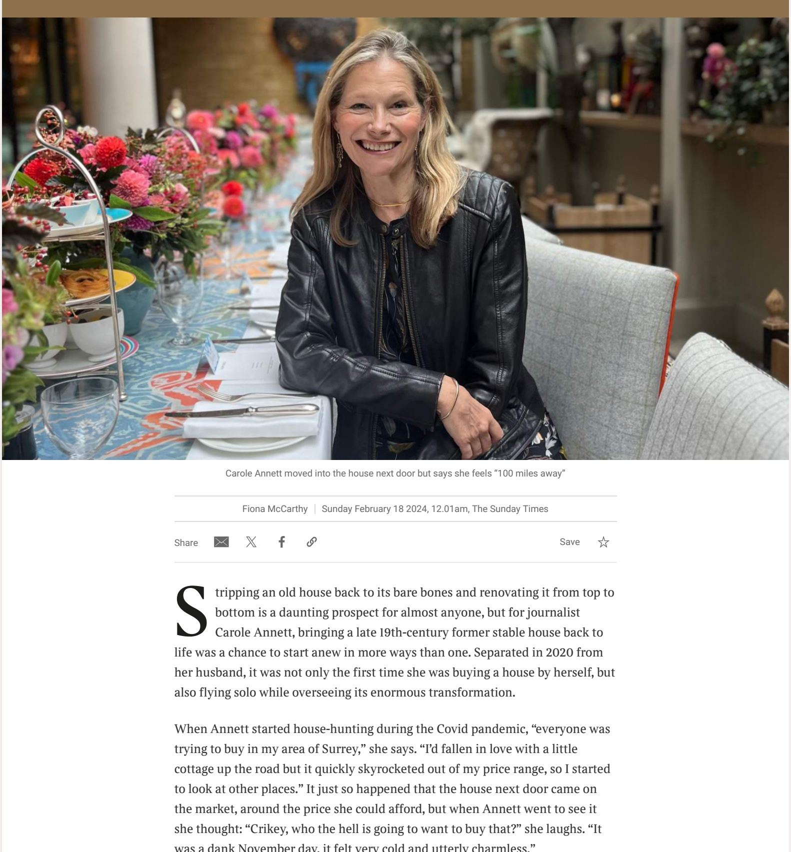
INTERIORS

'Heartbroken after a break-up, I bought and renovated the house next door'

Living around the corner meant Carole Annett knew the local pub and her neighbours — and so she could start afresh and decorate exactly as she wished



Carole Annett moved into the house next door but says she feels "100 miles away"

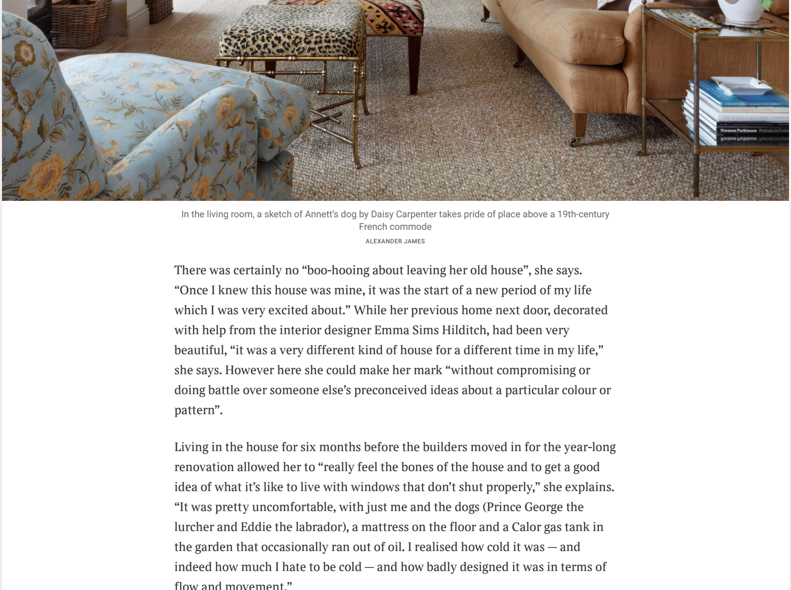
Fiona McCarthy | Sunday February 18 2024, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

Share | Save

Stripping an old house back to its bare bones and renovating it from top to bottom is a daunting prospect for almost anyone, but for journalist Carole Annett, bringing a late 19th-century former stable house back to life was a chance to start anew in more ways than one. Separated in 2020 from her husband, it was not only the first time she was buying a house by herself, but also flying solo while overseeing its enormous transformation.

When Annett started house-hunting during the Covid pandemic, "everyone was trying to buy in my area of Surrey," she says. "I'd fallen in love with a little cottage up the road but it quickly skyrocketed out of my price range, so I started to look at other places." It just so happened that the house next door came on the market, around the price she could afford, but when Annett went to see it she thought: "Crikey, who the hell is going to want to buy that?" she laughs. "It was a dank November day, it felt very cold and utterly charmless."

However, a neighbour and good friend encouraged her to take it on. A local architect, Petras Andriuškevičius, "came up with a completely logical, brilliant design on paper, and I could finally see its potential". Even though "the electricity meter was in my neighbour's cellar, there was a loo in the middle of the living room, and windows in weird places," Annett recalls, it proved the perfect canvas. There was also a certain amount of security in buying next door, she says, because "I knew the neighbours, I knew the local pub, and I ended up renting a little studio in my neighbour's garden during the building works so I could be on site with the builders."

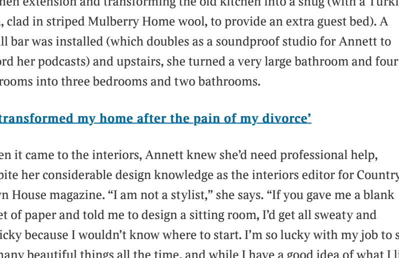


In the living room, a sketch of Annett's dog by Daisy Carpenter takes pride of place above a 19th-century French commode
ALEXANDER JAMES

There was certainly no "boo-hooing about leaving her old house", she says. "Once I knew this house was mine, it was the start of a new period of my life which I was very excited about." While her previous home next door, decorated with help from the interior designer Emma Sims Hilditch, had been very beautiful, "it was a very different kind of house for a different time in my life," she says. However here she could make her mark "without compromising or doing battle over someone else's preconceived ideas about a particular colour or pattern".

Living in the house for six months before the builders moved in for the year-long renovation allowed her to "really feel the bones of the house and to get a good idea of what it's like to live with windows that don't shut properly," she explains. "It was pretty uncomfortable, with just me and the dogs (Prince George the lurcher and Eddie the labrador), a mattress on the floor and a Calor gas tank in the garden that occasionally ran out of oil. I realised how cold it was — and indeed how much I hate to be cold — and how badly designed it was in terms of flow and movement."

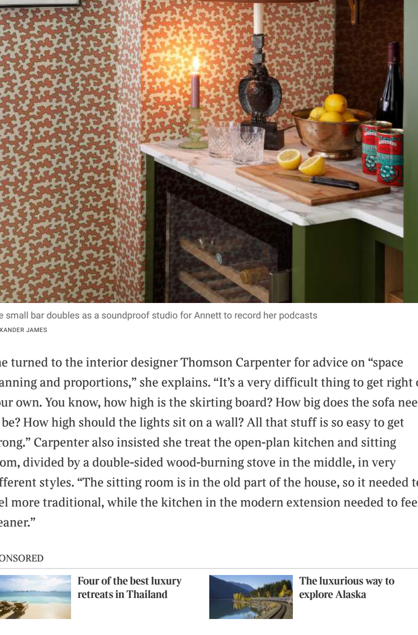
ADVERTISEMENT



With Andriuškevičius's guidance, Annett made the ground floor more spacious by moving the staircase to one side (creating space for a small larder), adding a kitchen extension and transforming the old kitchen into a snug (with a Turkish sofa, clad in striped Mulberry Home wool, to provide an extra guest bed). A small bar was installed (which doubles as a soundproof studio for Annett to record her podcasts) and upstairs, she turned a very large bathroom and four bedrooms into three bedrooms and two bathrooms.

• 'I transformed my home after the pain of my divorce'

When it came to the interiors, Annett knew she'd need professional help, despite her considerable design knowledge as the interiors editor for Country & Town House magazine. "I am not a stylist," she says. "If you gave me a blank sheet of paper and told me to design a sitting room, I'd get all sweaty and panicky because I wouldn't know where to start. I'm so lucky with my job to see so many beautiful things all the time, and while I have a good idea of what I like, I still just want everything. I find the editing process really difficult."

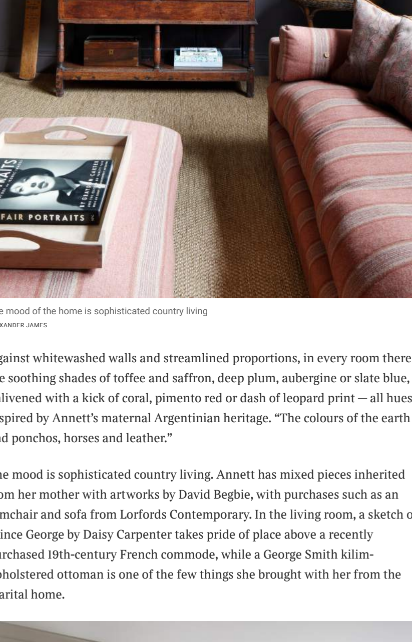


The small bar doubles as a soundproof studio for Annett to record her podcasts
ALEXANDER JAMES

She turned to the interior designer Thomson Carpenter for advice on "space planning and proportions," she explains. "It's a very difficult thing to get right on your own. You know, how high is the skirting board? How big does the sofa need to be? How high should the lights sit on a wall? All that stuff is so easy to get wrong." Carpenter also insisted she treat the open-plan kitchen and sitting room, divided by a double-sided wood-burning stove in the middle, in very different styles. "The sitting room is in the old part of the house, so it needed to feel more traditional, while the kitchen in the modern extension needed to feel cleaner."

SPONSORED
Four of the best luxury retreats in Thailand
The luxurious way to explore Alaska

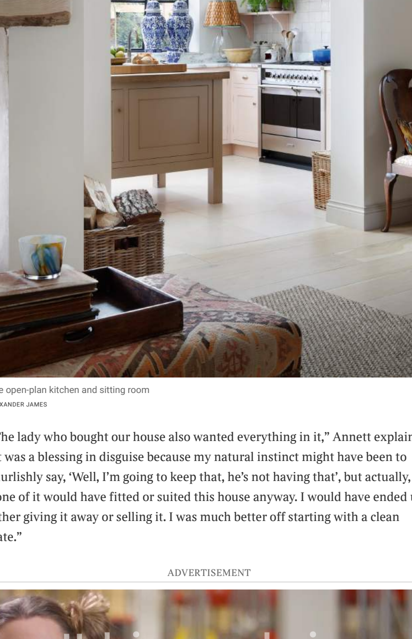
Pandering only to her own tastes meant going "a bit more feminine" in the kitchen with a dreamy shade of Edward Bulmer pink for the joinery, complemented by warm antique brass hardware. In her bedroom, Annett treated herself to an elegantly upholstered canopied half tester bed, purposely raised so that she looks out "on to the treetops of the surrounding land rather than into somebody else's garden."



The mood of the home is sophisticated country living
ALEXANDER JAMES

Against whitewashed walls and streamlined proportions, in every room there are soothing shades of toffee and saffron, deep plum, aubergine or slate blue, enlivened with a kick of coral, pimento red or dash of leopard print — all hues inspired by Annett's maternal Argentinian heritage. "The colours of the earth and ponchos, horses and leather."

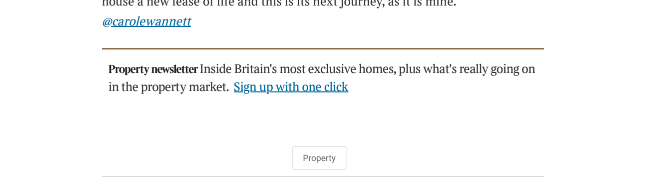
The mood is sophisticated country living. Annett has mixed pieces inherited from her mother with artworks by David Begbie, with purchases such as an armchair and sofa from Lorfords Contemporary. In the living room, a sketch of Prince George by Daisy Carpenter takes pride of place above a recently purchased 19th-century French commode, while a George Smith kilim-upholstered ottoman is one of the few things she brought with her from the marital home.



The open-plan kitchen and sitting room
ALEXANDER JAMES

"The lady who bought our house also wanted everything in it," Annett explains. "It was a blessing in disguise because my natural instinct might have been to churlishly say, 'Well, I'm going to keep that, he's not having that', but actually, none of it would have fitted or suited this house anyway. I would have ended up either giving it away or selling it. I was much better off starting with a clean slate."

ADVERTISEMENT



The renovation has given the fifty-something Annett "a lot of confidence," she says. "I do feel like I've really achieved something, and you don't get that feeling very often." She never even thinks about having once lived next door in her old life (nor do the dogs it seems, having not once ventured over to sniff around). "It's almost as if I am 100 miles away." The result is a home where "I hadn't anticipated it feeling so personal to me," she enthuses. "I feel like I've given the house a new lease of life and this is its next journey, as it is mine."
@carolewannett

Property newsletter Inside Britain's most exclusive homes, plus what's really going on in the property market. Sign up with one click

Property

Share | Save

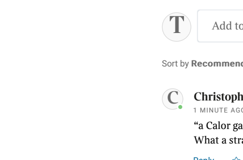
Related articles

THE BIG QUESTION
Should assets be split 50/50 in a divorce?
January 04 2024, 12.00pm
Ali Hussain

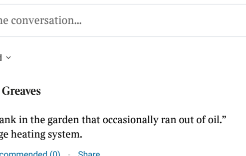
MOVING STORIES
'After divorce, I didn't think I'd ever make it back on the property ladder'
October 03 2023, 12.13am
Interview by Hugh Graham

HOT TOPICS
Colour-coded bathrooms, his and hers zones: the reality of living with your ex
March 26 2023, 12.01am
Zoe Dare Hall

Read more



OBJECT OF DESIRE
The £150,000 piano that plays itself
February 18 2024, 12.01am
Tara Loader Wilkinson



OPINION
Building on brownfield alone won't solve the housing crisis
February 16 2024, 12.05am
Matthew Spry

GARDENING
How to create a peachy-keen garden
February 18 2024, 12.01am
Louise Curley

Comments (1)

Comments are subject to our community standards and participation guidelines policy, which can be viewed here. By joining the conversation you are accepting our community rules and terms. Update your commenting notification settings here. Our policy is for readers to use their real names when commenting, find out more here.

Thomson Carpenter

Add to the conversation...

Sort by **Recommended**

Christopher Greaves
1 MINUTE AGO
"a Calor gas tank in the garden that occasionally ran out of oil."
What a strange heating system.
Reply · Recommended (0) · Share

OpenWeb | Feedback

© Times Media Limited 2024.
Registered in England No. 894646. Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.