

NOVEMBER 2017

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

HODGKIN AT HOME

The painter's rooms in Bloomsbury

PILE ON THE NILE

Old-world luxury comes to Luxor







PAST PRESENT

"You feel the layers of history here," says Merlin Eayrs of the 18th-century Spitalfields abode he shares with his wife, Zoe Chan, and their daughter. But although their French furniture and fittings certainly reflect the building's Huguenot heritage, this architect couple delight in introducing other elements that reinterpret the original spirit of the house in a strikingly modern way. The results are anything but tense, argues Kate Jacobs. Photography: Jan Baldwin

Left: the kitchen's copper lanterns were reclaimed from a funeral directors' premises and hang over an Arabescato marble countertop. The wooden trough sitting on top was an antique-market find. The Faye Wei Wei painting - one of many around the house - is from the Cob Gallery. Top: "We like the *wabi-sabi* concept; we're not keen on sterile spaces," says Chan. "In the kitchen we used the same warm wood as elsewhere, so it feels akin to the rest of the house." The brass taps are made by Devol in collaboration with Perrin & Rowe





Left: the pair chose French pieces, like the farmhouse table and wall sconces from Piers Pisani Antiques, to reflect the building's Huguenot heritage. The brass pendant light was designed by Claus Bonderup. The chairs are from Atomic Antiques and have been reupholstered in Pierre Frey's 'Petrol' velvet. Top: the Arabescato sink niche echoes the Marcus James ink-on-paper artwork seen on these pages. Above: the brass candlesticks were bought at Spitalfields antique market, while the chunky pot is from a bazaar in India





The double living room is bisected by the staircase. Just as the original Georgian panelling in Huguenot houses incorporated cupboards, here the same timber is used for wainscoting with storage, as well as for the kitchen cabinetry and for alcoves around the house. The Beni Ourain rug is an antique and the pair of armchairs are by Merlin's grandfather Kenneth Griffiths, a furniture manufacturer working in Manchester in the 1960s



Top: 'This line at dado height runs like a ribbon through the house,' explains Eayrs, while the woodwork is painted in two distinct shades for a layered look. Above: the opening to the bed niche in their daughter's room was designed to fit this toran, an Indian door hanging, from one of the Marché aux Puces in Paris. Opposite: 'We wanted the bedroom layout to feel like a hotel suite, with an informal distinction between the bathroom and bedroom,' says Eayrs. The couple moved the insulation up to the roof to expose the beams





SOMEBODY LACKING in imagination might describe Chan & Eayrs as property developers, but that term really doesn't do justice to this architect duo's all-encompassing way of working. Zoe Chan and Merlin Eayrs prefer to think of themselves as 'bespoke house makers'. The married couple combine their diverse skill sets to find and finance each site, design a house, oversee every aspect of its construction – working closely with hand-picked craftsmen – then set about creating the interior, with carefully sourced antiques and Modernist rarities their finishing touches. With no client, Chan & Eayrs have complete creative freedom and can work at their own pace.

By the time the pair's paths crossed in 2013, at the end of their studies at the Architectural Association, Chan had observed her contemporaries becoming mere cogs in vast architectural machines, focused on one tiny detail of a huge project, with no contact with the buildings or materials themselves. 'I became interested in re-empowering the architect,' she says. Meanwhile Eayrs's passion for large-scale social housing dimmed as 'I came to realise that that sector puts little emphasis on good design any more.' Having studied interior design at the Inchtald School of Design before the AA, Eayrs had returned to interiors when the couple met, working with his friend Rory Macpherson of Play Associates. 'I became interested in working on a smaller, more human scale, where you can weave moments of delight into the design,' he explains.

Chan's Chinese-British family background mixes banking and architecture, and her own gifts extend in both directions. She renovated and sold her first home at a good profit, then quadrupled her money through some astute investments before buying up a handful of small, derelict sites around London – all while still at architecture school – and had just completed her award-winning Herringbone House in Dalston when she met Eayrs.

As their relationship grew (they married in 2015 and now have a young daughter, Max), it was natural for each to offer advice on the other's work. Within six months they were working together. Eayrs grew up on a Cambridgeshire farm and his style is rooted in tradition, while London-born Chan is interested in creating work that is truly of its time. Yet the pair have many more aesthetic sim-

ilarities than differences, and their styles combine with an alchemical spark so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. 'Merlin is more of a people person and likes hatching up the physical details on site, whereas I prefer to be by myself, so I do the earlier stages, the sketching and concept,' Chan explains.

For their own home, Eayrs was adamant that they should live somewhere central. But with start-from-scratch sites few and far between, they considered existing properties and discovered this rare gem, built in the early 18th century, among the old Huguenot houses of Spitalfields. Such former silk-weavers' homes are treasured today for their austere dignity. 'You feel the layers of history here,' says Eayrs. 'Spitalfields has been stamped with many strong identities: Huguenot, Jewish, Bengali and the hip creative community today.' Like the wider area, this house – originally two separate dwellings, long since amalgamated – has seen highs and lows over the centuries. It has been a tavern, a fruiterer's warehouse and a grotto-maker's premises before attaining celebrity status as the home of not one but two household-name actors: first Samantha Morton, then Keira Knightley.

By the time it fell into Chan & Eayrs's hands, the house had lost almost all of its original features. 'We'd never rip out anything original ourselves, but working with something so old can suffocate you,' Chan says. 'This was less restrictive.' Despite their reservations, working with an existing building has been a surprisingly positive experience, as Chan explains: 'We wanted to inject the same amount of love into the project, so it has gone into honing our interior skills.'

In a contemporary nod to the original building, the couple reinstated oak wainscoting to dado height – but on their terms. The smoked, limed timber is cross-sawn for texture, and fitted flush into the traditional lime-plaster walls. The effect is seamless, but creates a visual line at dado height that runs up the staircases over all five storeys, with the timber replaced by marble in the bathroom. As Eayrs says: 'We enjoy tradition, but we don't want to replicate the past; we want to do something fresh.' And Chan is quick to agree: 'We're trying to establish our own language.'

Paint colours were chosen with painstaking care. The woodwork on staircases and window frames uses two shades side by side, a moody blue-grey next to darkest green. The effect is to add depth to the space, heightening the sense of shadow play.

The couple's tastes and inclinations draw on their past and their travels. 'Our style combines Arts and Crafts, Japanese Modernism and Moroccan earthiness, all expressed through a natural palette of materials,' says Chan. Their devotion to the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi* is evident throughout the house, from the traditional lime plaster – left unpainted – to the original beams, now exposed, and the hand-made Bejmat tiles in every fireplace. 'The imperfect and the weathered sit very well in this house,' says Eayrs.

The family now relish the variety of their home. 'If we want to be in a light, open space, we can go to the top floor,' says Chan. 'The living room is very calm, while it feels moodier and more connected to the city on the ground floor. There is an energy in this area that you can tap into,' she continues. 'When we were moving in, Tracey Emin poked her head in for a chat and Gilbert and George, who walk past every day, really love our dog, Yogi,' says Chan with a smile. Like the custodians of most of these Huguenot houses, Chan & Eayrs don't hide their lives behind curtains or blinds. 'You can't be that private here, people love to look in – but their responses are very positive,' Eayrs explains. 'It's a little bit of a stage set, but you just have to embrace it' ■

Chan & Eayrs. Visit chanandeyrs.com



Opposite: on the landing between the guest-room and its bathroom is an antique acacia Rajasthani bench. Through the pedimented door (one of few remaining period features) is Ercol's '305' chair. This page: in the guest bathroom, Verde Luana marble surrounds a Barber Wilsons & Co tub. The couple used 'Obsidian' and 'Livid Blue' by Little Greene for the woodwork, while the mirrored wall sconces come from a Lisbon antique shop