

## INTERIORS

*A sleek and pristine modern space is not just an empty dream, for it can even be achieved in a listed Georgian terrace. By*  
**REBECCA TANQUERAY**

**T**his is not the kind of interior you might expect to find inside a Georgian terraced house. It is sleek, modern and rigorously minimal. It's so empty, in fact, that at first glance it would be easy to think that nobody even lives here. There are no pictures on the walls, no magazines on the shelves, no everyday mess on the kitchen surfaces. But appearances can be deceptive; this pristine house is home to Fiona Morley, an estate agent, and Paul Payne, who runs a business information company. When the couple bought the house early last year, it was far from ideal. The decoration had not been touched since the 1970s, and it showed. There were tiles on the ceiling, swirly carpet on the floor and hideous wallpaper



# Order in the house



Hot spot: on the top floor, the vivid orange and red cactus room, main picture, is aglow with colour. Far left, clockwise

from top left, the sitting room with its limestone benches; the bedroom; the old chestnut table almost fills the dining area;

blue kitchen cupboards are one of the few concessions to colour. Below, from left, architects Joyce Owens and Ferhan Azman;

the house in Islington, north London; a Georgian backdrop for modern furniture. Photographs by Michael O'Connell



everywhere. The decor was so dreadful that Morley and Payne felt more than justified in doing a complete "gut" job, ripping out everything and starting again.

Unlike many who buy old properties, Morley and Payne were not interested in trying to reproduce the period look. They wanted a home with space and light; somewhere clean-cut and contemporary that would stand out from all the other Georgianscattered terraced houses scattered throughout London.

Although they knew the look they wanted, the couple did not know how to achieve it, so they called in architects Ferhan Azman and Joyce Owens to help. The two women, one Turkish, one American, who set up a practice together in 1993, are exponents of streamlined,

minimal architecture and clicked immediately with their clients. "We knew we were on the same wavelength," says Morley. Both she and Payne had so much faith in Azman and Owens that they gave them the briefest of briefs. "All Fiona and Paul asked for was a 'stainless-steel kitchen and no clutter'," says Azman.

They got just what they wanted, but the transformation of the house was not straightforward. The building is Grade II\* listed, so Azman and Owens were severely restricted in what they could do with the space. The layout of the rooms couldn't be changed, for example, and any remaining original features, such as the mouldings and the main staircase, had to be kept. You might think that such limitations would pose a serious problem to contemporary

architects, but Azman and Owens weren't fazed. Though both self-confessed minimalists, they are not out-and-out modernists. "We like our work to be seen as timeless," says Azman and, consequently, they relished and exploited the blend of old and new.

Throughout the house, modern lines rub shoulders with period detail. The sitting room mixes limestone benches with original wooden floorboards and plaster mouldings; the Georgian staircase is carpeted with industrial rubber; the steel fireplace in the bedroom dissects an original skirting board. It is a combination that creates a softer, more subtle look than hard-edged minimalism and one that keeps

Continued on page 28

# Order in the house

Continued from page 27

the history of the house alive.

The basement was a different story. Because it had been altered considerably by the previous owners, Azman and Owens had the freedom to reinvent the space completely. They turned three poky rooms into a large kitchen-cum-dining room, and also created a Mediterranean-style terrace outside, with a solid concrete bench and table. Though the room is below ground level at the front, with its shiny stainless-steel units (all custom-made), white walls and pale limestone floor, it's surprisingly light. The most overtly modern area in the house, it could look clinical if it weren't for the furniture, particularly a beautiful old chestnut table that almost fills the dining area. "Subtlety is very important to us," says Owens, "and the table makes the space subtle."

Luckily for the architects, the couple's taste in furniture complements their designs perfectly — there's a streamlined Le Corbusier recliner, some leather Cab chairs by the Italian designer Bellini, and sleek modern lighting. What's most striking, however, is how little there is of it. "People keep asking us when we're going to move

in our furniture," laughs Morley.

Though she is in tune with the sparse aesthetic, you get the feeling that it is Payne who is the driving force. He doesn't really like to put anything anywhere — the walls must be bare and the sitting room benches left completely clear (though they are allowed to sit on them occasionally). If it had been left up to him, even colour would not have got a look-in. As it is, Azman and Owens used a subtle palette — some tall blue cupboards in the kitchen, a purple mosaic panel in the otherwise neutral bathroom — until, that is, they got to the top floor. Here the cactus room is an explosion of vibrant orange and red. It is also the barest room in the house — just a fireplace, a couple of cacti and some weights. "We might buy a bed to put in there," says Morley, "but there's no hurry."

It's easy to see how the couple keep the house so empty (there are cupboards everywhere), but more pertinent is why? The answer is not what you might expect. This clutter-free lifestyle is not a design statement, or even an obsession, it's just a result of their enthusiasm for the clean-lined architecture. "Once you've lived inside it," says Morley, "you just don't want to spoil it."

## DESIGN directory

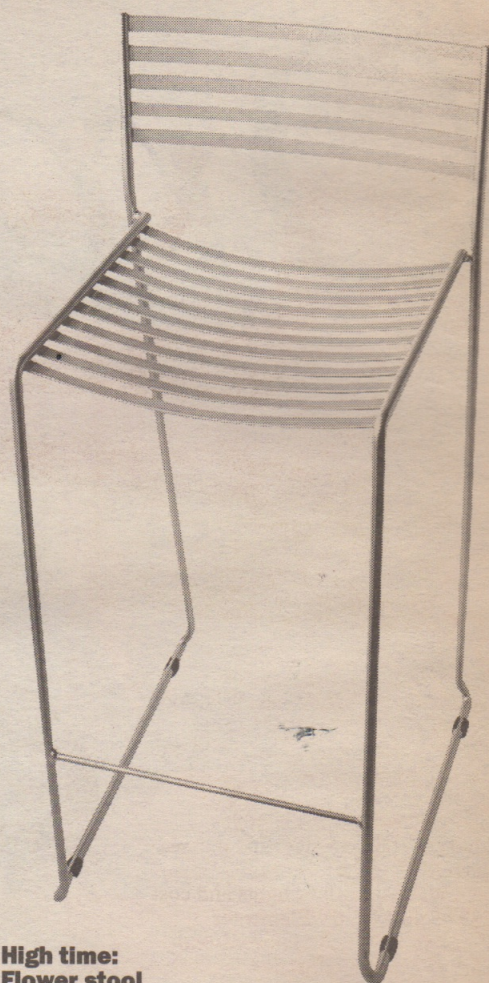
An architectural interior doesn't have to be empty. This blend of modern lines and Georgian detail works with any mix of furniture. For a rigorously minimal look, keep clutter behind closed doors and chuck out unnecessary accessories; the only thing you should leave on show is a small selection of streamlined furniture.

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**Squeeze me: juicer**



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**High time: Flower stool**

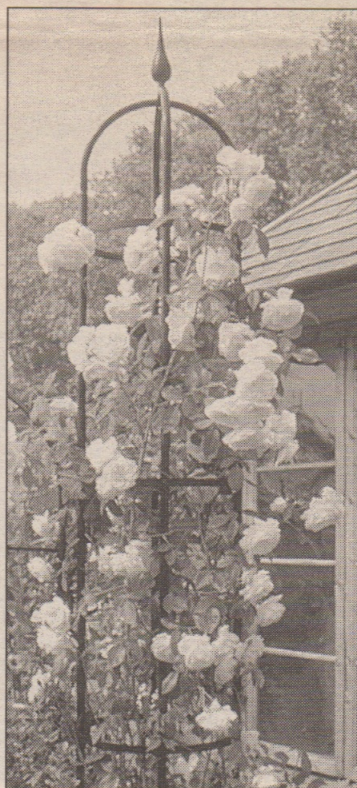
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