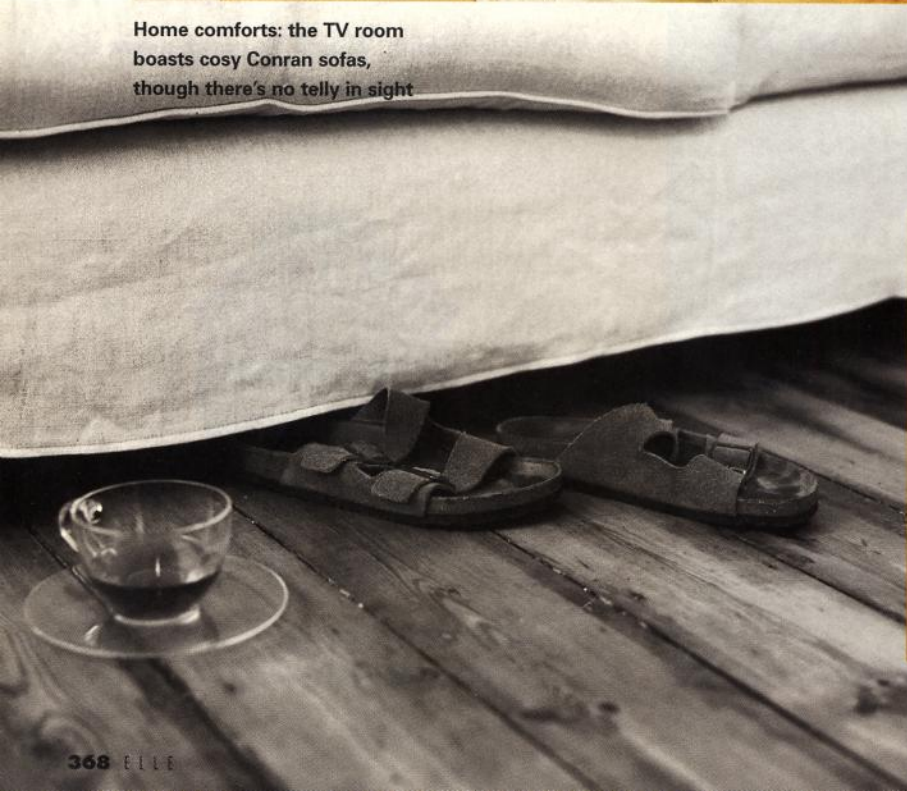




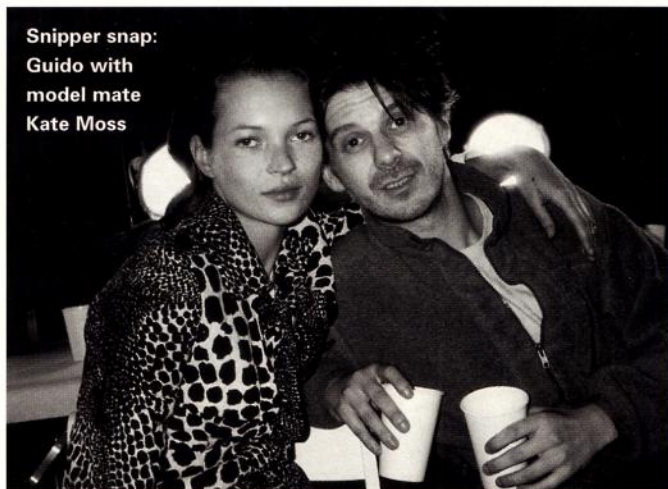
Home comforts: the TV room boasts cosy Conran sofas, though there's no telly in sight

Easy living: Guido kicks back in his Eames rocker (top); a 50s chair (above); Mondrian pencils (below)



Pale but interesting

Snipper snap:
Guido with
model mate
Kate Moss



Outside, a typical Victorian town house. Inside, a haven of pared-down simplicity. Welcome to the home of the hairdresser to the stars, Guido Palau. Sarah Bailey blisses out



A lit candle – that's what I wanted the house to feel like,' muses Guido Palau, radical hair artiste, reclining in his 50s Eames rocker. 'Warm, but cool; that sort of aura.' Then he laughs because, while he might be the man most wanted to tease the tresses of fashion's A team and he might own a vintage Eames rocker, Guido is not at all pretentious. Quite the opposite, in fact.

He's also laughing because, as anyone who's ever attempted to convert a crumbly Victorian house into a minimalist Zen palace, hired a builder or been bossed around by overbearing architects knows, you can't always get what you want...

Upscale house conversions have not always been Guido's scene. A down-to-earth Bournemouth boy (Dad's Spanish, which explains the name) brought up in a knick-knack strewn bungalow, Guido's star rose when he began styling understated, messed-up hair for grunge photographer David Simms. He was one of the hip Brit pack (including Simms, Kate Moss, stylist Melanie Ward, make-up artist Dick Page) exported to the States in the early 90s to infuse the campaigns of Calvin Klein et al with a fiercely contemporary lo-fi aesthetic.

Soon a must-have at every self-respecting catwalk show, Guido reinvented the ponytail as an acceptable fashion hairdo, damn near killed the perm and, more recently, buzzed-off Erin O'Connor's long girlie mane, thereby sending her career into the stratosphere.

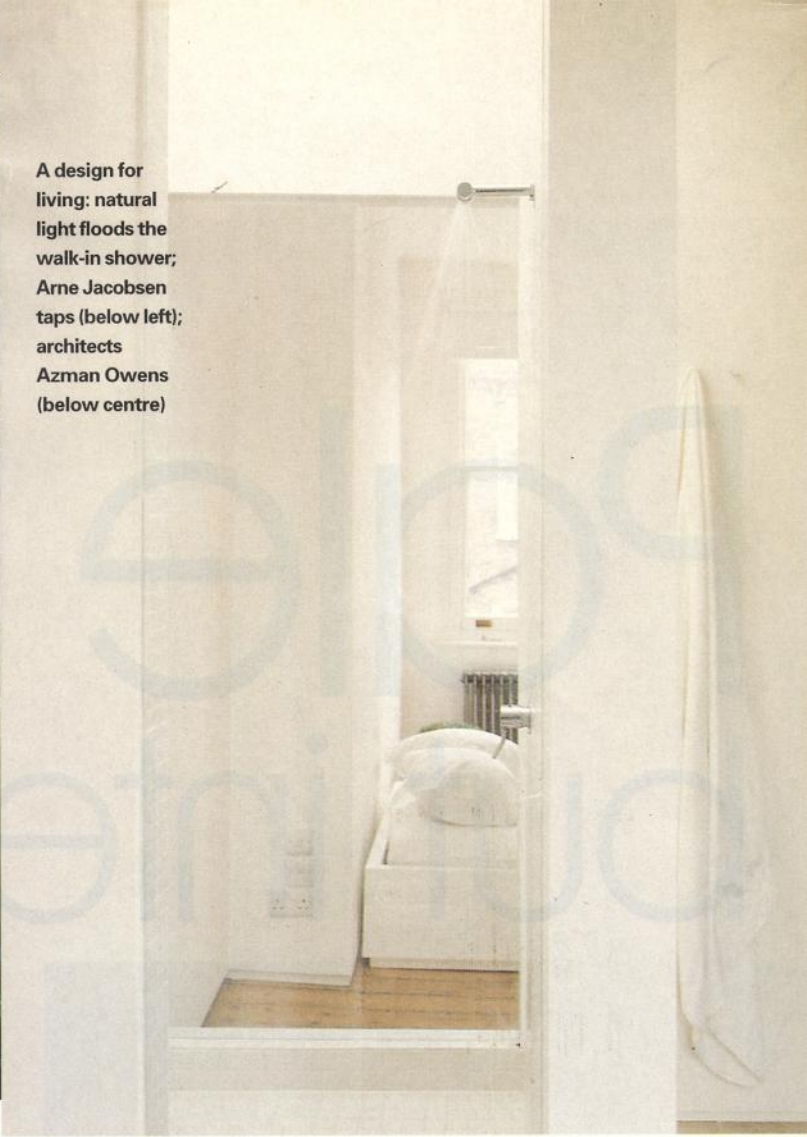
A man more familiar with international departure lounges than his local estate agent, Guido was flat-sharing in New York with Simms when a London home was located for him. A pretty Victorian town house on a sleepy north London street, it was love at first viewing. Simms had ➤

ROBERT FAIRER/LUCY SLADE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN MORRELL



A design for living: natural light floods the walk-in shower; Arne Jacobsen taps (below left); architects Azman Owens (below centre)



already bought a property round the corner, so Guido had an instant neighbour. (Now Alexander McQueen has bought one street away and the three are already swapping Formica samples in the local pub of an evening, so whether the area remains sleepy...)

Back then, the house was decidedly frou-frou. 'The former owner was a window dresser, so it was very theatrical,' Guido explains diplomatically. (Well, chintz and elaborate swagging are hardly a fitting backdrop for a Grand Lord of Grunge.) And so, before you could say light and space, loft apartment or minimalism (all phrases to be used with a degree of caution when commissioning architects), Guido set about finding someone who could give him all three. Anyone who saw *Bare*, the *Modern Times* documentary about the strictures of minimalist living, will be familiar with Azman Owens Architects, the designers Guido commissioned to transform his home: two formidable ladies – one Turkish (Ferhan Azman), one American (Joyce Owens) – possessed of what might be described as 'strong ideas' about how a project should evolve.

Viewers will recall the famous 'debate' in Guido's home concerning a burgundy stair carpet which Joyce and Ferhan vetoed. 'I wanted it to be like a Buddhist's robes,' he recalls, wistfully. Then there was a battle about a set of asymmetric shelves that Guido (quite reasonably, given that it *is* his house) fought tooth and nail to have centred. Happily, relations with the architects are jolly again, if a tad eccentric. 'Ferhan comes round almost every day to check on something,' admits Guido.

The carpet issue aside, what drew Guido to Azman Owens' work was their clean, serene vision combined with a sensitivity to the existing Victorian architecture. He interviewed several candidates for the job. 'One woman walked in and suggested underfloor heating for £60,000. I thought, "Are you mad?" Another – a man – wanted to turn it into a concrete cube.' All the male architects he met seemed to harbour a secret desire to knock down the house and build a new loft space instead.

The beauty of Azman Owens' design is that it looks like a Victorian house converted into a tranquil modern space, as opposed to pretending

Amazingly, no walls were knocked down

to be something it isn't. The original pine floorboards have been rubbed down and polished up (providing a welcome counterpoint of rich, orangey brown in a house otherwise stripped of colour). Similarly, the classic Victorian staircase has simply been tinted with a coat of paint.

That's not to suggest, for one second, that Azman Owens or Guido are softies. The living room ceiling – once resplendent with ornate cabbagey mouldings ('Ugh – they made me feel all creepy') – was dumped unceremoniously in the skip. His more conservation-minded neighbours were so horrified, they came knocking on Guido's door to ask him what he was doing. 'The street was in uproar!' he giggles. Fancy fireplaces were hoiked out and replaced with stark geometrical openings. Barely a single door or doorway has survived. Amazingly, given the airiness of the house, no walls were knocked down. Instead, Azman Owens pierced the walls with long rectangular openings, which let natural light flood through. 'What I appreciate more than anything,' grins Guido, 'is the light they've created. It's as though they've created a feeling, as opposed to some *Ohmigod* structure that screams at you.'

From the drawing board to the final spotlight, the conversion took a year and a half, although Guido was spared the living-off-takeaways/going-to-work-with-plaster-dust-in-your-turn-ups experience by working abroad and staying with friends. All said, one of the hardest things about moving into any new space (never mind a sublime minimalist one) is how to incorporate your raggle-taggle of possessions – in Guido's case, a collection of exuberantly coloured Mexicana which ended up in the charity shop. 'It sounds callous, but you have to be strict with yourself,' he says. Luckily, his mid-century Eames ply furniture – picked up on Lafayette Street in New York and now gracing his reception room

ROBERT FAIRER/MICHAEL MACK

Cool living?
Nothing to it:
the downstairs
lounge – light
bright, and not a
dirty coffee cup
in sight. Guido
backstage with
Amber Valletta
(below right)



– looked the part. The 50s Italian space-age light – another New York find – inspired the whole aesthetic of the interior.

Unfortunately, some purchases made for the house didn't work out, chiefly a bespoke kitchen table, which Guido sold to his agent. Happily, its replacement – a spare T-shaped form, with Formica top, steel legs and neat matching bench, made by whippersnapper designers AJA – fits perfectly. The long, low concrete bench which extends from the kitchen into the reception is an Azman Owens signature piece.

The kitchen is another exercise in restraint, consisting of just a single solid maple worktop and a row of white MDF cupboards. 'I wanted it to be masculine and for everything to feel quite solid. I hate flimsy things,' explains Guido. The day-to-day organisational gubbins of his life is hidden away in a discreet pull-down hatch ('this house makes you tidy'), leaving the surfaces blissfully clear – well, save for a Diptyque Tubéreuse candle and a tub of white Mondrian pencils.

The absence of clutter allows the eye to focus on the fabulous fig tree in the garden, framed like a painting by the chunky metal French doors. The garden is another Azman Owens creation, covered in decking (the New Patio!) to resemble an outdoor room. Said tree is another sore point, having recently been given a haircut and, according to Guido, 'looking a bit bald. Well, it will grow back and probably be all the healthier for having been cut,' he mutters, leading the way upstairs.

The first floor plays host to Guido's TV room (not noticeably occupied by a television set, but that's minimalism for you). Instead we find two chunky beige Conran sofas, which Guido promptly dives on to demonstrate lounge-ability. He's been toying with fitting the room with a chocolate carpet 'and painting the walls in different tones of beige, very warm, but very masculine'. One senses that Ferhan and Joyce remain ignorant of such developments. The next floor up is Guido's personal comfort zone, occupied by his bedroom and a huge architectural en suite bathroom. Everything from the giant bed to the heart-racingly expensive Arne Jacobsen taps suggests luxury and generosity. The mosaic-tiled,

walk-in shower (big enough for a rugby team) is flooded with natural light, thanks to Azman Owens knocking through into the roof and fitting a skylight. The bath, like the floor, is clad in soft, warm limestone. Floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows look out onto the garden (sandblasted from waist height down to protect Guido's modesty). The bedroom is spare but sensual, thanks mainly to the temptingly rumpled white bed sheets. The geometrical white bed frame is another made-to-commission creation by AJA. There are a few eccentric touches – a vase brimming with 'Peace in the Home' (architect-approved greenery) and a tiny cloth Snoopy (don't ask) perch daintily on an Eames bedside table. A collection of barmy paperweights – a preserved fish head, a 60s glass blob, and a ceramic owl made by Guido's little brother – cluster on the floor. There is a tiny expressionist canvas that Iggy Pop painted for Guido as a present for a haircut. 'The figure's supposed to be me,' laughs Guido, 'but I feel it's more like him.' However, the pièce de résistance is an original 50s 'flagline' chair by Hans Wegner, if you please, an amazingly reclining rope affair. Guido has just shipped it in from LA – 'quite expensive, but one of those things you have to get. I'm going to get a sheepskin to drape over it.' He looks quite thrilled at the naughtiness of it all.

There are no wardrobes. Instead, MDF cupboards line one wall – and hide a multitude of underpants. 'You can throw everything in them,' he says, swinging open the doors to reveal two layers of hanging space, a shoe mountain and a laundry basket. 'That's what I'm really like.' And that's what happy minimalism is like, too. It's all about good cupboards. ■

Style file

Azman Owens Architects is an Islington-based practice. For enqs, tel (0171) 354 2955. ● Furniture designers AJA are happy to accept commissions. For enqs, tel (0171) 237 1114. ● The taps in Guido's bathroom are by Arne Jacobsen, available from the Danish company Vola. For enqs, tel (01525) 841 155.