

# SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

American designer Rachel Laxer brings transatlantic glamour to the interior of this Belgravia penthouse

Words Catherine Coyle Photography Adrian Briscoe

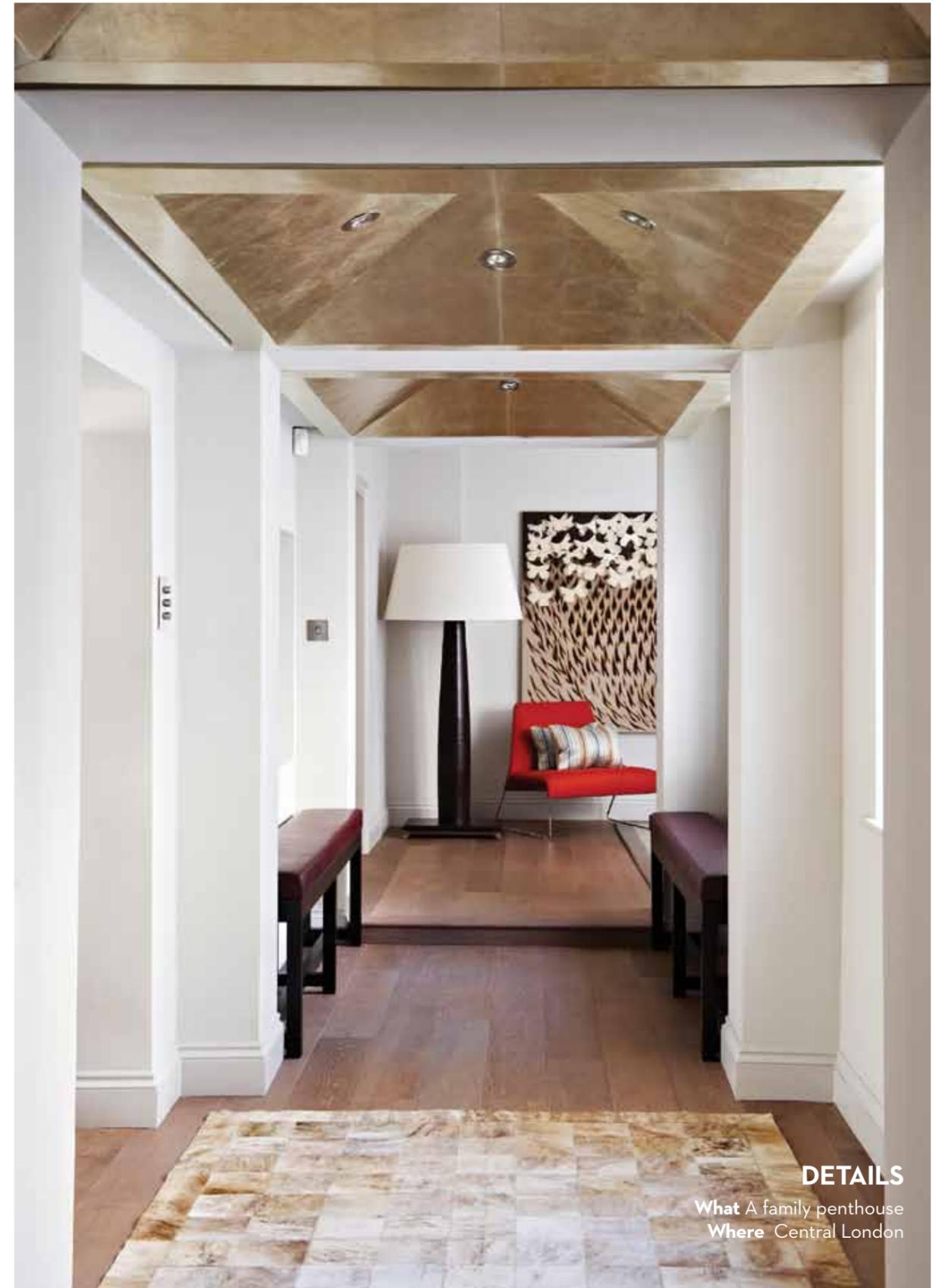
What happens when a globe-trotting home owner hires a cross-continental interior designer? Throw in a commanding London penthouse in need of some TLC, and the results are a heady fusion of styles that wouldn't look out of place as the backdrop for James Bond.

Being based in New York and London, American interior designer Rachel Laxer has an eye on what's happening in both cities (and a roster of clients who themselves have multiple residences), which makes her perfectly positioned to provide the transatlantic aesthetic they crave. Her speciality is in creating spaces that are impressive and glamorous yet completely practical at the same time.

At this penthouse property in Belgravia, for example, home to one of Rachel's longstanding clients, the task was to create a bold look that would work with the family's love of entertaining, while retaining a sense of comfort and functionality. "To me, a home is more than just a dwelling place to come home to and relax in; it is also a place to entertain and work," the designer explains. "I like to make spaces very versatile."

With this project, there was no time to waste. The job had to be turned around quickly, with the clients willing to move out for three months while the work was being done. Having a limited amount of time focuses the mind, says Rachel, and here it helped her to make swift decisions, adhering tightly to brief and budget.

A desire to make the penthouse a multifunctional home is what has driven the design scheme. On first inspection, it looks like the ultimate ►



## DETAILS

What A family penthouse  
Where Central London

“THE OWNERS WANTED A FRESHEN-UP THAT WOULD LOOK HOT. THEY’VE GOT IT – THIS PLACE IS HIP AND SEXY!”



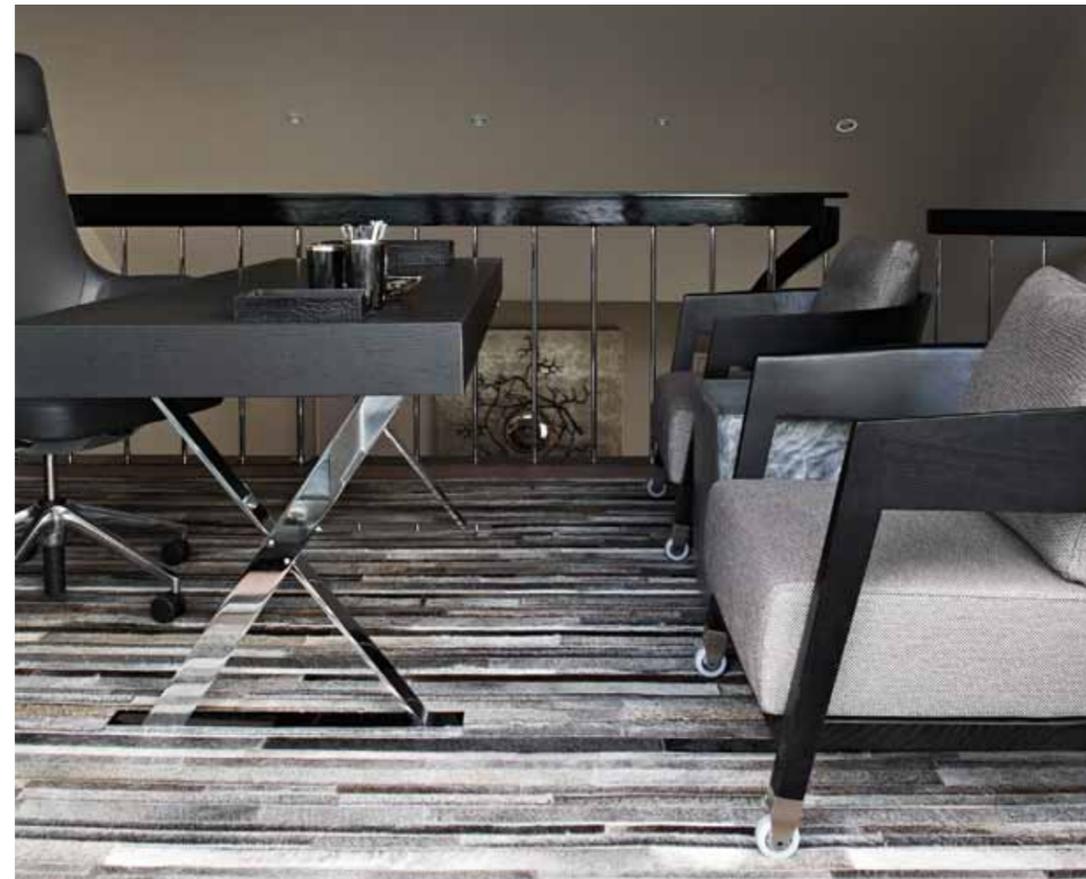
[Above] A minimal palette has been used in the living area, with pops of colour and a focus on entertaining. [Opposite] the original spiral staircase has been stripped back and painted using black piano paint, for dramatic effect

party pad, packed with glitzy, glam adornments. But a closer look reveals a home that takes on different personalities depending on what it is being used for. The abundance of natural light helped to inform the design, as Rachel explains: “The property has a lot of windows, which illuminate the interior with natural light – it’s that beautiful western light that just floods in.”

A good deal of thought was given to other sources of light. Ambient lighting was installed, along with recessed and vintage lamps, with everything positioned to allow a variety of different moods to be created. A shimmering light envelops guests as soon as they cross the threshold. The entrance hall feels a bit like an art gallery, with plain whitewashed walls (Farrow & Ball’s Shaded White) encouraging the eye to take in the custom-built elements that make this apartment special. The dimpled ceiling is a *tour de force*; Rachel covered it in a silver leafed wallpaper by Phillip Jeffries and then back-lit it with LED lights to give a warm, inviting glow at night.

The same attention to detail has been applied in the main living space, where the flat’s original spiral staircase, stripped back and repainted with black piano paint, acts as a unique centrepiece.

This area doubles as a great party room but is also a place where the family of four can come together to eat, chat and relax. “We went for modular furniture and durable, soft fabrics here,” says Rachel. ▶



[Opposite] A masculine look has been adopted on the mezzanine level. [Middle] furniture is classic Max Alto at B&B Italia featuring sleek black surfaces and chrome fixtures. [Right] A luxe carpet by Stark adds to the opulence of this high spec home office space



“I like how relaxed and chilled-out the space feels, both during the day and for entertaining at night.”

Chic furniture has been placed on castors so that the layout can be rearranged to suit the occasion. Some of the chairs have been upholstered in outdoor fabrics whose durability is much admired by Rachel. It also means that furniture can be wheeled out on to the patio for a different party atmosphere.

The bar – two interlocking cubes made from marble, offset by two angular resin stools – is one of her favourite pieces in the whole project. “It is so simple and elegant,” says the designer.

The staircase brings a central focus to this room but also divides the space between the living and dining areas.

The dining table, a Zaha Hadid-inspired coated creation weighing nearly 40 stone, had to be craned in through the window. “Before that, of course, we had to ensure the floor was structurally stable enough to take the weight!” laughs Rachel.

There is a strong sculptural element here: the table, the staircase and the mirrors (two bespoke Hervé Van Der Straeten mirrors that Rachel designed in conjunction with Based Upon) all required a big financial outlay, but the aesthetic impact is worth it. Rachel mounted the mirrors on metallic-leaf wallpaper (to reflect the look in the hallway) and back-lit them for an extra glam touch. The results are an impressive mix of art and design, and go a long way towards giving this penthouse its unique identity.

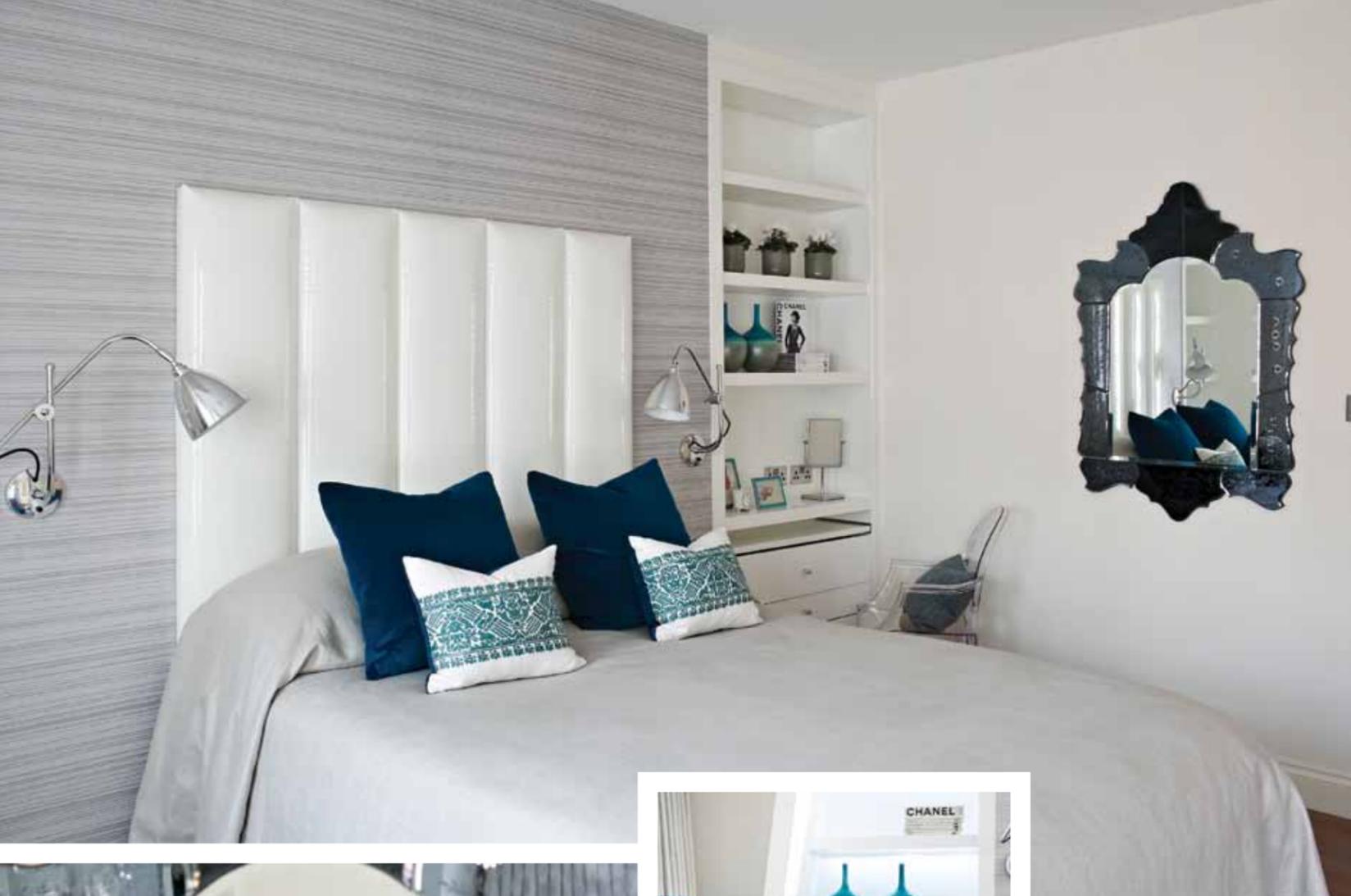
The mezzanine level has masculine overtones but still manages to connect seamlessly with the interior styling downstairs. Black custom-built shelving designed by Rachel harmonises with the black lacquered steel furniture. The Maxalto desk from B&B Italia (a contemporary update on the 1975 original) offers a hint of classic bachelor-pad edge. The space is stylish without being contrived and has clearly been influenced by New York’s famous industrial loft spaces, updated for contemporary living. “The client wanted a minimal, modern space with nothing fussy or over-designed,” explains Rachel.

Flooring is a clever hybrid. The wooden plank effect makes the space look natural and but is warmed up using durable carpet – in this case, Element 7 flooring paired with

Stark Carpet.

The family have owned this turn-of-the-century house for around ten years, and the previous owners had thoroughly renovated it, so there was virtually no building work to be carried out. Rachel’s role, rather, was to provide a cosmetic lift. “No walls were brought down or built, and the floorplan was comfortable and met the family’s needs so didn’t need to be altered. It just needed sprucing up. The clients wanted to refresh it now that their children were a bit older. So we kept as much as we could to eliminate unnecessary costs and to retain the history of the house. The bones of it are wonderful.”

The bedrooms, all four of them, are where the designer has been able to indulge in a more tactile approach. In ▶



[Clockwise from top] All four of the bedrooms are glamorous and well-equipped for guests; a bespoke leather headboard by Edleman Leather works with the jewel-toned blue highlights; a monochromatic scheme is sleek and simple, using Clarence House Velvet for the custom-made headboard and Porta Romana lamps flanking the bed; the bathroom features Ann Sacks Tiles and a Waterworks basin and tap



these rooms, the mood moves away from ‘party’ to relaxation so have been given a scheme that is more conducive to rest. “We chose a neutral palette for the walls and pulled colours from the chosen artworks. Velvets, leather and fur are timeless and cosy fabrics, so I knew these were going to be the main textures to look for.”

Her overarching aim has been make these rooms practical, but to do so in great style. So, bedding is luxe, cushions are plump, carpeting is thick and lighting is cleverly designed to allow for a variety of moods. To elevate the rooms beyond simply looking (and feeling) like upmarket boutique hotel suites, Rachel has added a lived-in appeal through homely accessories and bold splashes of colour.

In one bedroom, a custom-made padded Edelman leather headboard by Rachel Laxer Designs is a modern interpretation of ‘feminine’ – chic and upmarket without being twee – while vibrant cobalt blue injects energy into the space. An Andrew Martin Venetian mirror ▶



Rachel designed the kitchen from scratch for a unique finish, using formica laminate. She created an Elitis blind and fitted flooring by Element 7

and Original BTC wall-mounted lamps adorn the room like treasured pieces of jewellery.

In another bedroom, monochrome has been a smart choice. Clarence House linens and velvets dress the bed, which is flanked by Porta Romana tables and lamps. Black in the bathroom is brave but successful, the dark mosaics by Ann Sacks at Chelsea Harbour shimmering and glowing. A simple basin by Waterworks, an American bathroom company, nods to the sculptural elements found elsewhere in the house, adding to the sense of the continuity that infuses the whole project.

The understated kitchen, likewise, possesses the upmarket vibe of the rest of the house. The space may be discreet but Rachel has not scrimped on style. The kitchen is to her own design, in Corian and Formica laminate finishes selected for their durability and sleek appearance. The window has been dressed with a custom-made blind in an Elitis fabric to make the most of the natural light. There is a love of the linear here: just as she did in the mezzanine, Rachel favours open shelving and a lack of fussiness, so the doors and drawers are handleless. Element 7 flooring injects colour to the otherwise neutral room. There are cobalt blues, dark oranges and brick reds, and they give the kitchen a punch of colour without going overboard.

“The owners wanted a freshen-up that people would think was hot,” says Rachel. “They’ve got it: this place is cool, hip and sexy!” ■