COLLECTORS’ ISSUE

PEOPLE AND THEIR PASSIONS: FROM IRIS BULBS TO FAIRGROUND RIDES, PLASTER CASTS TO MODERN ART
PAINT JOB

Hung with pieces by Damien Hirst, Mark Wallinger et al, these Mayfair offices could easily be mistaken for a private home. Here staff get to share watercolour rather than water-cooler moments, thanks to their philanthropic boss, an assiduous collector who has a keen eye for striking paintings and furniture – and likes to put her art into her work. The perfect client, then, for interior designer Olivia Outred, who found it all a labour of loveliness... Text: Kate Jacobs. Photography: Simon Upton
MANY MODERN

workplaces make some concessions to being fun and creative – with varying degrees of success. However, this Mayfair office, designed by Olivia Oudred for her art collection (the client, a leading art dealer), is surely laying down a benchmark. "We wanted it to be glamorous, yet relaxed," Oudred explains, "somewhere that feels more like a home than an office."

The sense of glamour comes in part from the building itself, an imposing Mayfair town house built in the Queen Anne style in 1895. Prior to its current incarnation, its heyday was as the home of Jacques de Rothschild, scion of the French banking dynasty. He bought it in 1915, the year he married 17-year-old Dorothy Potts, although the couple are more commonly associated with their celebrated Buckinghamshire home, Waddesdon Manor ( eclc-1204). They stayed for five decades, leaving when new hotels sprang up along Park Lane, blocking their views of Hyde Park. By the time the building was bought by its present owner as the headquarters for her art foundation, it had gone the way of many grand Mayfair residences, languishing as an anonymous office space, in this case in drab shades of beige and brown.

Oudred, who trained at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, had already worked on several projects with the owner and her family, including their London home, so was the obvious choice to bring a domestic slant to this workplace. Ranged over seven floors and featuring numerous large, elegantly proportioned rooms, it's a grand set-up, but that's where the formality ends, for here the décor – with its palm-tree motif and prevalence of wicker – doesn't stand on ceremony. Each space has been kitted out with a playful and irreverent eye. "The client wanted comfortable sofas, piles of books and a quirky mix of furnishings," Oudred explains, "unusually for someone whose foundation nurtures the careers of numerous artists, the owner’s impressive collection, which features works by Mark Wallinger, Keith Tyson and Damien Hirst, was a starting point for the interiors. We realised that white-painted panelled walls and oak chevron floors would mean that whatever pieces are hung here, now and in the future, they'll work against this gallery-like backdrop," explains Oudred.

Art collections aside, the interior designer likes to start her projects from a spatial perspective, an approach that was encouraged during her first job after art college, working under Cefalax & Fowler’s Philip Hooper. “He had an architectural background and was interested in buildings as well as decoration, which suited me very well,” Oudred recalls. She begins her projects by walking through the building, thinking about how each room will work best and flow into the adjoining spaces. That’s no mean feat with seven stories to factor in, including the practicalities of waiting rooms, meeting areas, boardrooms and a common area. “There was no room to accommodate. In my mind I visualised 50 people, how they would move around and use each space. It takes discipline not to get sidetracked by the next lovely chapter, planning out the colours and furniture.”

Oudred’s attitude to this more obviously pleasurable aspect of her work was informed by her second job, working under
This page, clockwise from top left: Room tiles, laid diagonally, cover the floor of the entrance. The curtain fabric is from Volga Lines, while the Henrik chairs are by Magno Koch; this one on the lower ground floor is given over to a large Tetris table used for dinners, meetings and talks; in the 'bouquet space', over 1960s banca chairs from Piano Mastroeni for Nicholas Haslam sit under a painting by Joan Poblanes; re-covered in heavyweight linen, the client's old sofa has become a place to chat or quietly read. Opposite a bookcase painted in Annabianca 'English Yellow' houses one of the foundations of a personal library.
Left: in a first-floor office, a dining table by Piet Heijn Eek now makes a work spot. The unframed screen on the wall behind it is from Oakley 258 St, London’s Portland Road. Tom Gunn’s campfire panel of azobe slabs and black glass on the desk, along with the oiled wallframing. The office tables are by Indian Mobelk, while Cowhead's Red screen painted trailing-edge border on the curtains. Above: Marjani’s 'Time the Year' wallpaper hangs in the general doe
Lulu Lytle (WO: July 2014) as head of interior design at Soane Britain, which she did for five years before going solo in 2014. I learned so much from Lulu, from her bold confidence with colour, to sourcing antiques from the wildest mix of overseas countries, so pulling everything together with an air of laid-back confidence. This has helped to shape OuTed’s signature style — full of colour and joy, maintaining a balance between offbeat glamour and委托ing comfort.

Her unique approach is also rooted in OuTed’s childhood, a wild and carefree existence with bohemian, creative parents on the north Norfolk coast. ‘My mother raised us and painted, while my father built and sailed boats around his work as a doctor. We were seen as the odd family,’ she recalls with a laugh, ‘tricking and hurtling into our side provincial neighbours in equal measure.’ Her mother had a talent for composing interesting little furniture groupings among all the puppets and the chickens and the chaos of the family home. OuTed inherited this gift. When, as a young teenager, she decided to ditch her bedroom decor in favour of restoring the original fir floors, her parents hired a sender and let her get on with it. ‘I think they started me thinking about making beautiful rooms and gave me the confidence to follow my own path.’

Lulu but certainly not least among OuTed’s many influences are her customers. ‘Above all, my approach is deeply client-driven. I’m designing a home for them, not me, so it’s my job to listen to what they want and turn that into a reality,’ she says. Sometimes that can mean spending hours poring over trend forecasts, trying to tease out the nuances of someone’s likes and dislikes. ‘But on this project we raced forwards because my client was both practical and passionate.’

Armed with glass and dimensions, they embarked on several epic shopping trips together, finding out whole floors at a time. ‘In the antiques market, she’d be pulling wonderful textiles out of dusty piles or she’d see something broken and suggest we fix it. She’s been a wonderful client to work with.’

The client’s pragmatism was proved beyond doubt when OuTed made an uncharacteristic logistical error. Having commissioned a spectacular poured-concrete table from Italy for the boardroom, she suddenly realised, with a terrible sinking feeling, that it was too big to fit through the doors. After they talked through alternative table options, the client urged her to reconsider every possible route into the building and they eventually created it in through the French windows of the courtyard garden. ‘She was completely forgiving and brushed it off as a mere glitch,’ recalls OuTed.

Today the building bubbles with purposeful energy. Informal meetings spring up in each of the appealing little seating areas and everyone clearly relishes the perk of an in-house chef who makes up sumptuous healthy lunches in the staff canteen each day. It’s hard to imagine managers having to deal with many requests to work from home, because, it seems, there busy workers already feel as though they do.

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Tips in the central void, a 1960s table to the style of Maison Jansen sits under a beamed light, which once picked up at Penny Wyburn’s London’s Little Road. This originally had globe shades, but OuTed removed them for a simpler feel. Above a woven George Smith bed is a plywood panel tree by London-based Joaquin Lopes. These give the reception areas a welcoming and distantly non-effected feel. Opposite: Thomasson Bespoke (www.thomasson.com) ‘Marble Cain’ sideboards from the latter from