

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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## THE POWER OF DESIGN

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# London Calling

Stately 1830s architecture meets cutting-edge art and design  
in a historic home updated for a collector by Francis Sultana and Thomas Croft

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Designer Francis Sultana and architect Thomas Croft renovated a triplex apartment in a 19th-century London mansion for its art-collecting owner and her family. In the drawing room, a Steinway piano is positioned between a light sculpture by Elizabeth Garouste and Mattia Bonetti and a cabinet by Bonetti. Over the cabinet hangs a sculpture by Thomas Houseago, while a painting by Keith Coventry is displayed above a Martin Szekeley console nearby. The clear cylindrical side table is also by Szekeley, and the crocodile stool is by Claude Lalanne. For details see Sources.





## A late-Georgian stucco mansion is not an obvious home for a collection of cutting-edge art

and design—but this London residence comes with a historic connection to the avant-garde. In 1913, at the same address, leading society hostess Lady Hamilton created a showcase for the Bloomsbury Group’s newly established design collective, the Omega Workshops (the critic Roger Fry advised her on the decor, and Virginia Woolf’s sister Vanessa Bell was among the contributing artists). So it is entirely appropriate that, a century later, the property’s present owner—a Hong Kong-based art collector with strong ties to several European museums and galleries—has reintroduced a forward-thinking aesthetic to the place, this time with a wide-ranging international selection of pieces by designers like Mattia Bonetti and Martin Szekely and such artists as Adam Fuss, Gabriel Kuri, Fiona Rae, Anselm Reyle, and Keith Tyson.

What principally attracted the collector to the building was, she recalls, “the rarity of the dimensions, and the unexpectedness.” A peculiarity of the five-story mansion and its neighbors along the block, all built in the 1830s, is that their grander sides face the garden, rather than the street. “It’s very historic and unique,” she says.

The sizable apartment she occupies with her husband and two small children takes up the house’s three lowest levels. The first and second floors are grand in scale, their elaborately corniced ceilings rising to heights of 13 feet or more, while the garden level’s ceilings extend to 12 feet. This presented designer Francis Sultana and architect Thomas Croft, both based in London, with a problem and an opportunity. Though ideal for entertaining and displaying works of art, the vast rooms weren’t obviously suited to a young family, and historic-preservation regulations stipulated that the spaces couldn’t be fully partitioned to give them more intimate proportions. The challenge, the owner says, was “to create a home, not a museum.”

Sultana and Croft (who has worked for minimalist architect John Pawson) have collaborated on several projects, despite possessing rather divergent sensibilities. “Whatever I choose in terms of furniture and decoration is quite strong,” explains Sultana, “whereas Tom is the total opposite.” The owner also took an active role, and in the end a harmonious triumvirate was established. “Francis was quite maximal, Thomas was very minimal, and I was in the middle,” says the owner. “But they were both very thoughtful about not imposing their visions.” (Lighting designer Sally Storey of John Cullen Lighting also helped humanize the building’s scale.)

The entrance opens onto the apartment’s most impressive space: a cavernous, irregularly shaped drawing room with a grand stairway rising to the second floor. Large enough to hold 200 people, this area was used by the former occupants to host lectures and discussions—a tradition the new owner has continued. But now, thanks to the careful deployment of striking artworks and opulent furnishings,



**Above:** The white stucco exterior of the late-Georgian residence. **Opposite, from top:** At one end of the drawing room, a Jean Royère sofa is grouped with Bonetti polished-steel side tables and a Charlotte Perriand bench with a cushion covered in an Edelman Leather cowhide; the large framed painting near the window is by Anselm Reyle, the photograph on the mantel is a piece by Marlo Pascual, and the pair of table lamps is by Garouste and Bonetti. A sinuous mirrored table by Ron Arad separates twin sofas designed by Sultana; the white geometric side table is by Bonetti, and the carpet is by Fort Street Studio.







**Above:** On the terrace, a Sultana-designed sofa clad in a Scalamandr  fabric is grouped with two Fredrikson Stallard tables and an Andr  Dubreuil chair. **Opposite, from top:** The garden-level kitchen's cabinetry is by Minotti Cucine, with a cooktop by Wolf and barstools by Sultana; the sculpture at right is by Nicole Wermers. At one end of the first-floor dining room, Vladimir Kagan sofas frame a Willy Rizzo table; the photograph above the fireplace is by Wolfgang Tillmans, and the sculptures are by Rebecca Warren.

it also serves as a sort of gallery—George Condo, Keith Coventry, Thomas Houseago, Nate Lowman, Marlo Pascual, and Eva Rothschild are just some of the artists represented—and, on quiet nights, a comfortable place to curl up with a book. Long twin sofas, separated by a mirrored curvilinear table by Ron Arad, face each other across a gray silk carpet by Fort Street Studio, while a plump purple sofa by Jean Roy re resides in front of an expansive window. At the base of the stairway, next to the Steinway piano, is a somewhat surreal eggplant-esque light sculpture by Elizabeth Garouste and Bonetti.

A broad doorway leads to the dining room. The designers brightened this once-gloomy space by ripping out dark paneling, painting the walls white, and installing a splendid light fixture that runs the length of the room. Nickel plated, gleaming with crystal, and resembling a giant but delicately woven basket, the piece was created by the design duo Patrik Fredrikson and Ian Stallard. “I’d seen a project they’d done with Swarovski years back,” explains the owner, “and because the ceiling needed something quite grand, we came up with this.” The fixture’s intricacy contrasts with the simplicity of the glossy black carbon-fiber dining table below it, a collaboration between industrial designer Terence Woodgate and a race-car engineer. The table is matched with black enameled-aluminum dining chairs by Bonetti and offset by a pair of white Vladimir Kagan sofas. Painted vases by Ai Weiwei provide splashes of color—as do the two abstract artworks on the walls, a Wolfgang Tillmans photograph and a Mark Bradford painting.

Upstairs, Sultana and Croft had the task of converting two palatial salons into snug bedrooms. Their solution was to construct enclosed chambers inside each space—rooms within rooms. In the master suite, they broke up the wide expanse by building a capsule containing a bathroom in the area behind the bed. A pair of chaise longues—designed, along with the bed, by Sultana—add to the sense of cozy elegance. In the adjoining children’s room, a two-level wood cubbyhole with a sleeping berth below and a miniature library above gives focus to the space, while a stuffed-animal chair by the Campana brothers and a multicolor geometric desk by Martino Gamper show playful design at its best.

The one major structural change to the triplex was the creation of a stone staircase connecting the first-floor dining room to the garden level. The bottom floor—long derelict—has undergone the most comprehensive renovation of all, anchored by the kitchen. Adjacent are a second, less-formal dining room and a sitting room that doubles as a cinema, while a corridor leads to three bedrooms, an office, and a gym. “We spend a lot of time down here,” says the owner, “and it doesn’t feel like a basement, because there’s so much light and height.”

Throughout the apartment, the marriages of grandeur and comfort, modernity and tradition are testaments to the successful collaboration of client, designer, and architect. “When you’re privileged enough to live in a building with this heritage,” says the owner, “you have to do it justice.” □







*From top:* The children's bed-and-library unit was designed by Croft; a Campana brothers stuffed-animal chair sits on a Fort Street Studio carpet, and the artwork at right is a photograph by Adam Fuss. Mirrors by FontanaArte and pendant lights by Garouste flank a Nigel Cooke painting above a guest-room fireplace; the chairs are vintage Jansen, and the carpet is by Fort Street Studio. *Opposite, clockwise from top left:* A Fredrikson Stallard light fixture hangs over the first-floor dining table, which is topped with a trio of Ai Weiwei vases and lined with Bonetti chairs. In the garden-level dining room, a painting by Fiona Rae overlooks a Szekeley table and chairs. On display at the top of the stairway are a wall-size work by Keith Tyson and a Cerith Wyn Evans light installation.







A two-panel painting by John Stezaker graces the partition that conceals a bath within the master bedroom; the bed and chaise longues were designed by Sultana. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** In the master bath, a work by Aaron Curry is reflected in the mirror; the vanity is by Bonetti, and the sink fittings are by Grohe. The master bedroom's closet, customized by Sultana, has palladium-leaf doors; the carpet is by Fort Street Studio. A tub by the Water Monopoly is matched with a Corian vanity in a second-floor bath; the sink and tub fittings are by Grohe, and the floor is statuary marble.