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# LIFE of the PARTY

When renowned hostess and fashion plate Rena Abboud reconceives her husband's bachelor-pad townhouse in London, the results are vivid, dramatic, and, not surprisingly, perfect for entertaining

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Rena Abboud, famous for her themed parties, her larger-than-life glamour, her love of high fashion and haute couture, and her passion for color, isn't given to indecision. When she first saw her future husband's chrome-and-black-leather-clad London townhouse, she knew exactly what to do. "We have to sell the house and buy something else," she told him. But Makram Abboud wasn't having it. "We should make it work," he replied.

The man who has made it work is Philip Vergeylen, who with his partner, Paolo Moschino, runs Nicholas Haslam Ltd., a division of the firm founded by celebrated British designer and man-about-town Nicky Haslam. Vergeylen and Abboud have been friends for years, and she called him immediately. "I said, 'Tell me honestly, could I love this house?'" Abboud recalls.

Eighteen months and an extensive renovation later, the Abbouds are happily living in the house, in London's smart Chelsea neighborhood, with Rena's two teenage daughters. "The great thing about Rena is that when she decides to go for something, she really goes for it," says Vergeylen. "She is incredibly impatient and very focused, so I would wake up every day to about 12 e-mails, full of ideas and photographs of furniture she had found. The renovation was done at Rena's supersonic speed: seven months for the whole house."

**ABOVE:** Rena Abboud near her family's London townhouse, which was decorated by Philip Vergeylen of Nicholas Haslam Ltd. **FACING PAGE:** In a sitting room at the entrance of the townhouse, a pair of 1940s French stools are upholstered in a Brunshawig & Fils linen, the 1970s Belgian cocktail table holds a large ceramic bowl from Tomasz Starzewski, and artwork by Shepard Fairey hangs above a bronze fire screen by Charles Edwards; the early-20th-century Louis XVI-style chairs against the wall were purchased at Christie's, Abboud acquired the statues of monks in Singapore, the walls are sheathed in antiqued-mirror panels, and the floors are ebonized oak.



Vergeylen's most audacious stroke was to transform the three-story black-and-white house ("a real bachelor pad," Abboud says with a laugh) and its warren of small rooms into an open, airy, and opulent blur of vivid color. "The ground floor had five small rooms," Vergeylen explains, "and because I know Rena so well, I know how much she entertains; it's not eight people, it's 50, or even 150. We had to open up." By digging out the basement and moving the kitchen and dining room downstairs, Vergeylen was able to make the whole of the first floor into an entertaining space that offers both discrete seating areas and open-plan expansiveness.

The colors that dominate much of the ground floor are an eye-popping *Arabian Nights* mix of turquoises, greens, and oranges, with hand-painted walls of bronzy green-blue set against ebonized-oak floors. That palette, Vergeylen says, came from an unusual brief: "Rena handed me a peacock feather and said, 'This is what I want.'"

Realizing that it was important to have visual relief from the hot color elsewhere, Vergeylen kept the entrance area in calmer shades of browns and creams and gold. "What is typical of our design style

**NEAR LEFT:** A custom staircase of steel and reinforced glass leads from the ground floor to the downstairs dining room and kitchen; the flooring is polished slate. **BELOW:** The sofa in the ground-floor study is upholstered in a Romo fabric, the floor lamps are by Nicholas Haslam Ltd.; the black-lacquered paneling and the obelisk-shape bookshelves are custom made, the paintings were purchased in Singapore, and the sisal rug is by Tim Page Carpets. **FACING PAGE:** In the ground-floor sitting room, the slipper chairs, upholstered in a cotton velvet by Lewis & Wood, and the sofa are by Nicholas Haslam Ltd., the ikat pillows are from Istanbul, and the 19th-century Korean screen was bought at Christie's; the table covering is in a linen by Jim Thompson, and the rug is by the Rug Company. See Resources.





room's armchairs are  
 in a linen from Nicholas  
 , and the tablecloth was  
 fashion designer Tory  
 d-and-frosted-glass  
 s lead to the kitchen.  
**E. FROM TOP:** Pendant  
 tholtz hang above a  
 in the kitchen; the stools  
 oro. A custom-made  
 family room is covered in  
 en from Nicholas Haslam  
 olographs are by Halim  
 e cocktail table was  
 rods, and the sisal rug is  
 Carpets. See Resources.





that it's about contrast," he says. "There are contrasts of color, and also a juxtaposition of styles, from a 19th-century copy of an English sofa to a John Dickinson table covered with Middle Eastern antiques. Of course, everyone always heads straight for the turquoise sofa."

How to get from the entertaining area to the new downstairs living area, however, posed a problem. Continuing the main staircase would have cut into the newly acquired space in an unattractive fashion. But having to use a staircase at the back of the house seemed, Abboud says, "a bit weird." Vergeylen's solution was to sign a stunning, sculptural, all-glass descent that feels like anything but a back staircase and also creates a brilliantly illuminated contrast to the saturated colors of the first floor. "After a few drinks, people are a bit panicked on those stairs," Abboud says with a laugh. "But it's a big hit."

In the newly created basement area, two large square tables can be joined, and a pair of chaise longues at the end of the room can be moved aside to make room for extra tables when Abboud stages one of the themed dinners for which she is legendary. (In 2002, *House & Garden* published her *Be My Guest: Theme Party Savoir-Faire*, a photographic diary of the 14 parties she had given in the previous year.) "With entertaining, it's not about having a big space—quite the contrary," says Abboud, who was born in Baghdad and spent part of her childhood in the Persian Gulf, where her father founded an investment firm Investcorp. "People like to congregate, to feel close and tight. I've had 60 people seated for dinner downstairs. So that if you can't cut your food at the same time as your neighbor!"

In the upper floors, Vergeylen's principal change was to open up the small room and corridor to create the hot-pink dressing room of every woman's fantasies, with specially constructed drawers for shoes, scarves, hats, and belts, color-coded displays of jewelry in acrylic boxes, and handbags arrayed like artwork on shelves.

For now, the master bedroom has a neutral palette. But Abboud has other plans. "Red," she states in a definitive tone. How will her husband feel about that? "He'll love it," she says confidently. ■



In the master bedroom, the bench, custom-made headboard, antiqued-mirror chests, and vintage lamps are all from Nicholas Haslam Ltd.; the artwork is by Kira Appelhaus, and the walls are painted in Dulux's Tuxaria. **FACING PAGE:** Abboud's dressing room features walls and custom-made cabinetry painted in Dulux's Russian Velvet 3. See Resources.