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FOR DESIGN



LIFE OF THE PARTY

Rena Abboud turns a bachelor-pad townhouse in London into a dramatic space which is 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 colour, isn't given to indecision. When she first saw her future husband's choice 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 Vergesley, 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. Vergesley 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 neighbourhood, 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 Vergesley. 'She is incredibly impatient and very focused, so I would wake

RIGHT: A sofa in the ground-floor study is upholstered in a Romi fabric, the floor lamps are by Nicholas Haslam Ltd. The black-lacquered panelling and the ribbed-shape bookshelves are custom made, the paintings were purchased in Singapore and the stool rug is by Tim Page Carpets.





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.

Vergeylen's most audacious stroke was to transform the three-story black and white house and its warren of small rooms into an open, airy and opulent blur of vivid colour. "The ground floor had five small rooms," Vergeylen explains, and because Hanou Rena so well, I know how much she entertains: it's not 8 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 made the whole of the first floor into an entertaining space that offers both discrete seating areas and open-plan expansiveness.

The colours 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 ebonised oak floors. That palette, Vergeylen

LEFT: In the sitting room a pair of 1940s French stools are upholstered in a Brunswich & Filz linen, the 1970s Belgian cocktail table holds a large ceramic bowl from Tomasz Staronick and artwork by Shepard Fairey hangs above a bronze fire screen by Charles Edwards.

TOP: In a glamorous sitting room, the slipper chairs are upholstered in a cotton velvet by Lewis & Wood and the sofa is by Nicholas Haslam Ltd.



ABOVE: A custom-made sofa in a family room is covered in a glazed linen from Nicholas Haslam Ltd, the photographs are by Hålem Al Karim. The cocktail table was found at Harrods, and the rug is by Tim Page Carpets.

says, came from an unusual brief: 'Rena handed me a peacock feather and said, "This is what I want."

Realising that it was important to have visual relief from the hot colour elsewhere, Vergeylen kept the entrance area in calmer shades of browns, creams and gold. 'What is typical of our design style is that it's about contrast,' he says. 'There are contrasts of colour, and also a juxtaposition of styles, from the 19th-century copy of an 18th-century English sofa to a John Dickinson table covered with Middle Eastern antiques.'

How to get from the entertaining area to the new downstairs dining 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 design a stunning, sculptural, all-glass descent that feels like anything but a back staircase and also creates a brilliantly illuminated contrast to the saturated colours 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 longue at the end of the room can be moved aside to make room



ABOVE: In a master bedroom, the bench, custom-made headboard, antiques-mirror chests and vintage lamps are all from Nicholas Haslam Ltd. The artwork is by Kira Appelhans, and the walls are painted in Dulux's Tufarna.

for extra tables when Abboud stages one of the themed dinners for which she is legendary. 'With entertaining, it's not about having a big space – quite the contrary,' says Abboud, who was born in Baghdad and spent some of her childhood in the Persian Gulf, where her father founded the investment firm Investcorp. 'People like to congregate, to feel close and tight. I've had 60 people seated for dinner downstairs. So what if you can't cut your food at the same time as your neighbour?'

On the upper floors, Vergeylen's principal change was to open up a small room and corridor to create the hot-pink dressing room of every woman's fantasies, with specially constructed drawers for gloves, scarves, hats, and belts, colour-coded displays of jewellery 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 definite tone. How will her husband feel about that? 'He'll love it,' she says confidently.



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