

# Taking FLIGHT

Let a magpie decorator with a flamboyant streak loose on a townhouse and the results are bound to be eye-catching. But Helen's labour of love hangs together beautifully

Words - Damon Syson  
Photography - James Merrell  
Styling - Marianne Cotterill



## LIVING ROOM

Bold patterned wallpaper, plush velvet upholstery and mid-century furniture give the scheme its eclectic look. 'I like things to clash sometimes,' says Helen. 'I think it adds drama and humour.'

**GET THE LOOK** The wallpaper is Florence Broadhurst's *Birds of Paradise*. Borderline sells Broadhurst designs in the UK. The mid-century rosewood coffee table came from Modern Metropolis. The Ikat Fashion rug in Pink is by Knots Rugs.



## Home profile

**THE OWNER** Interior designer Helen Harlow, plus her son Harry, 14, and Mimi and Pepper the cats.  
**THE PROPERTY** A four-storey Edwardian townhouse in south London. The ground floor has a hall, living room, dining room and kitchen. Downstairs, the cellar has been converted into a family room. On the first floor, there's an office, bathroom, master bedroom and en suite. There are two further bedrooms and a shower room on the second floor.

## LIVING ROOM

'I call this space our conversation room,' says Helen. 'I'm a firm believer in having one area that's reserved for adults. There's a TV in here, but really the basement is our family zone. This room is more for enjoying a glass of wine and a chat.'

**GET THE LOOK** See *Ideas To Steal* for a similar mirror. The Fifties armchairs are upholstered in a Paul Smith fabric. The Thirties Italian chandelier was found at Tindle London. The parquet floor in a vintage finish is by Broadleaf. The walls, cornices and woodwork are painted in Paint Library's Slate range of emulsions and eggshells.

# One

of Helen Harlow's favourite possessions can be found at the top of her home in the converted attic: a stuffed magpie seemingly about to take flight. 'It's quite fitting really,' Helen muses, 'because I'm a bit of a magpie when it comes to decorating – I take elements from different styles and eras and mix them together.'

Helen's south London townhouse is indeed an eclectic *mélange* of hand-printed wallcoverings, designer furniture and vintage chandeliers – spiced up with a tropical palette of orange, purple and pink.

Her biggest influence, however, is the Fifties. 'I think the fabrics and design that came out of that era were amazing,' she enthuses. 'And I've got a definite weakness for kitsch. Some people say it's tacky, but I see it as anything that puts a smile on your face and stops your décor from looking like it takes itself too seriously.'

The injection of these humorous touches – including an ornate candelabrum that Helen laughingly describes as 'a bit Liberace' – acts as the perfect foil for a look that is otherwise high on glamour and opulence.

She has lived in the house for 16 years – with two sojourns in Australia and various decorative upgrades in-between. Helen started her working life in the music industry with EMI Records, then retrained as an interior designer when she moved to Australia for the first time in 1998. A stint back in London, where she had a vintage shop and interior design business, was followed by another in Sydney. 'That time,

I worked as a colour consultant as well,' she says, 'and in a sense, colour is my primary motivator.'

Helen readily admits that the adventurous use of colour down under, thanks to the amazing light there, heavily influences her work. 'For example, most of the wallpaper in the house is by the Aussie designer Florence Broadhurst,' she says. Helen's admiration for the late designer stretches right down to her own feet, as displayed when she points out her shoes – a pair of stilettos in Broadhurst's Japanese Floral. 'Kate Spade did a limited-edition clothing range last year using iconic Florence Broadhurst prints,' she explains. 'For me, these were an absolute must-have.'

Unfortunately, Helen's second spell in Sydney was marred by one particular piece of bad news: a call in the middle of the night from a friend who was house-sitting in London, informing her that the water tank had burst at the top of the house, flooding the entire property.

'I was planning to come back home and in a way, the incident was the catalyst I needed to say, "Okay, this is a chance to totally rethink the house so that it works perfectly",' Helen recalls. 'As a result, I redecorated throughout and altered the layout in some areas. For instance, I didn't have an en-suite bathroom before, which I felt was lacking, and I also decided to take the plunge and reconfigure the kitchen. I wanted to have it next to the dining room and then have a separate living room with doors to the garden. I can see that if you've got young kids, it makes sense to have a large, open-plan kitchen, but I've got a teenage son. When they get to that age, it's better to have a more compartmentalised living area, so they can go off into their own space.'

Despite the house's feminine flourishes, Helen insists her son Harry approves of her flamboyant décor. 'I've always taken him along to car-boot sales, so he takes an interest when I bring new things back. And Harry's friends love the house. They often make enthusiastic comments, totally unprompted. It's great to see teenage boys react like that,' she says with a smile, 'because most of the time, you can't get a word out of them.'

So apart from winning teenage cred points, what has impressed Helen most about her new-look home? 'The major revelation after redoing a kitchen to your own specifications is the pleasure that comes back into cooking,' she says. 'Everything is exactly where you want it to be.'

Sure enough, since completing the revamp, Helen has hosted a number of successful dinner parties – though her passion for colour can sometimes run away with her. 'I've been known to go a bit over the top with the table setting,' she says ruefully. 'Last year, I organised a Halloween supper, the theme of which was orange – my favourite colour. Everyone wore orange, there were pumpkins down the table and the food consisted of things like smoked salmon, sweet potato mash and mandarin sorbet. I have to admit, it was all a bit too much. The food tasted great, but at the end of the meal, you found yourself thinking, "I never want to eat anything orange ever again!"'

To learn more about Helen's interiors business, visit [paintbox.co.uk](http://paintbox.co.uk)

*'I'm a bit allergic to a room that has been designed around a single range of fabric, with everything matching perfectly'*

**GET THE LOOK** This ornate candelabrum was a flea-market find. For similar, try Alfies Antique Market.

## DINING ROOM

To complement her love of bright colours, Helen decided to keep the base of her décor neutral. 'When you have a high ceiling, it really frames the room if you pick out the cornicing and skirting boards with a darker shade of the same colour,' she explains.

**GET THE LOOK** The artwork, entitled Parham Spring, is by Kate Giles. Find her paintings at Thompson's Gallery London. The lamps were bought at Modern Metropolis. This is the Alba sideboard by Russell Pinch for Pinch. The white Scandinavian vases were bought from various dealers at the Midcentury Modern Show at Dulwich College. The blue French glass bowl was found at an antiques fair. For similar pieces, try Vessel. The Conran Shop has Eames DSR chairs.





Home truths

**IF YOU COULD BE REALLY GOOD AT ONE THING, WHAT WOULD IT BE?** Ballroom dancing. It must be the sequins.

**WHAT'S YOUR SECRET AMBITION?** My son thinks I should go on *MasterChef* – but I don't think I could stand the pressure.

**CAN YOU REVEAL YOUR MOST EMBARRASSING SECRET?** I can't ride a bike. I never learned as a child and now I feel too awkward. I've actually got a beautiful pink bike, but it's purely decorative.

**IF YOU COULD VISIT ANY ERA IN HISTORY, WHICH WOULD IT BE?**

I quite fancy a day in the 18th-century French court.

**WHO IS YOUR ULTIMATE ROCK/POP STAR?** The Pet Shop Boys. I love that they're flamboyant yet have remained enigmatic.

**WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE FILM?** *Sliding Doors*. It makes London look amazing – and I love that idea of your entire life changing in a matter of seconds.

**GET THE LOOK** The cabinetry and worktop are by Daulby and Tickle. For Hazel Atlas apple jars, try Etsy.



KITCHEN ↑ →

'I wanted to get more texture in here, so I had one wall – which was previously painted – sandblasted back to the brick,' says Helen. 'It gives the room a sense of transition to the outdoor space because the same bricks continue along the side return and into the courtyard garden.'

**GET THE LOOK** The island is clad in arabascato marble. Devon Stone sells similar. For metal high stools, try Retrouvius. Andy Thornton's Factory pendant in Green is like this.



KITCHEN

'The cockatoo painting always reminds me of Australia,' says Helen. 'I was on my way to pick up Harry from school when I saw it in a gallery window. I literally slammed the brakes on and ran in to get it.'

**GET THE LOOK** The cockatoo painting is by Australian artist Darren McDonald. See more of his work at Scott Livesey Galleries. The gilt standard lamp is by Graham & Green. The armchair upholstered in black velvet is an original Thirties design from Heal's. Pigeon Vintage Furniture stocks similar.

**MASTER BEDROOM** →

The look is unashamedly feminine, combining vintage finds with Louis XVI-style furniture and sumptuous fabrics. 'It's a bit girly, isn't it?' laughs Helen. 'But I do love this colour palette - orange, pink and purple.'

**GET THE LOOK** Find the Foxglove wallpaper by Suzy Hoodless at Osborne & Little. The antique French bed was bought at French Finds. The bedding is by Designers Guild.

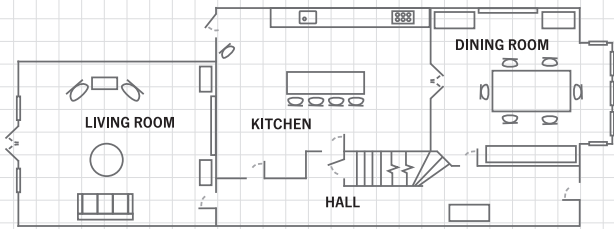


← **MASTER BEDROOM**

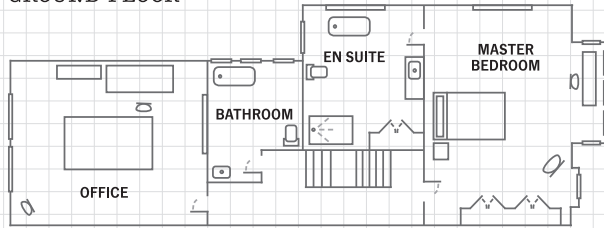
Artwork and decorative accessories accentuate the boudoir theme.

**GET THE LOOK** The armchair was bought at Lots Road Auctions and re-covered in Designers Guild's Varese velvet. The Tactile rug was brought back from Australia. Try WovenGround for similar. For kitsch ceramic lamp bases like this one, check out Etsy.

## The blueprint



GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



### ↑ MASTER EN SUITE

The plastic flamingo fits in with the house's avian motif, as well as summing up Helen's quirky, kitschy sense of humour. 'I've had him for years,' she laughs. 'His name is George.'

**GET THE LOOK** The artwork is a traditional Haitian 'voodoo flag' by Eviland Lalanne. Find these at Indigo Arts Gallery. The Sixties Waterfall chandelier was found at 20thcenturycollectables.co.uk. The Barcelona freestanding bath is by Victoria + Albert. The brick glass mosaic tiles are from Fired Earth.

### ← GUEST BEDROOM

A large-scale damask wallpaper teamed with Georgian stripes and Italianate touches makes a striking display.

**GET THE LOOK** Buy the Tudor Floral wallpaper by Florence Broadhurst at Signature Prints. Designers Guild stocks broad-stripe fabrics and cushions in this picture-postcard style. For a range of artificial stuffed birds like this magpie, go to Places and Spaces.



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