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WOW! WHAT A HOUSE

The design buzz of the summer was all about WOW!house – a magnificent showhouse that brought together some incredible creative talent and demonstrated a thriving, diverse industry in full force. Charlotte Abrahams explains how this ambitious project took shape

It began with a lockdown flight of fancy. Isolated at home, the Design Centre's CEO Claire German dreamed of doing something different; of creating something that would, she says, "show the world what extraordinary achievements can be made when our talented industry comes together." It ended two years later with a glittering gala party in which the great and creative of the design world celebrated the making of the UK's first ever showhouse, a 100 square metre, 17 room immersive design experience fittingly named the WOW!house.

Purpose-built showhouses are well established in the US, but Britain has been slow on the uptake. Packed full of showrooms and already the beating heart of the London design scene, the Design Centre was the obvious setting for the country's first. "It felt natural," German says, "that WOW!house, as the ultimate home,

should be located in the ultimate home of design and decoration."

And so the foundations were laid. World-class designers, selected by a steering committee made up of high-profile industry representatives including the CEO of de Le Cuona, Bernie de Le Cuona, ceramic artist/gallerist/tableware designer Peter Ting, furniture, decorative arts and fabric aficionado, Miles de Lange and Deborah Pocock, CEO of the craftsmanship charity The Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust (QUEST), were given carte blanche to interpret a room. A simple concept, but one with the most ambitious of intentions – to pioneer a sense of wonder, to amaze and to inspire.

The moment the doors opened on 1 June 2022, it was clear that the designers had far exceeded that intention. Freed from the restrictions of a client's brief,

OPPOSITE: The entrance to WOW!house. The combination of ancient forms and cutting-edge craft, Mamou-Man's facade draws the view upwards into the light-filled space of the Design Avenue. Made from sustainable materials, it will be reused for subsequent exhibitions. ABOVE: Freddy van Zevenbergen's Dining Room included a servery, a lobby and a dining room, with lines of sight connecting all three

Each WOWhouse room was utterly unique, telling its own story through cutting edge art (an AI artwork titled 'Generated Petals' by Sarah Meyohas hung in the entrance foyer), beautiful antiques and the very best in contemporary furniture and furnishings sourced from the Design Centre showrooms and beyond, but as you walked from one to the next, what struck you was the cohesion. Outside it may have been a temporary structure (it will be stored and reused for subsequent exhibitions), but once inside you felt you were wandering the rooms of a fabulous mansion owned by someone of bold, eclectic, exquisite taste. A collector, a patron of artists and craftspeople, an aesthete, and a home maker.

WOWhouse did many remarkable things, but perhaps the most remarkable of all was that this temporary installation did feel like a home. Far more than a showcase of individual design talent and the latest products and trends, it was a masterclass in the transformative power of good design. Given a white box, the designers layered and juxtaposed, complemented and clashed colour, pattern, furniture and objects to create rooms that by turn seduced (Rayman Booter's exotic, pattern-filled Principal Bedroom), calmed (de Le Cuona's meditative, textural Living Room with its colour palette drawn from the landscape), and lifted our spirits (Kit & Minnie Kemp's snick-inhancing Day Room).

There was sound and music too. Luxury Italian fragrance brand Dr. Vranjes infused each room with its own unique scent, while contemporary conceptual sound artist Peter Adjaye created an extraordinary, unifying musical landscape of different influences that filled the house.

No wonder then that WOWhouse was declared a triumph. "Prepare to be WOWed," blazoned *ELLE Decoration* UK; BHID, (the British Institute of Interior Design) described it as "room after room of imaginative wonder," and US-based *ADPRO* named it a "17 Room Wonder." Social media lit up - Instagram impressions soared over 500,000 - and thousands of design professionals and enthusiasts from near, far and overseas visited in person, thrilled by the unique opportunity to experience spaces made by some of the world's biggest and most exciting design stars. And those design stars themselves were equally thrilled - "here are all these designers who you've looked up to, heard of, but never managed to see, all in one place," enthused Kit Kemp, while GP & J Baker's managing and creative director Ann Grafton said, "the rooms are truly beautiful. WOWhouse is a fantastic representation of the standard of our industry."

The final visitors stepped through architectural practice Mamou-Mani's fantastical mandala-strewn



facade on 30 June. The WOWhouse may have been dismantled, its contents repurposed and reused, but its legacy lives on.

The project raised vital funds for, and awareness of, Centropoint, the leading charity for homeless young people. It provided a platform not only for the designers and brands, but also for a whole host of makers and artists such as wood carver Henry Neville Wood, designer Alexander Lamont, and Tollgard. It inspired and set trends - established and younger designers (Brandon Schubert, Freddy van Zevenbergen, Stephanie Barba Mendoza, Linda Boronkay, Minnie Kemp and graduates from United in Design) alike embraced a highly curated, layered style of decorating ensuring that this is a look that's here to stay. And, perhaps most important of all, its beauty sparked joy. The countdown to WOWhouse 2023 begins...

THE WOW!ROOMS

Colefax and Fowler Drawing Room by Philip Hooper and Emma Burns of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler • Day Room by Kit Kemp and Minnie Kemp of Kit Kemp Design Studio • de Le Cuona Living Room in collaboration with United in Design • Dining Room by Freddy van Zevenbergen of Lambert & Browne • Drawing Room by Paolo Moschino and Philip Vergeylen • Drawing Room by Rui Ribeiro Studio • Dressing Room by Richard Moore of Martin Moore • Entrance Foyer by Shalini Misra • GP & J Baker Mornings Room by Rita Koning • House of Rohli Bathroom by Jordan Cluore and Russell Whitehead of 2LG Studio • Julian Chichester Library by Turner Pocock • Morris & Co. Courtyard Bedroom by Brandon Schubert • Pierre Frey Salon by Linda Boronkay • Principal Bedroom by Rayman Booter of Apartment 48 • Schumacher Garden Room by Duncan Campbell and Charlotte Roy of Campbell-Rey • Study by Stephanie Barba Mendoza • Tissus d'Hélène Bedroom by Joanna Plant • Architectural Facade by Mamou-Mani

ABOVE: Morris & Co. is the custodian of the William Morris legacy, and for the Courtyard Bedroom, Brandon Schubert embraced the power of patterns, making the historic designs relevant to a contemporary audience. OPPOSITE: A selection of WOW!rooms. Each one had a story to tell and designers worked closely with renowned makers and international design houses to create multi-layered spaces. A kaleidoscope of different styles, colours, patterns, textures, craftsmanship, art and objects, the styles ranged from inviting comfort and a meditative retreat to dramatic globetrotting fantasy and romance



LESSONS FROM THE MASTERS

A feast for the eyes it may have been, but WOW!house was more than just a spectacle – it also offered many inspiring ideas for creating utterly memorable, comfortable and functional rooms, finds Emily Brooks



Subtleties can make or break a scheme, but they are often the things that get lost when looking at a room in the pages of a magazine: the feel of a brushed velvet; how the perfect acoustics can create a sense of calm; a beautifully detailed trim, or a well-placed lamp. This is why industry professionals and design enthusiasts alike flocked to WOW!house, to see in person what is normally out of reach – the work of masters in their field, and how they put a space together.

Stylistically, the rooms were incredibly diverse; you could step from a cosy bedroom laden with delicate prints into a futuristic bathroom, or transition from a light and serene plant-filled living room to a moodily lit art-filled drawing room. Nonetheless, from this diversity, themes emerged: here are a few key takeaways.

CLEVER CURATION

It's called "cross-collecting" – the art of bringing together objects from across styles and eras to create an interior that looks like it has evolved over time. It was a defining feature of many of the WOW!house rooms, where an astonishing breadth of objects were on show, from an ornate 18th-century mirror in the Colefax and Fowler Drawing Room designed by Emma Burns and Philip Hooper of Sloyd Colefax & John Fowler, to a klisch grasse-shaped glass match-holder in the GP & J Baker Morning Room designed by Rita König.

Creating a sense of intrigue is the name of the game. The Schumacher Garden Room designed by Campbell-Rey contained shell obelisks that looked like they could be several centuries old but were in fact by contemporary

maker Tess Morley. Shalini Misra's Entrance Foyer featured a chandelier by Thierry Jeannot made from recycled plastic bottles – and who could forget the rows of whimsical hats by French artist Mimi de Biarritz in Kit and Minnie Kemp's Day Room?

Like many of the designers, Paolo Moschino and Philip Vergeylen used their personal collections to decorate their Drawing Room, so it was no wonder that it felt convincingly like someone lived here. "A lot of pieces come from our home, and they will go back there," said Moschino. "We wanted it to feel like 'us.'" There were pieces from the showroom, and objects spanning the past few centuries, but also a *gogotte* – a sculptural sandstone formation that is not thousands, but millions of years old.



LOOK UP

If you forgot to look up while you were visiting WOW!house, you missed a trick: designers lavished detail on the so-called 'fifth wall' and decorated the ceiling with stylish alternatives to a plain painted finish. "Ceilings are underused – they're a big area, and often a missed opportunity," said WOW!house designer Joanna Plant; in the Tissus d'Héline Bedroom, she created a tencel ceiling using Nanay Samay's "Kadva" fabric, anchored in the centre by an alabaster bowl light by Vaughan.

Paolo Moschino and Philip Vergeylen were inspired by the work of the 20th-century artist, playwright and poet Jean Cocteau: "At the villa Santo Sospir, Cocteau said that he had 'tattooed' the walls, so we thought, 'why not tattoo the ceiling?'" said Vergeylen. In their Drawing Room, a simple black line twisted its ways across the perimeter of the ceiling in homage to

Cocteau – complementing his art on the walls.

Linda Boronkay's rumpled, reflective silver surface amped up the opulence in her Egyptian-themed Pierre Frey Salon while elsewhere, designers used wallcoverings or fabric to add an extra layer of pattern and colour on the ceiling: the labyrinth-like "Trevi" fabric by Gaston y Daniels in Kit and Minnie Kemp's Day Room, or rich-red "Ansoir Libre" wallcovering from Dedrar in Stephanie Barba Menzoka's Study, finished with a neat rope moulding around the perimeter. Coocooned by comfort. Most interior designers would profess to putting comfort at the top of their aims for a room – but a visit to WOW!house uncovered exactly how the experts achieved this essential but sometimes elusive element.

Many designers opted for fabric-covered walls, rather than paint or wallcoverings; it can make a huge difference to the acoustics of a room, dampening sound

and making a space feel cocooning: in the Colefax and Fowler Drawing Room, the banquette and walls were uniformly covered in "Rivoli" cotton velvet by Manuel Canovas, and the seating appeared to almost melt into the walls.

In the Tissus d'Héline Bedroom, Joanna Plant used no fewer than nine different fabrics to create a sense of comfort. "It might seem a lot in a small room, but because they are tonally matched they sit together harmoniously," she said, going on to explain how she thought that "we want to be held, not challenged" by our design schemes in uncertain times.

Brandon Schubert also played with many layers of fabric to add to the feeling of richness in a room and create more of a sense of comfort: the magnificent four-poster bed in the Morris & Co. Courtyard Bedroom was hung with "Oak" fabric, lined with contrasting "Willow Boughs Minor" fabric.

OPPOSITE: Paolo Moschino and Philip Vergeylen were inspired by the work of Jean Cocteau in their WOW!house Drawing Room, with Cocteau's artwork on the wall and a snaking black line decorating the ceiling that could have been by the French artist's own hand. The room is full of the couple's personal possessions ABOVE: The Tissus d'Héline Bedroom, where designer Joanna Plant also took a more decorative approach to the ceiling, cladding it in Nanay Samay's "Kadva" fabric, anchored in the centre by a Vaughan light



HOUSE OF STORIES

Storytelling has become an important part of interior design, with brands parcelling up their collections with a compelling narrative, and designers coming up with winning concepts to bring clients on board with their schemes. WOW!house was the same, with the designers letting their imaginations fly when it came to conjuring fantasy occupants for their rooms. These stories made WOW!house feel completely transporting – to different times, different places, in the company of new and fascinating people.

“Coming from a hospitality background, I like to create a narrative,” said Stephanie Barba Mendoza about her ‘Killer Queen’ Study. She was inspired by the Queen song of the same name, but with a twist: “She is sharp and intelligent, yet has a wild side,” as the designer put it, and the spirit of a bold, well-travelled woman came out in the mix of an Aubusson tapestry, a contemporary sculpture and Alexander Lamont’s ‘Ocean Armoire’ parchment cabinet, its doors clasped together by a bronze octopus.

2LG Studio’s narrative for the House of Rohl Bathroom is based around a real-life figure, US actor, singer and author Billy Porter. “He’s such an icon of

“COMING FROM A HOSPITALITY
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fashion and an incredibly lovely human, so we wanted to take his approach to life and create this bathroom space for him to indulge his senses,” said 2LG Studio’s Russell Whitehead. “The combination of luxurious vintage upholstery with retro glass brick and the stark modernity of brushed steel should appeal to his distinctive aesthetic.” The designers challenged Victoria + Albert Baths to come up with something special for the ‘Amiata’ bath and double basins, and the result is a dynamic ombré-effect paint finish.

For designer Linda Boronkay, the story idea sprang from the products themselves. In the Pierre Frey Salon, she made full use of the French design house’s *Merveilles d’Egypte* collection to conjure up an intimate Egyptian-themed room with curtain fabric whose pattern was inspired by ancient jewels, and walls clad in a cut-velvet depicting gods, priests and hieroglyphics – alongside vintage floor lamps that looked like Egyptian columns, and contemporary Pierre Frey furniture.



OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Stephanie Barba Mendoza’s had a gutsy woman in mind for her ‘Killer Queen’ Study, whose imaginary travels have resulted in an eclectic aesthetic where contemporary art and fine antiques sit side by side; US actor Billy Porter was 2LG Studio’s muse for the House of Rohl Bathroom