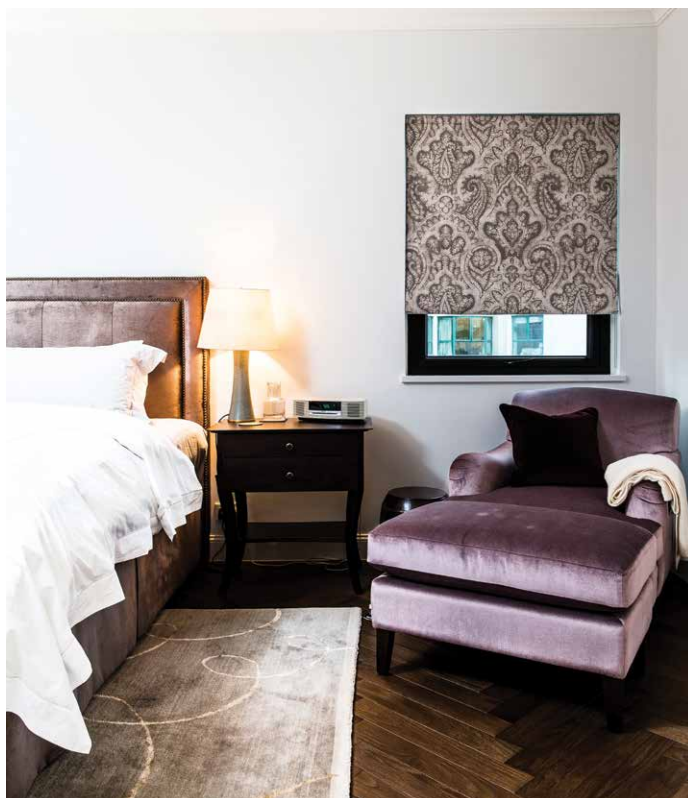




Feels like home

Warm, elegant and full of personal touches, Adele Brunner discovers how one couple undertook a complete renovation to create the home of their dreams.





When interior designer Nicole Cromwell (www.nicolecromwell.com) was commissioned to work on this Mid-levels project, her initial design brief was for a few minor renovations. By the time she and her clients had reached the planning stages, they had decided to gut the 2,800-square-foot flat and start from scratch.

"It is amazing how quickly one change led to another," says Cromwell. "In the end, the only thing we didn't really renovate was the guest powder room - and even then we gave it a bit of a facelift by covering glass panels with painted plywood so that it matched the rest of the apartment. The décor was also too modern for my clients' taste. They wanted less of an anonymous box, and more of a colonial feel instead."

The apartment originally had five bedrooms, which Cromwell's clients didn't need, so she decided to reconfigure the space and make better use of it. The bedrooms were variously converted into a fabulous master suite complete with separate his and hers walk-in wardrobes and a large en-suite bathroom, a study, an en-suite guest room and a tv snug, which can be opened up to become part of the living and dining areas when required. Working closely with her client, who wanted to be involved in the design process, Cromwell came up with a warm and elegant look.

"The apartment definitely leans to more traditional décor but that must not be confused with being old fashioned," she says. "My clients love colour and weren't afraid of using it - that's what gives their home its richer feel."

Accents of purple, red and deep blue run throughout the property - often where you might least expect them. A wall of floor-to-ceiling shelves, custom-designed by Cromwell, for example, have been stained a deep blue, paying homage to one of the libraries at Oxford University, of which Cromwell's client is a former alumnus.



The floor-to-ceiling shelves were custom-designed to pay homage to one of the libraries at Oxford University.



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From wooden chests to ornaments, a Chinese flavour is apparent throughout the apartment. Separating the living area from the snug is a fabulous blue leather door that is studded on either side and reminiscent of a moon gate. It adds visual interest to both rooms and ties in with the blues of the silk rug, ottoman and artwork, giving the area a cohesive feel.

The clients' impressive collection of Chinese art, acquired over many years, played a major part in the thought process and was central to the design scheme. One particular piece, which apparently takes three years before the paint has completely dried, was teamed with a bio-ethanol fire burner and a majestic charcoal marble fireplace to draw the eye in and give focus to the living room.

"My clients didn't want a television in the living area so we needed to create a focal point – otherwise, they would have been sitting on the sofa staring at a blank wall," says Cromwell. "I designed the fireplace and sourced the marble in Lockhart Road."

Tactile fabrics and pattern also play an important part in the flat's aesthetics, with liberal use of plush velvet, linens, leather and silk. The entrance features French hand-painted silk wallpaper by Fromental, which is very delicate and had to be painstakingly hung, while the guest bathroom is lined in black silk with black marble units and cladding.

"My clients wanted a more masculine feel in the guest bathroom because [the man of the house] often gets up early for work and doesn't want to disturb his wife by using the master bathroom," explains Cromwell. "It is quite bold to do black – especially in a small space – but it works well and is quite fun."

The kitchen is no less luxurious, with a Chinese ancestor painting on one wall, a Buddha statue on the counter and even a silk rug on the floor. This is deliberately done to make the kitchen an integral part of the whole living area rather than being more like a separate entity.

"We definitely wanted the kitchen to flow on from the living and dining room and we used the same wooden flooring to enhance this continuity as well as rich colours and art that you might not expect to see in a kitchen," says Cromwell. "My client loves to cook so she can still be part of the conversation when they have guests over while a recessed bar means her husband also has something to do and doesn't get underfoot. It's win-win all round." **M**

