

# THE BEST LITTLE TOWNHOUSE IN BELGRAVIA

This ground floor family room has walls upholstered in tomato-red cashmere with embroidered trim, hand-painted ceiling panels inspired by a William Morris design, a Regency giltwood chandelier, and an Ashley Hicks carved commode beneath the television.

Patience is, of course, a virtue. Don't believe us? Just ask designer Markham Roberts, who spent four years working on this once-in-a-lifetime house in London.

WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY WILLIAM LI PHOTOGRAPHS BY NELSON HANCOCK



In the entrance hall the restored features included the original paneling, the mantelpiece, and the plasterwork, plus a new stone floor, a custom chandelier by Cox London, and a painting by Sonia Delaunay over the mantel.

In our age of instant gratification, rapid-fire renovations are the norm. That's what makes what New York-based interior designer Markham Roberts has achieved in a 19th-century Georgian-style Belgravia mansion—one of London's largest private residences—so extraordinary. Over four years of working on a house so grand it could easily be mistaken for an embassy, Roberts orchestrated what can only be described as a master class in slow design, where age old craftsmanship meets modern living and where every detail has been given time to reach its full potential.

To execute his vision, Roberts enlisted the architectural firm Bories & Shearron, whose meticulous design drawings and understanding of classical proportions proved invaluable in guiding the local teams through this complex transformation. The result is a tour de force of the decorative arts, from hand-rolled glass to horn-flecked plaster with bronze banding, and a house in which each room tells its own story and also contributes to a greater narrative.

That this Grade II-listed, 13,500-square-foot architectural gem has become a deeply personal family home rather than a museum speaks to Roberts's genius for balancing grandeur and intimacy. With clients who understand that excellence cannot be rushed, he has created something that defies the contemporary appetite for quick solutions: a home where every detail has been considered, each finish perfected, where the passage of time has been an ally rather than an adversary. Here, T&C and Roberts discuss the remarkable transformation.

**T&C:** *Four years is quite a commitment for any project. What made this extensive time frame not just preferable but vital to achieving the result?*

**MARKHAM ROBERTS:** The house was a seductive siren of a potential project. Even if someone had told me it was going to be a 10-year project, I'd have still pushed people out of the way to jump at it.

Yes, the pandemic played a bit of a role in the timeline, but the logistics of dealing with six floors of complex demolition and renovation within the envelope of the exterior walls made it an extremely challenging and lengthy process. Where do you house materials? Where do you put the workmen when they want to have a break? It was an incredibly hard puzzle in three dimensions, with the added challenge of an intricate design scheme of decorative finishes. I'm sure it could have been done faster if we'd just painted everything with a roller and walked away.

**T&C:** *Grade II listing requirements make Brexit negotiations look straightforward. How did you navigate preservation and progress?*

**MR:** There was no choice but to follow the rules and protect the historic elements, so, like being conscripted to fight in an army, you put your boots on and dig in. It's not going to be a day at the spa. Completely rewiring an old house for new systems of lighting, AV, and security—all of which had to be undetectable behind the original walls and paneling—is but one challenge. Figuring out how to attractively get heating and cooling throughout six floors of a house that was originally heated by fireplaces is an entirely different mountain to climb. A job like this is not for the faint of heart.

**T&C:** *There's something deliciously British about transforming coal*



A secondary staircase, originally intended for the staff, runs up six floors of the house. The walls feature a William Morris printed paper and sconces by Vaughan, and there is custom Stark carpet throughout.

*vaults into wine cellars. How did you approach these moments of historical reinterpretation?*

**MR:** The three old coal vaults were sitting there abandoned and empty under the sidewalk, so we had the opportunity to do something with the valuable space. From the moment I first visited the house and laid eyes on those vaults, it was perfectly obvious to me they would make fabulous wine cellars: one for reds, one for whites, and the third for spirits. I guess drinking just seemed a better pursuit to me than having a gift wrapping room.

**T&C:** *The overall aesthetic of the home reads sophisticated global treasure hunt, from 18th-century Japanese screens to Baroque-style French chandeliers. How did you orchestrate this worldly dialogue while maintaining the house's British dignity?*

**MR:** I wanted the house to reflect sophisticated, well-traveled, worldly clients. Finding and assembling furniture and art from all periods, origins, and cultures seemed like a worthwhile, modern-day Grand Tour, just with a farther reach and wider focus.

**T&C:** *There's an irony in how the most effortless-looking design often requires the most time-intensive execution. What about this house required extended periods of development to achieve seemingly simple elegance?*



The ballroom is home to panels and plasterwork painted by Mathew Bray and Matthew Collins, a custom Murano glass chandelier, paintings commissioned from the artist Alex Schuchard, custom kidney sofas, and decorative art from the homeowners' travels.



In the principal bedroom the walls are upholstered in a chintz that was washed, faded, and bleached to achieve a subtle coloration, the plaster chandelier is by Stephen Antonson, and the shell-encrusted tree of life panel is by the artist Sheema Muneer.

**MR:** The house had a large garden, and we obtained permission to divide the space in half so we could add a new one-story kitchen extension opening onto a trellised, walled garden. Designing the garden and selecting the climbing vines and plants was easy and fun; working out the logistics of the planting beds and the irrigation, however, took months and made me want to pull my hair out. Of course, all you see now is the garden furniture sitting amid jasmine, roses, and clematis. The peaceful sound of the water from the fountain we added gives no clue to the belabored process it took to achieve that serenity.

**T&C:** *Your experimentation with paint colors at different times of day speaks to an almost scientific approach to aesthetics. Were there other decisions that required that level of scrutiny?*

**MR:** Nothing was simple about this project. The only easy thing was knowing what I wanted to do. I can't even count the hours of excruciatingly long meetings, but there were more than 130,000 emails between my office and all the teams conveying information, asking and answering questions, and solving problems as they arose. Every aspect of the work was intensely scrutinized. It couldn't have happened otherwise.

**T&C:** *The house seems to showcase an extraordinary range of artisanal techniques, from traditional crafts to more experimental approaches. Were there any techniques or design elements you had been waiting for the right project to explore?*

**MR:** Thankfully, there isn't a dearth of skilled artisans in London. I found exceptional craftsmen to help me realize what I wanted. The mirrored powder room, the smallest room in the house, was for me the most exciting and rewarding. It was a tiny space that I wanted to feel larger, which we achieved by the use of mirrors—though it was important that it be mirrors that reflected light and depth of space, but wouldn't prismatically reflect a million versions of oneself in every direction like some sort of bad trip.

The handsome marble floor was laid in its bookmatch-slab pattern, and then the paneling and vanity had to be built to exacting specifications by the joinery company before the glass artisans could come and fit the beautiful hand-rolled tinted mirror segments into place. If any one of them didn't fit, it had to be scrapped and remade. Lastly, the silver leaf was put on the ceiling, and the fixtures were installed. Only then could we hang the Venetian mirror over the sink and install the perfect little 18th-century Swedish chandelier to light the space.

**T&C:** *For clients contemplating a similar adventure, what wisdom would you share?*

**MR:** Know at the outset this is going to take time, but also know there are people whose jobs are to steer the ship. As my clients did with my team, put your trust in someone and allow them to take charge and do their job. Layered, intricate design work is neither fast nor inexpensive—it's that simple. I would advise clients to make sure they have a comfortable place to live until the project is ready. **T&C**



The ceiling in the dining room was inspired by the dome of the Secession museum in Vienna, and the walls are upholstered in a small-scale printed linen. Both are easier to see thanks to the glow of a 19th-century French chandelier and English Regency gilt bronze wall lights.