

HENRIETTA SPENCER-CHURCHILL

HARMONY IN SCALE

Editor Kerry Harper-Cuss meets Henrietta Spencer-Churchill to discover how an indefatigable work ethic and passion for architectural provenance makes her one of the most high profile women representing English classic interior design

The eldest daughter of the 11th Duke of Marlborough, Henrietta Spencer-Churchill has carved out a distinctive and respected career as a key proponent of classical interior design with a particular passion for the Georgian era.

For the uninitiated observer, the job of an interior designer might appear to be an exciting swirl of fabrics, frippery and lunches with high profile social connections. But as those who have earned their stripes will testify, the daily job requires much broader skills than pattern matching and colour co-ordination. Respected interior designers are not only supremely organised, they also balance the combined skills of psychologist, therapist and number crunching administrator too. The best of the best also rule contractors (and arguably clients too) with an iron fist inside the softest kid glove to get the job done on time, in budget and to full client satisfaction whilst managing realistic expectations along the way.

Henrietta Spencer-Churchill exemplifies all these qualities in the most naturally winning way. When we meet, I feel myself being quickly assessed and gently taken in hand. She remains discretely in control of the course and time frame of our lunchtime interview, an uncommon feeling, but so tactfully and adeptly done I can only admire her skill.

As we talk, it is quickly apparent that Spencer-Churchill's 34-year career has been almost entirely self driven rather than buoyed by the 'connections' that come with being born eldest daughter of the 11th Duke of Marlborough and raised in the rarefied environment of Blenheim Palace. In fact she confesses that this background was initially a hindrance not a help. As the author of nine books on classical interior design, owner of interior design company Woodstock Designs and a shop, designer of fabric collections for Marvic Textiles and on top of that a director of HRW Antiques, it is clear she is an unequivocal and impassioned powerhouse of work. She somehow even finds time to remain a stalwart hand in behind-the-scenes restoration of Blenheim. So how does one end up in such an all-consuming career?

"As a child I was always curious about houses, particularly important architectural ▶





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE This classic double drawing room of an English country house is naturally divided into two seating areas, defined by rugs and a pair of crystal chandeliers. The two-tone, dark salmon pink of this original panelling, provides a flattering shade for the gilt-framed paintings. It was vital to establish the exact location of this free-standing bath

before installing the pipework, as the bath taps are exposed and not wall mounted. This classic bedroom features in a new build house in Scotland. Modern technology is discreetly hidden in the end-of-bed chest. Original foot-to-ceiling windows are maximised with lavish curtaining. The Georgian inspired staircase is "an exemplary example of interior architecture and craftsmanship".





ABOVE In this supremely elegant yet welcoming drawing room, in a newly built house, three seating areas are defined using rugs. Light floods the room from the floor-to-ceiling windows and silk damask fabric covers the walls above the dado rail. The craftsmanship and proportions of this room echo the design of an 18th century English mansion.

houses,” says Spencer-Churchill. So much so that from a very young age she would ‘wander off’ alone for hours around the stately homes of family friends, to marvel at the detail of antique-filled rooms.

“I was artistic at school, not a good free-hand artist but I excelled at sculpture. I went on to study the history of art in Florence and Paris, which gave me a good classical background.”

The natural next step at the time for someone with Spencer-Churchill’s background might have been a secretarial position at Sotheby’s or Christie’s. But instead she enrolled upon an interior design course with the Inchbald School of Design to continue her love of art and antiques in a different vein, although she admits to having had an underlying inclination to study architecture.

“Thirty four years ago interior design was not really a recognised profession. You had interior decorators but not interior designers; who are really the bridge to architecture. I suppose I really wanted to be an architect but the focus then was commercial, industrial and the courses very long!”

Once graduated, she spent just three years as assistant to interior designer Diana Hanbury before launching her own company. Forming Woodstock Designs was, in many ways, to prove wrong all those who thought she was simply playing at design. “It was perceived as a hobby... that was one of the reasons why I opened a shop. I wanted to be taken seriously not just by clients, but within the trade.”

Spencer-Churchill and her team look after projects primarily in the UK and America. She admits her passion is still particularly for the architectural side of her business. “I tend to be the one specifying

structural changes, panelling, detailing and dealing with contractors. My staff tend to deal with the furnishings side more so. I can’t be quite so excited about curtains,” she says. “I love new build houses especially. I love old houses and historic architecture but on a new build you can use your creativity and use wonderful craftsmen.” She expands on her focused attention to architectural provenance by explaining: “You can be vocal and opinionated about architecture; the choice of cornice or style of door being wrong for the period of a room.”

Over her career, Spencer-Churchill has become perhaps the most high profile female designer representing the classical tradition – particularly the Georgian era which she adores for “being so clever with the positioning of property and its aspect.” Yet for her creating something classic is not simply about endlessly reworking the past. Nor is classic the same thing as traditional. “Traditional is Old World English: traditional and comfortable. But the term classic can apply to contemporary too – the principles of good design as used by Palladio (and the principles of the Cube) can cross to any country or style.” She goes on to explain: “Classic is about taking good and correct elements of architecture and focusing on scale and proportions, such as window size in relation to the rooms.”

When asked if she sees her role as guardian or re-interpreter of classical style, she replies, “Both, to be honest with you. Part of a project is restoration and keeping the authenticity of the original. The second challenge is to make sure that the new does work with what is there already.”

For someone so incredibly goal driven, one wonders what the future holds. She admits to a wish for a little more free time to pursue sculpture and gardening. “I would love to do a garden design course.” But with a range of doors for the Iron Door Company launching in January and a furniture line for Maitland-Smith in April, that looks a little way off yet. ■

KEEPING EGO OUT OF DESIGN

Spencer-Churchill focuses on client desires and architectural provenance, not self promotion.

“The key I think is to work with your clients rather than being dominant and seeking to put your own stamp on your designs. I encourage clients to put *their* stamp on things,” says Spencer-Churchill who enjoys and encourages the collaborative process of working. “For me one important point is not necessarily being the most innovative leader in design, you have to be a very good business administrator, juggling hundreds of suppliers and sub contractors. I can have 20 different projects all at different stages and sizes going on at once. The homes I work on are not showcases, I want them to be a refuge and sit comfortably within their surroundings.”