

# HOUSE & HOME

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Illustration by Lucy Davy

## Shanghai Tudor

English-style architecture and decor are imitated the world over, from the US to China. By Henrietta Spencer-Churchill

After more than 30 years spent creating interiors for English homes, my work is more fascinating than ever because the appetite and enthusiasm for English style is now as keen in China and the US as it is in Britain. English style has an enduring international appeal although, as we shall see, it means different things in different parts of the world.

Clients sometimes ask me to define English style. There is no one definition that covers the field but various adjectives go some way to conjuring up its atmosphere: charming, comfortable, welcoming, enduring, endearing, sometimes even quaint. Its qualities lie in scale and proportion, timeless elegance, good craftsmanship, all brought together with apparently effortless grace.

And just as English style has global appeal so it owes its heritage to the globe. Chintz has its origins in India, wallpaper in China, Persian rugs speak for themselves, and Ancient Greece and Rome gave us the classical pediments, porticoes, friezes and fireplaces that now seem so quintessentially English. More recently, America has given us open-plan living and breakfast bars.

Maybe England's extraordinary ability to absorb disparate cultures, through generations of invasion, trade and immigration, is an underlying reason for the enduring popularity of English style. The style also represents a melting pot of eras, as I was reminded recently when undertaking a three-year renovation of a listed house in the Chilterns, west of London. The house combined medieval, Tudor and Georgian architecture that needed restoration and yet had to accommodate services suitable for the 21st century.

Our changes were scrutinised by both English Heritage and the local planning authority, who had to approve rooms being divided to put in en suite bathrooms, the installation of air conditioning and under-floor heating in certain areas, and new service ducts.

One of the most challenging aspects was the addition of an indoor swimming pool to complete the fourth side of a medieval courtyard and cloisters. It was imperative to retain the original medieval arches but impossible to glaze them individually; instead, a large internal glass screen was fitted, supported by a minimalist wooden frame. The end result was a wonderful combination of old and new.

I certainly believe that, even when they are built from scratch, 21st-century English houses can be created with the quality and panache of those in the past. One of the best examples is Tusmore House, Wafic Said's monumental country house near Bicester in Oxfordshire. This private house won the Georgian Group Architectural award in 2004 for best new building in the

classical style. There are many more that display the same timeless beauty.

These are the qualities that a small elite in the US look for when they commission "English" houses. I have worked on many in the past 16 years. Some are more authentically English than others; while some follow a distinctly American interpretation of English style, which I put down to lifestyle, practicalities and the huge impact and influence of shops and media.

Layouts and details differ, too. Many American houses are timber frame rather than stone and brick. They are often built for one generation and bought and sold for the plot rather than the house, unlike in England, where owners tend to alter and add to what previous generations have created.

American houses in the English style tend to have a more open-plan feel, with large doorways or no door at all and a number of vast rooms. They tend to use wood rather than plaster mouldings for details such as cornices, and finishes are prepared for durability rather than beauty.

Several years ago I worked on a new-build house in Buckhead, the stunning residential area of Atlanta. The house was

There were English limestone floors, imported antiques and a pack of Jack Russells to complete the scene

Palladian in style and built from Texas limestone, set in 18 acres of parkland. It looked as if it could have been in Gloucestershire.

We even imported Cotswold stone to build the perimeter dry-stone walls (initially impounded by US customs because it contained English snails), and took over workmen to teach the Mexican builders the art of laying and dressing the stone. There were English limestone floors and a stone cantilevered staircase, six panelled mahogany doors, plasterwork, marble fire surrounds and antiques imported from the UK along with a pack of Jack Russells to complete the scene.

Even so, the overall effect to me felt a little too sterile. Perhaps this was because it was just too perfect, surfaces too polished, accessories left just as they had been placed, lawns too manicured and not a weed – certainly no clutter – in sight.

Another location was Las Vegas, where my client had commissioned a stone Palladian-style villa among the Spanish colonial-style homes. She told me this was a temporary home – "just a practice run so I can make all the mistakes before we build our proper home in Virginia".

There were elements of classic Americanism in this Las Vegas home, such as the

kitchen, which could have come out of a manufacturer's brochure and was personalised with a lot of colour and three differing floral patterns for tiles, wallpaper and fabric. It was much braver than we English would dare to be and yet it seemed to work in the big, bold arena of the US. Largely, however, the interior was decorated in a much more restrained English style: we used solid oak polished floors, waxed rather than sealed, plaster cornices, English bathroom fittings and plenty of damask and chintz.

In China, meanwhile, a similar taste for English design has taken hold among the rising middle class. Invited there recently by private clients, I was curious to find out why English styles in architecture and decoration were so popular.

The answer lies at least partly in the fact that Englishness is seen as a status symbol that signifies class and sophistication. Chinese developers certainly believe that culture and tradition – and the appearance of these qualities – add value. In the fashion world, brand names such as Burberry, Dunhill and Mulberry are a must. While we Europeans flock to Chinese markets to buy cheap knock-off copies (and good ones at that), Chinese are queuing in the authentic designer shops, forking out thousands of pounds for the latest reptile handbag or six-inch leopard print heels.

Another revelation to me was a visit to one of the very large home trade centres, where different buildings specialise in everything from bathroom suites and kitchens to flooring, furniture and home furnishings. I was looking for inexpensive, Chinese-made products to use for my projects back home but I was shocked by the prices. English wallpaper that I can buy for £35 a roll in the UK selling for the equivalent of £120 per roll; fabrics from major UK brand names such as GP and J Baker selling for three or four times the British price. Evidently, this is what the Chinese want – not cheap imitations made closer to home.

I also learned of many proposed English-style developments, including the Prince of Wales's Foundation for the Built Environment's designs for a couple of cities. Another classic example of "Englishness" is the Thames Town project, completed in 2006 in the Songjiang City suburb of Shanghai. Designed by WS Atkins, the town aims to recreate the mixture of Tudor and Georgian architectural styles that characterises many of England's historic towns.

In large established cities such as Shanghai, the influence of great contemporary British architectural practices such as Foster & Partners, Arup and David Chipperfield is pervasive, as it is on massive urbanisation projects across much of Asia. But the truth is that the up-and-coming middle classes in China no longer want to live in the centre of major cities, largely because of the appalling traffic and pollution. The

**Global** Below, a classic telephone box in Thames Town, an 'English' town in Songjiang, China

**Bottom:** the hallway of a Palladian-style house – a project on which Henrietta Spencer-Churchill worked – in Buckhead, Atlanta

Corbis

trend is to live in American-style gated communities where the architecture and interiors are driven by European, and particularly English, styles.

This trend towards smaller residential urban developments leads back in turn to a more classical tradition of "villas" emulating the traditional styles of English detached and terrace townhouses.

What is interesting is the actual style and internal layouts of these homes. While externally the architecture may suggest Englishness, in reality there is often a curious mix of Asian, American and pseudo English (which the Chinese tend to call "neoclassical"), with Chinese-style ironwork thrown in.

Interiors are equally curious. While bathrooms have been thoroughly westernised, with power showers, marble surfaces, heated towel rails and brass taps, the squat WC is still commonplace in many standard homes and new-built public buildings. Rooms are often open plan, American-style and many houses include two kitchens: a closed-off Chinese kitchen for deep-fat frying and a westernised one with eating area or American-style breakfast bar. A media room is also a must.

Anything and everything seems to be available in China but, for many, there is great kudos in using imported materials, whether Italian marble or English limestone, US bathroom fittings, such as those by Kohler, and European fabrics, including designs by Colefax and Fowler, Pierre Frey and Designers Guild to name a few.

In Chengdu, Sichuan Province, the fastest-growing city in China and one of the most desirable for western companies and their staff to be based, I met with the Chongqing Jinyang Real Estate Company to discuss their new "West London" project, a development of semi-detached Edwardian-style houses and apartments.

The plans I had already seen looked impressive on paper but, in reality, the site seemed much smaller and the area in need of massive regeneration. I had been asked to design two show houses and three apartments to give an authentic "English" look, but I felt that I would not be able to do it to a standard I wanted, given the size of the spaces, the local materials and limited time available.

Certain Chinese developers believe that culture and tradition create value. The same is true of many individuals in the US, which is perhaps why English style is still in demand and why so many projects with our influence are on the drawing board.

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The global appeal of English style has inspired a House & Home series of that name. This week Ben Pentreath looks at the quintessentially English kitchen, page 4



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