

## High notes

## A Triad and trusted trick



**David Tang**  
Agony Uncle

*Sir David Tang, globetrotter, entrepreneur, and the man about too many towns to mention, divides his time between homes in Hong Kong, mainland China and London. Here he invites readers' queries for his advice on property, interiors, etiquette at home (wherever you live), parties and anything else that may be bothering you.*

**My parents-in-law found themselves in a tight spot while driving a convertible through Italy last summer. Evidently some Neapolitan thugs had scattered some nails on the road, then offered to help with the predictable puncture. Using the situation as a diversion they managed to liberate some cash and valuables from the unsuspecting couple. Is there a set DT formula for confronting and controlling such a situation?**

Ever since I had to climb down a fire-engine ladder in my pyjamas to escape a fire, I have always regretted not having at hand what I might call a "Titanic" bag, in which I would put all my valuables. So rule number one is to travel with such a compact bag. My rule number two

involves a pre-agreement with my wife that in an emergency, I should always appear to be a mad man. If I had been your father-in-law, I would have got out of the car and started to shout at your mother-in-law, pretending to blame her for the puncture. Holding on to any stick or lethal object in our luggage, I would have smashed it to the ground, and threatened her with it – all to send a clear signal to anyone around who might wish to take advantage of us that I was completely out of my mind and capable of incalculable violence. All this time, my wife would have been clutching our "Titanic" bag. I suspect this might have made the conniving Italians think twice about their nefarious plot. The Triads are always more cunning than the Mafia!

**Several days ago, on a freezing cold evening, a neighbour's child came to my door to ask if I'd seen her pet cat which apparently had wandered off. Several days later, while outside shovelling snow, I found the remains of her cat, now frozen**

**stiff. Should I return the dead cat to her or quietly dispose of it?**

It's always extremely dangerous to lie to be kind. Remember Deborah Kerr lying to Cary Grant in *An Affair to Remember*? That was cruel! You must return the corpse to the child, preferably wrapping it up in a piece of dark blue velvet to lend solemnity and poignancy. And make sure you will have talked to the parents so that they are ready to comfort their child, in case of any freaking out.

**My wife favours living in a large house in the country, whereas I would prefer a small apartment in London. Predictably, we rattle around in a substantial property in the heart of Dorset, with all that this entails in terms of mud, social deprivation and inconvenience. Short of divorce or buying a second property, can you suggest a compromise that is less one-sided than our present arrangement?**

Rent a house in London with a bit of garden, and encourage your wife to come

up to stay, so that she doesn't think that living in London must consist of being boxed up in a small concrete flat. By feeling a bit of space, especially if you chose somewhere on the edge of London, such as, say, Richmond, she might be persuaded to abandon your pile in Dorset. Mind you, Virginia Woolf once said: "If I had to choose between Richmond and death, I'd choose death".

**The very rich fuss about \$500, but at the same time spend \$5m without thinking. How do you explain this discrepancy?**

I can assure you that the rich think a lot before spending \$5m. Those rich ones who fuss about \$500 are pretending that they care, which is a pretentious kind of reverse snobbery. The canard that rich people are rich precisely because they count their pennies is, of course, absurd. Wealth is not earned through being tight.

E-mail questions to david.tang@ft.com

# First impressions

*English style: Henrietta Spencer-Churchill suggests ways to furnish an often-overlooked area – the entrance hall*

The entrance hall has evolved from its medieval origins as a large multi-functional family space, becoming a grand waiting vestibule during the 18th century en route to its current incarnation as little more than a lobby or passage leading to other rooms. But, whatever its size or location, the hall is a scene-setter, giving new arrivals the first clues about the people who live in the house, so above all it should be inviting.

A cluttered hallway full of boots, bicycles and pushchairs may feel inviting, but it risks giving the impression of a disorderly family life. On the other hand, a sterile and shiny marble floor with bright lights will feel cold, uninviting and possibly pretentious. What is required is balance, and you should decorate it as if it were a room.

Let's deal with two very different scenarios: the country hall and the town hall.

The country hall will be easier to treat as a room since you will probably have another, less formal back entrance that houses the coats, boots and so on. This means you can think of the entrance hall as a multi-functional space. In past centuries it may have been used to welcome guests and serve tea, so furnishings would call for a seating area, preferably around a fireplace. A fireplace provides a focal point that you can emphasise with a mirror or picture above, and a mantelpiece on which to display objects. If the room is square, then a round table, grounded by a rug and with a chandelier or lantern hanging above it, is ideal.

I favour strong, warm colours in country



Henrietta Spencer-Churchill of Woodstock Designs

halls, or perhaps two-tone wallpaper such as damask or stripe. Use period rugs to absorb sound and add texture to wood and stone floors along with indirect lighting: lamps, wall sconces and picture lights.

Town houses often have little more than a passage leading to a formal room and a staircase. In these cases I like to add double doors leading to a dining or sitting room. This will open the hall up, adding light. Use neutral colours and patterns: this space inevitably leads to the staircase and other rooms, so should not dominate.

Often it is narrow, but try to add a console in wood or metal to conceal a radiator and provide a shelf. Above this hang a

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mirror to reflect light and enable a last appearance check before you leave.

Hard floor surfaces such as stone, marble or tiles are practical but appear cold, so use them with underfloor heating and a carpet runner. The latter can be a dirt trap, so make sure you have a sunken doormat. These are now available in more exciting colours and textures than the stereotypical coir which, when new, sheds more strands than a moulting dog.



▲ Rousham Hall Lantern, three lights in brass finish, £4,200  
www.vaughandesigns.com



◀ A pair of Chippendale period mahogany side chairs, c1760, £14,000  
www.antiquefurniture.net



▲ An early 19th-century mahogany bracket clock with an Egyptian style case, £4,200  
www.antiquefurniture.net



◀ 'Summer at South Cerney' by Charles Neal, £9,500  
www.art-uk.com



◀ A William IV rosewood drum table with inset leather top, c1830, £9,950  
www.hrw-antiques.com



▼ Antique Mahal carpet from north-west Persia, c1900, £12,500  
www.robertstephenson.co.uk