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Essential Directory 31
Lettings 32-33
Overseas 34
New Homes 36-44
Commercial 42

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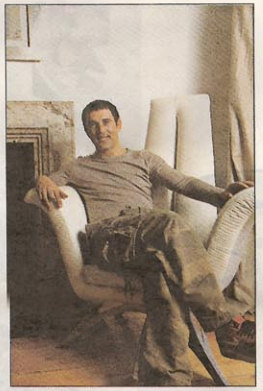
Contrasts: a Precious McBane cream vinyl armchair works well among the living room's traditional features

Compact: the kitchen/dining area has Ikea units with Formica doors. Bacchus looks approvingly on diners

Grate expectations

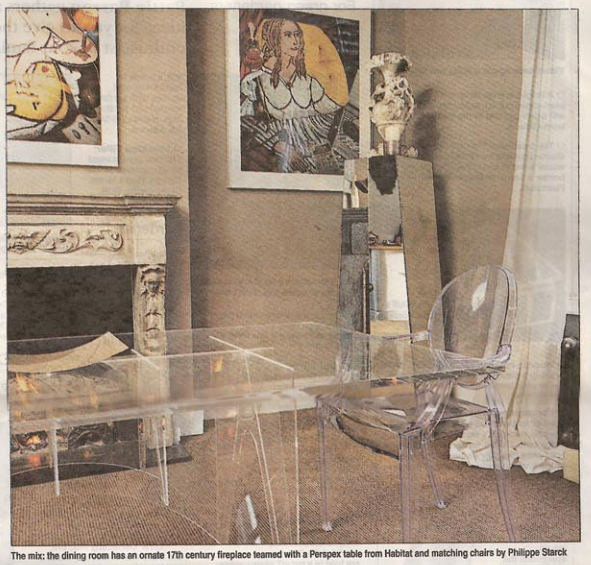
An empty office block became a chic home, a shop and even a car park for one clever Londoner who saw the potential in an unusual property, says Fay Sweet



Relaxed: Owen Pacey by the 16th century Travertine marble fireplace he bought — for £8,000 — from a wily Italian monk

Duel: in the surprisingly over-the-top bedroom, an

xtravagant 19th century French bed competes with a flamboyant 18th century fireplace



The mix: the dining room has an ornate 17th century fireplace teamed with a Perspex table from Habitat and matching chairs by Philippe Starck

OWEN Pacey loves it when the weather turns cold and there is the promise of snow: this is always good news when you sell fireplaces. Based in east London's City Road, Pacey lives above his shop, Renaissance, which he founded 15 years ago. There he has grown a reputation as something of a fireplace aficionado, someone who knows his bulseyes from his Bossis.

With a roaring fire next to the sales desk and a range of handsome stone, marble and wood fireplace surrounds on show, the large shop attracts a starry list of celebrities, including George Michael, Cher, artists Gilbert and George, and Pacey's friends, Jamie and Jools Oliver (Jamie's TV-nurtured restaurant, Fifteen, is just round the corner). There is plenty for more humble shoppers, too: "We've just sold a cast-iron Victorian design to one of the nurses over the road at the Moorfields eye hospital," Pacey points out.

Not surprisingly, fires are a feature of Pacey's comfortable home, which he shares with partner Prudence Allen, who also works in the shop downstairs, as its chandelier expert. Their home is on three floors, "but the top one is still pretty derelict, so we live on the other two".

Pacey found the place by chance when he was a patient at the eye hospital. After moving on from stripping doors and fireplaces in Islington, he began to sell antique fireplaces along with period doors, radiators and statuary, and wanted to set up his own architectural salvage business.

"At the time, everyone thought I was mad setting up here, in east London, because then it felt like the middle of nowhere. But the shop had six big windows, it was on a main road, it had parking and there was somewhere to live — so I took it." A wise move: not only is the restored building now a landmark in the area, its proximity to the City has meant that Pacey was first in line to be offered marble and other salvage items when old buildings were undergoing refurbishment. Much of that marble is now transformed in the on-site workshops into reproductions of the antique fireplace styles.

The former office building was unoccupied and in a poor state of repair, especially the upper floors that were to provide him with a home. "There were at least three inches of pigeon poo that we had to scrape off the floors," he says. Gradually, though, he glazed the windows, replaced the floors and began to create a cosy living space.

The flat now has an open-plan dining room ar kitchen on the upper level, with bedroom, bathroom an iving room below. A door at this lower level leads on to a ge terrace that makes the roof of the shop. Of cou e, antique fireplaces are a feature of every refurbished r m.

"Everyone in the business says that you ould never fall in love with the goods. But sometimes I j t can't help it," says Pacey, an east Londoner who grew u in Bethnel Green.

Along with an infectious enthusiasm for hi work, he is a natural raconteur and loves to spin the yarn attached to each fireplace. In the dining room is an ornate 7th century Italian design in creamy limestone, for exam le. "It came from a grand country house and I had to keep it because I love the carved face in the middle," says Pace

> *'Everyone in the business says you should never fall in love with the goods. But sometimes, I just can't help it'*

IN THE living room is a more auster geometric design from the 16th century in Trave ine marble. "After the earthquakes in Italy about 0 years ago, I was contacted by a monk in charge c rebuilding part of a monastery that had been estroyed. I thought I would be sure to get a bar ain, but, of course, he knew what it was worth and I end- up paying about £8,000 for it."

The final flourish is in the bedroom, where e flamboyant 19th century French bed is accompanied b an equally over-the-top 18th century French fireplace.

Pacey's network of dealer contacts spreads r and wide, with large numbers of items coming from rance and Italy, and others from Asia and the USA. He says that, like the art world, the architectural salvage business has worked hard at eradicating the opportunity for thieves to make a quick buck.

"A few years ago, we used to get vans loaded with fireplaces turning up all the time, but organisations such as Trace, which help to track down stolen items, have reduced the incidence of theft," he explains.

Furnishings are a bold mix of items. Against a backdrop of dark-taupe-coloured walls in the dining room there is a transparent dining table with Philippe Starck-designed clear Perspex chairs. Suspended over the table is an unusual Sixties "flying-saucer" pendant lamp, probably from Italy. In the corner of the room is a pyramid-shaped mirrored cabinet by the late Evlynn Smith of the art/design duo Precious McBane. The kitchen, with its amoeba-shaped island, was built by Pacey using Ikea cabinets with custom-made, wood-effect Formica doors. A huge, wall-hung antique mask of Bacchus gazes down approvingly on the dining table. In the living room, with its reclaimed French oak floorboards, a Precious McBane-designed armchair in cream vinyl sits to one side of the fireplace, there is a small Sixties retro-style sofa in front of the fire and a comfy brown leather sofa for stretching out in front of the television. The bedroom is French boudoir with its flouncy bed and fireplace topped with ornate gilded mirror.

"It's amazing to think that just a few decades ago, people were predicting that central heating would mean the end of the fireplace," says Pacey. "And then minimalist design was going to be the end of decorative designs. Thankfully, none of this has come true. In fact, even the most ornate fireplaces can look stunning in minimal homes; the contrast is really exciting."

He adds that this look is now popular in Australia and New Zealand, which is good, because, during a holiday in New Zealand he fell in love with the place and three years ago opened a shop in Auckland.

But never short of a fresh idea, he is now planning for the summer — and outdoor fireplaces.

He says of them: "They build on the idea of big stone barbecues, but also combine a hearth to keep you warm when the sun goes down."

Renaissance is at 193-195 City Road, EC1 (020 7251 8844), and open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and 10am to 5pm on Saturday

Pictures by David George

Complementary: a Sixties-style vinyl sofa sits opposite the fireplace in the living room, adding a contemporary touch

HOW TO GET THE LOOK

DINING ROOM: the 17th century Italian fireplace came from a country house, while the Perspex table came from Habitat (London stores at King's Road, 020 7351 1211; Kensington, 020 7795 6055; Hammersmith, 020 8741 7111; and Tottenham Court Road, 020 7631 3880).

The Philippe Starck chairs are made by Kartell (at Selfridges on 020 7629 1234). Lighting is from Living Space, Cross Street, Islington (020 7359 3950). The mirror-fronted cupboard is by Precious McBane (020 7729 2213). The marble vase is from Columbia Road market.

LIVING ROOM: Armchair is from Precious McBane (as before) and the sofa from Living Space (as before). The brown sofa is from the Conran Shop (020 7399 0710 or 020 7723 2223). The picture above the fireplace is by artist Eric Peter; others in the room by Calum Colvin (email to calum.colvin@virgin.net).

KITCHEN: Pacey designed the kitchen himself but used Ikea units (0845 355 2262) with Formica-covered doors.

BEDROOM: 19th century French bed and 18th century ornate fireplace bought privately.