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An eye for detail

Architect Simon Gill created a contemporary living space in his London home that is highly inspiring and richly idiosyncratic

Report: Fiona Reid Photography: Jake Fitzjones Styling: Shani Zion



At first glance one might be forgiven for thinking that architect Simon Gill's contemporary home in Fulham was another shrine to minimalist living, which it is, but look closer and you'll find something much more individual going on.

This is a living space that toys with conventionality, where the teak veneer floorboards, quite literally, run up the walls, or clad sections of ceiling; where the concrete kitchen worktops have been fashioned like sculptural pieces, incorporating a vase holder at one point; and where Simon points out the stairwell as being "tucked behind the Bulgarian pine marten". And you smile at this, until discovering that there is actually a stuffed Bulgarian pine marten positioned on a shelf in the dining hall and that the wonderfully abstract stairs are indeed behind it.

"I really wanted to try out ideas here, as this was conceived as a live-work space where I could bring clients," he explains. The house was built as part of a contemporary development of live-work units in 1990, and when Simon bought the property in 2002, he was attracted by its blank canvas.

"There were constraints, but a lot of the design came out of those restrictions"

The space was challenging as its corner position meant that there were few windows on the ground floor – there's actually only one window and two glazed doors leading into the garden – while all but one of the windows upstairs are screened with dusted crystal film, which was a planning requirement. "There were constraints, but a lot of the design came out of those restrictions," says Simon.

His first decision was to move the kitchen alongside the dining area, both of which open off the main living space. "I wanted to abstract the design here as far as possible, so that it's hardly a kitchen at all but it still functions as one," he says. He limited the palette to include teak veneered MDF for the bespoke units with concrete worktops, stainless



Below: Simon chose the teak panelling for the units to ensure that the grain would run evenly, creating the impression of a single expanse of timber along the wall **Right:** Simon encased the extractor within teak panelling, which then wraps around the wall, creating visual interest while abstracting this cooking zone



What were the challenges of the space?

"Weight was a serious issue with the concrete worktops. We needed a team of people to bring in the biggest piece, but the joints of the worktops were carefully worked out as part of the composition, which explains their size."

As you were balancing expensive with inexpensive, what was your cheapest addition to the space?

"The pipe above the extractor was made from red cardboard, with ordinary metal ducting behind it, and the panelling around it was also inexpensive but visually interesting."

Which element of the finished space do you really enjoy?

"I particularly like the extended step [on the stairwell] as it signifies where two solids – the upper and lower levels – have been pulled apart with this step placed in between. It's a detail I look at when I'm at the dining table."

What's next?

"I'm designing a house in Bulgaria, as my fiancée Vanya and I have found a plot of land in the mountains."



Above: The concrete allowed Simon to play with the form of the worktops, which incorporate a vase and bottle holder. **Below left:** Simon has used a combination of slot openings on the drawer units and discreet bespoke brushed stainless steel handles on the cupboards. **Below right:** As with the concrete worktops, the bespoke teak veneered MDF units allowed Simon to add in quirkier touches with the detailing.



Above left: The stairwell was conceived as a piece of sculpture, with the elongated stair tread demarcating the informal upper level from the living and working zone below. The stuffed Bulgarian pine marten sits on a shelf created by one of the steps. **Above right:** Sliding mirrored doors conceal the wardrobe space while maximising the natural light in the master bedroom. **Below:** The headboard is made from spray-painted MDF, with integrated cupboard and shelving areas on either side.



steel splashbacks and limestone flooring creating a rich family of materials.

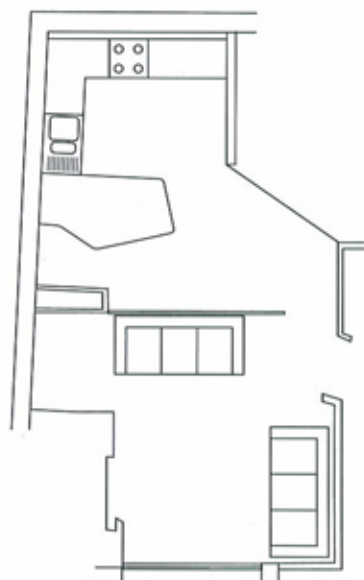
Rather than reading individual doors, Simon matched the grain so that the flush units appear as a wall of timber. The teak panelling around the hob has a similarly deceptive purpose as it integrates the extractor. "I wanted it to look as if it was built into that piece of wooden panelling," Simon explains. "It wasn't about buying an expensive extractor; the whole place was about balancing expensive elements, like the concrete, with cheaper elements, but the space still feels very luscious because of the grain of the timber and the tactile finishes."

The stairwell is similarly sculptural. "There's a symbolic significance to this because it creates the demarcation between upstairs, which is private, and downstairs, which is where I bring clients," says Simon. The extended stair tread "is like a geological boundary between the top level and the bottom".

The teak veneered panelling continues into the bedroom, where, as in the dining area, the floorboards simply sweep up the walls. "The panelling makes it feel cosy, and again it abstracts the room where the walls turn into floors and vice versa." Simon designed the headboard using spray-painted MDF, with a unique configuration of cupboards and shelving built in on either side. "My fiancée, Vanya, and I have different requirements, so why does everyone treat both sides of the bed as being the same?" he says.

The circular window high on the wall above the bed is closed over by a sliding timber panel, while rather than a typical ensuite, a niche off the bedroom contains a built-in teak vanity unit and mirror, which then leads to a stone-clad wet area.

"This house was about taking objects that aren't high art and designing round them," Simon reflects. The pine marten, for example, is a reference to Vanya's homeland of Bulgaria. "Rather than taking a Zen approach to the design, you have a stuffed animal or an old painting, and those get worked into this abstract composition. It was about enjoying these objects, and creating something quite experimental in the process."



COST

A similar kitchen would cost in the region of £17,625

CONTACTS

DESIGN

Architect Simon Gill Architects (020 7610 6874 or www.simongillarchitects.co.uk)

Construction Paul Gilpin at Riverside Construction (07957 625455)

KITCHEN

Teak veneer Walking on Wood (020 8969 1900 or www.hardwoodfloors.co.uk)

Concrete (for worktops) Lowinfo (01623 835311 or www.lowinfo.com)

Limestone floor Stone Age (020 8756 7700 or www.estone.co.uk)

Hobs Gaggenau (0870 840 2003 or www.gaggenau.com)

Extractor and oven Neff (0870 513 3090 or www.neff.co.uk)

Steam oven Imperial by Miele (01235 554455 or www.miele.co.uk)

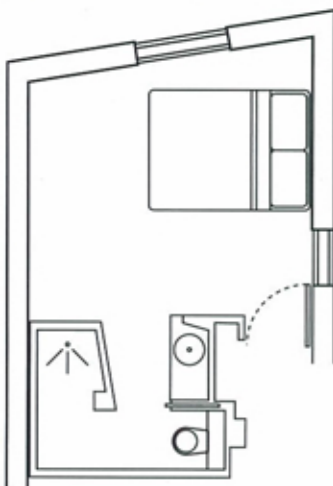
Stools and lighting Habitat (0845 601 0740 or www.habitat.net)

BEDROOM

Teak veneer flooring Walking on Wood, as before

Teak worktop (on vanity unit) bespoke

Tap Vola (01525 841155 or www.vola.co.uk)



Above left: As downstairs, Simon clad sections of the bedroom wall with the teak veneered floorboards, creating cosy areas. Rather than light switches, he created bell pulls with dimmer switches on the ends. **Above right:** Rather than a conventional ensuite, Simon used an alcove off the bedroom to create the built-in vanity area with a sliding pocket door accessing the wet area and WC. **Below:** Slab of solid teak forms the top of the vanity unit with undermounted basin and sleek Vola tap.



The open-plan kitchen, dining and sitting areas create an easy flow of space, with the Habitat sofa providing a punch of colour. The teak panelling on the ceiling and within the dining area grants a sense of warmth and intimacy.