

THESE PAGES IN THIS SITTING ROOM, THE LIGHT AND SHAPE WERE THE ELEMENTS GOVERNING EMILY TODD HUNTER'S DESIGN INSTINCTS: "IN A DARK ROOM, TO GO DARKER, IT'S A ROOM FOR WINTER."



HOME COMFORTS

DO YOU REMEMBER THE 1980s? WHEN IT COMES TO DECORATING, EMILY TODHUNTER RECALLS IT WITH A GREAT DEAL OF AMUSEMENT. THAT DECADE MADE UP HER FORMATIVE YEARS WORKING AS A SPECIALIST PAINTER IN THE UK AND THEN THE US.

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THIS PAGE TOOHUNTERS
OWN HOME COULD BE
DESCRIBED AS "MODERN
ART WITH PHOTOS AND
FAMILY PIECES". IT'S A
SHAMBOLIC FEELING OF
COMMUNAL FAMILY LIFE.





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT THE OPEN-PLAN, LOW-RISE NATURE OF THE KITCHEN FOSTERS COMMUNICATION; THE MASTER BEDROOM; THE DINING AREA IS DESIGNED TO BE A FLEXIBLE PART OF THE OPEN SPACE; THE ENTRANCE HALLWAY WITH AN EMILY TODHUNTER WALLPAPER INSPIRED BY A 1930s FRENCH DESIGN.



"I was at university studying philosophy, desperate for money, and became an apprentice to this specialist painter-gilder. We would do restoration work on these big houses. I learned up the ladder, you might say, and then I began my own business working for Nina Campbell, Colefax, and others," says Emily Todhunter.

It's no surprise to discover that her roots are so painterly when in Australia we are mostly familiar with her fabric and wallpaper work for Designers Guild and the earlier company, Paper Library. But her career has many more twists and turns.

"The decorator would plan everything: the furniture, the curtains and then ask me to create the backdrop. I was the colourist," Todhunter recalls. "It was the 1980s and everything was so chintzy and quite hilarious. They would hand me a chintz and say, 'I want you to match the red to the cherry'. It was that awful moment in decorating when people chose their curtain fabric first: you then painted round it, made your other choices, and proceeded to put up portraits of other people's dogs all over the place."

From the UK, Todhunter moved to New York where a number of >



English decorators were working. She became their girl on the ground with the right accent, the right connections and, by a process of osmosis, began to acquire a career.

"There I was bagging walls, creating trompe l'oeil, gilding bookcases, restoring bits of furniture, working with electricians, plumbers and often the hysterical client. It would be the end of the job – the time when it was all coming together. It was the best training I could have had for client and contractor liaison."

At the same time, Todhunter admits to spending rather too much time in nightclubs. That's something that was to pay off when she was asked to put together New York's O Bar from scratch. A rat-infested basement in a modern building was transformed into what looked like a St James gentleman's club. It was her entrée into "being a decorator" and garnered her much publicity. At what seemed the crest of that wave, she jumped back across the Atlantic to the UK in a big recession. It was the early 1990s but Todhunter is quick to point out that work – for her – continued to bloom. There was a fair amount of residential restoration work, Sissinghurst in Kent, and the designing of restaurants such as Christopher's and Daphne's.

"Restaurants are actually still very much a part of the business. It is something for which I am known and for which people continue to seek

me out. They showcase your work, taking it to a much wider audience and bring a lot of publicity."

Todhunter acknowledges that designing for the two markets is quite different but believes there is some interesting overlap... that you can take the best ideas from residential work, bringing a sense of home and privacy into the commercial arena, and vice versa.

"Restaurants have to be up to the minute and clients want to feel they are at the forefront but at the same time, they want to feel at home and maybe even cosy. From commercial design there is much to take back into the home. There are lighting techniques and lessons about acoustics, the transformation of hard materials such as stone floors and concrete into a residential situation."

Listening to Todhunter explain these aspects of her business, it seems only natural to ask her where her design sits in the scheme of things. "Where I really err is to be bang in the middle but I think that appeals to people," she replies. It's a surprisingly frank admission and indicative of her straightforward style.

"We are not desperately trendy: not cutting-edge modern and not at all hard. It's about bringing forward traditional decorating techniques and combining them with what we know about modern decorating and getting the balance right."

"You can't be totally minimal because to create comfort, there have to be enough elements to remind you of who you are, what you are, your life, history and lifestyle," Todhunter explains.

Techniques such as mixing modern and antique to create a happy middle line are important along with the subtlety of being unpretentious, non-designer, not young and not old. Of course, to try and pin Todhunter down to a look is an anathema. She evolves, changing from moment to moment and providing individual touches through the fabrics, wallpapers and furniture she designs.

"We have never attempted to be commercial with our furniture. It's small scale and expensive. Fabrics and papers you can be more magnanimous with, and our lamps – they're approachable."

In her own surprisingly large family home, Todhunter mixes modern art with family photos to create a sort of shambolic, communal feel. The open galley kitchen flowing to the living area is an important element for communication. The thought of coming home from work and trying to make time for the family, only to find herself stuck in a room on her own, is out of the question.

"For myself, I would open up rooms but always retain original features. There's no point losing the character. In the case of the red room here in the apartment – a sort of adults-only sanctuary – I have made it much more womb-like. It's north-facing, so it doesn't get a strand of light. It's soft and muffled, cosy and ensconcing. My husband is Greek, so everywhere he likes to have ruins round him. It certainly influences the decorating."

"Light and the shape of a room can make things difficult. My instinct is that there's no point trying to beat the elements – if it's a dark room, go darker. But then, I don't believe there are rules. You just have to keep playing with what you have until it clicks."

On a wall in a hallway is a distinctive paper, one of Todhunter's earliest designs. It is a strong, arresting pattern upon which "you would never bother to hang a picture". In a very traditional space it works by lightening it up, modernising the space without actually feeling out of sync. Perhaps it stems from the fact that the original inspiration was a 1930s French motif. The trick, according to Todhunter, is not to be aware of where the repeat lies.

In that one small phrase, Emily Todhunter says much about the art of designing and decorating. □

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