

Interiors

Words **Fiona Reid** Photographs **Neil Hanna**

THE giveaway with this place was that there were no interior pictures on the schedule," reflects Zoë Martin, recalling the day five years ago when she came to view this two-bedroom ground-floor flat at 72 Madeira Street in Leith with her fiancé Neil Pearson. While some people would take the lack of interior photos as a bad omen when property hunting, not so Zoë and Neil. "If it's not pretty enough to show any photos, I think that's a good sign," Zoë says. "We're always drawn to places that no one else would touch with a bargepole."

And so it was with flat Pff2, which needed new wiring, a new kitchen and bathroom, complete redecoration, and new flooring - or, in the case of the living room, the old carpeting ripped up and the original floorboards painted. While Zoë had tackled a similar refurb on her last flat in nearby Great Junction Street, this was the first property she had bought with Neil, and, she says: "This was the first flat where we really thought about the design."

Saying that, design is something of a passion for risk consultant Neil and copywriter Zoë, and particularly for Zoë who is garnering attention for her blog *Conversation Pieces*. Currently nominated for Best Lifestyle Blog by *Cosmopolitan* magazine, as well as making the shortlist for mydeco Design Democracy Blog Awards as one of the UK's best independent design blogs, *Conversation Pieces* sees Zoë musing on new shops, designers and artists and other such creative souls she admires, as well as cool finds - recent posts include Holly Golightly-inspired 'sleep-masks' and Edinburgh artist Emily Hogarth's gorgeous "papercuts". Zoë



Clockwise from main: Zoë Martin and Neil Pearson; the white painted floorboards; the kitchen table with sewing machine at the ready; the couple's cat on an old packing case; the vintage Parker Knoll chair has been re-covered with Cath Kidston fabric and sits beneath the Bams in the Bar portrait; his 'n her bathroom door; the fireplace with marbles; a window seat



'With every new choice we've made that's been a bit braver, we've had so much pleasure from it, we've thought, what next?'





writes: "I'm not a designer. Or even an interior designer. I'm just someone who likes pretty, practical things. I like colour and fun. Junk furniture and bargain buys. I like what I think is cool, not what I've been told is."

It's with this understanding that one can appreciate the ideas behind Zoë and Neil's flat, which is filled with quirky and personal touches. When upgrading the fireplace in the living room, for example, rather than changing the existing hearth, Zoë simply filled it with marbles, bags upon bags of marbles that catch the light when the fire is lit. "It's just a bit of fun," she says. "We have a general theory that your home is meant to be a fun place, so it should have things that make you smile."

This was also the ethos behind the bathroom design with its multi-coloured patchwork of

With their penchant for quirky things and an eye for a bargain Zoë Martin and Neil Pearson were well furnished with the skills to turn an unloved property into a gorgeous pad

From shabby to chic

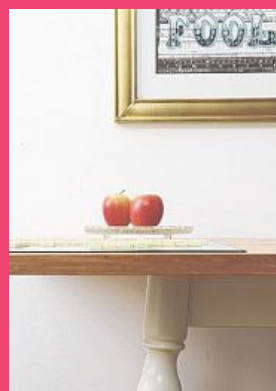
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♦♦ tiles. "It makes you feel happy when you walk in," says Zoë.

While Zoë tends to be the ideas person, Neil has the practical, hands-on skills. "I'm planning and Neil's ops," she says. Neil used to make props for photoshoots and the sewing machine perched on the kitchen table reflects the fact that he can rattle up a cushion cover if need be. "If Zoë says she wants something, I'm quite good at working out how it's going to happen," he says. The couple share a keen eye for good finds, whether from junk or charity shop or online on Freecycle, although Neil admits that for him this is a relatively new skill honed over their years together. "I'll spot things that years ago I'd have just walked past," he says.

They currently have a thing for chairs and Neil is about to begin an upholstery course so that he can tackle even the most beaten-up finds himself. The vintage Parker Knoll chair in the second bedroom is a good example, now reborn in a Cath Kidston cowboy print. In the master bedroom, meanwhile, the couple reflected the fact that there would originally have been a fireplace by applying the black vinyl sticker in its place. "This was one of the first quirky things we did here," says Zoë, while the canvas above was a purchase in Habitat's sale that Zoë customised with gold paint. "It makes something feel more like it's yours," Neil says. And Zoë admits: "It's easier customising something when you haven't paid a lot of money for it!"

Naturally enough, the couple pick up ideas from interiors magazines and other design blogs. The idea for painting the floorboards white in the living room came from a magazine feature. "We thought, what's the worst that can



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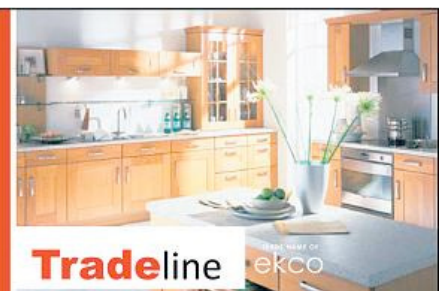
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Clockwise from main: the master bedroom; the bedroom's fireplace sticker; the kitchen table; Zoe and Neil in the kitchen; white accessories on the mantelpiece; the front door has been painted with blackboard paint; multi-coloured tiles brighten the bathroom



happen? If it goes horribly wrong we can buy a carpet," Zoë recalls. In reality, the white floor has transformed the room, making the deep pink chimney breast appear even more punchy and vibrant, while enhancing the light. The stripy rug was made using an offcut of fabric by Crucial Trading, while artworks by Kate George of Boxart and Zoë's uncle, photographer Roben Antoniewicz, along with the Futuremap print above the fireplace, add bold pops of colour.

The guest bedroom features another eye-catching artwork: a portrait by local artist Jonathan Gould from a collection called "Bams in the Bar" that he based on engravings of juvenile offenders from the 19th century, now decked out in Adidas sportswear. Juxtaposed with the Cath Kidston armchair, it's a striking combination. Yet Zoë stresses that things aren't as coordinated as they look: "I'm always moving stuff around. Lots of it is a happy accident."

Zoë filled the fireplace with marbles that catch the light when the fire is lit: 'We have a general theory that your home is meant to be a fun place, so it should have things that make you smile'

Neil and Zoë are now in the throes of doing it all again with their next flat, only with even more challenges as nothing had been done to the property since the 1930s - the flat didn't even have a kitchen when they bought it. Whereas this flat has painted accent walls, their new place has wallpapered feature walls; here the floorboards are painted white, their new flat has dark-grey floorboards.

"With every new choice we've made that's been a bit braver, we've had so much pleasure from it we've thought, what next?" says Zoë. Case in point: they recently chose some wallpaper printed with orange badgers. "A couple of years ago we'd have thought, are we crazy putting badgers on the wall? Not now," says Neil.

As Zoë says: "Even if people don't like what you've done, if you've made a brave choice they admire it." *

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