



## The Insiders

The interiors guru Vicky Charles and her business partner, Julia Corden, are the hottest new design duo in the US – with clients from the Beckhams and the Clooneys to Gwyneth Paltrow. Interview by *Stephanie Rafanelli*

### ACCOUNTING FOR TASTE

After a decade designing for Soho House, Vicky Charles, left, co-founded Charles & Co with Julia Corden. The company has worked on homes in Barcelona, below left, and LA, below right



**L**OOKING FOR VICKY Charles and Julia Corden in Cisco Brothers, a Los Angeles upholstery warehouse the size of an American football pitch, reminds me of a childhood game of hide and seek. I know they are in there *somewhere* among thousands of fabric bolts...When I eventually find them they are camouflaged in an aisle dedicated to shades of blue suede, wearing jeans and workday high-neckline shirts. “Everything is thrown on from Julia’s closet this morning,” chuckles Charles, a droll, gently spoken 42-year-old with the last vestiges of a Gloucestershire accent.

Personalities in the design world are not generally known for being low maintenance, but these two dynamic, well-connected and level-headed working mothers clearly aren’t ones to fuss. Since they started working together in 2016, when Charles ended a decade-long contract designing for Soho House, their bi-coastal interiors firm Charles & Co has become the go-to duo for high-profile homes. Their USP? “We take ego out of it,” says the elfin-faced Corden, 37, the more outgoing of the two. “Listening – to the space and to the client – is our most important design skill. Vicky listens, translates and curates.”

The clients they have had to listen to in the past couple of years are certainly pretty impressive. In the past 18 months they have worked with the Beckhams on their 18<sup>th</sup>-century Oxfordshire barn complex (“[David] didn’t want frou frou, but also wanted to be respectful of the period,” Charles says) as well as creating three nurseries in three countries for the Clooneys’ twins, one at their 17<sup>th</sup>-century manor on the Thames. (“We enjoy the fruits of her labour every day that we spend in our home,” raves Amal Clooney about Vicky Charles. “If we ever move she will be my first phone call!”) They have also squeezed in renovations for Gordon Ramsay and Liv Tyler, and are working on the Kutcher-Kunis’s new “American farmhouse” in Beverly Hills with the legendary Napa Valley architect Howard Backen. “They are so involved,

such a real family,” says Charles, who admits that she and Corden are “about family first. Neither of us is out for world domination.”

It was family that brought Charles and Corden together. Nick Jones, the founder of Soho House, introduced them in 2012 after Corden moved to New York with her then one-year-old son, Max, during her husband James’s Broadway run of *One Man, Two Guvnors*. Charles, a mother of two, had already made the transatlantic leap in 2003 to oversee the launch of Soho House’s Manhattan branch. Their friendship grew in Central Park, where their kids played, and continued after the Cordens moved to LA in 2015 for James to host *The Late Late Show*.

Although they now work on opposite coasts, Charles and Corden function in clear symbiosis, finishing each other’s sentences and refining one another’s answers. Their skill sets were the perfect match – the formidable Corden, a former non-profit executive who grew up in Blackheath with parents who “were always flipping houses”, runs the business side from their LA office.

Meanwhile, the self-effacing Charles, who made her name helping to define Soho House’s worn-in British country house glamour – working at first with Ilse Crawford and Martin Brudnizki before overseeing Soho House Malibu, Istanbul and Farmhouse – is the creative half of the duo. She lives with her husband, Joe, a marketing executive, between a flat in Manhattan and a Hudson Valley weekend home.

Jones spotted Charles when she was a graduate waitress at what was then his Oxford bistro Cafe Boheme and took her on at Soho House before promoting her to head of design eight years later. “Nick saw my design eye from the events I organised for the Oscars and Cannes,” Charles explains. “I was thrown in the deep end with restaurants, hotels, clubs, product design and private clients.”

Corden attributes Charles’s success to not only her broad design experience, but also to her “let’s keep it in perspective” attitude and her almost →



**MATERIAL GIRLS**

Julia Corden, left, and Charles at the Cisco fabric warehouse in LA



**Vicky Charles's tips to instantly update your home**

**Clear out the clutter** and style your shelves. Think about the purpose of everything in your house. Only put something back if you use it regularly or if it's a beauty, ideally both.

**Don't forget your sense of touch and smell** with interiors. It's not just how things look that influences how you feel at home. Candles and soft throws can create wonderful moods.

**Spend time and money looking for the right rug.** It's the glue of any room, but test it with your shoes and socks off.

**Spend money updating the details that guests touch** when they visit, such as tableware, glasses and napkins.

**Make sure that every lamp and light is on a dimmer switch.** As the daylight changes, so should the settings.

"The experience of living with kids is invaluable," Corden says. "Knowing what fabric to use on something the kids are likely to wipe their nose on." (Which is presumably why David Beckham described Charles as someone who "comes up with unexpected but brilliant solutions".) Their busy lives have cultivated "no tolerance for time wasting. I run a pretty tight ship in my house in LA," says Corden. "I have to, we almost always have people from London staying." Her husband, she says, has been very supportive. "He's got very good taste. We've really got into collecting art." Meanwhile, Charles's husband, Joe, has just called from New York. "The babysitter is sick. There's a snow storm, both kids are off school and he's looking after the dogs. You see, this is why we understand how our clients live. We keep it real," she says with a laugh. ●



HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY LISA RIBAR; PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON

**Charles & Co's five favourite interiors stores**

**Lorfor**ds in Tetbury is a staple for antiques. [lorfordsantiques.com](http://lorfordsantiques.com)

**Matthew Cox** makes the most beautiful tables and also has good finds. [matthewcox.com](http://matthewcox.com)

**Woven** for rugs, vintage and new. [woven.is](http://woven.is)

**Portola Paints** in LA has wonderful finishes and colours, and ships anywhere. [portolapaints.com](http://portolapaints.com)

**Trudon** for the most lovely scented candles. [trudon.com](http://trudon.com)



**CLOSE TO HOME**

Three looks inside Charles's weekend home in Hudson Valley, New York

invisible presence. "Clients don't need me turning up in their intimate world with my drama," Charles says with a chuckle. "You're going into a relationship for a minimum of two years and learn a lot about people from designing their bedrooms. You have to go through a period of complete trust." That trust has built Corden, as she will admit, an "amazing Rolodex". Her friend Gwyneth Paltrow, for example, charged them with creating the country-cottage feel of her Goop pop-up in the Hamptons last summer. "The reference was a Cornwall general store," says Charles, "and her team are really easy to work with." Corden and Charles are pretty picky, though, about which clients they take. If they feel as though someone is going to be "crazy" or "it's going to be drama" then they simply won't do the job.

There are, however, themes to the kinds of jobs that they do. "We are doing this one agent's house who does a lot of entertaining," says Corden. "Vicky's private club experience is a real draw for creating a space with that environment within a family home." And her mastering of the lived-in feel of Soho House, which lends a "sense of belonging", is now being translated to a range of properties, from the New York branch of the hip LA eatery Gjelina and a very modern house in Barcelona to an 1803 family home in Dublin. What most of their clients want, Corden explains, is "modern with an element of traditional, or traditional with an element of modern. Rooms that look and feel established, are living-ready and will age gracefully." Their experience as mothers, they acknowledge, has helped them to develop other families' homes.