

From Soho House to A-list homes

The interior designer who took the defining style of the members' club global is now attracting private clients from the Clooneys to Gwyneth Paltrow – and, it is rumoured, the Duchess of Sussex. **Aimee Farrell** reports. Portraits by **Kensington Leverne**



Vicky Charles is a designer with a *modus operandi*. The former global head of design at Soho House, who founded the studio Charles & Co with Julia Corden in 2016, wants to break free from the perception that interior design is nothing more than the decorative fairy dust of throw cushions and merino blankets. “We don’t always recognise or value the emotion that goes into creating interiors,” she says. “It’s so much more than just the clothes of the house. Good design is a representation of a good life. It actually advances happiness.”

Charles & Co’s ethos is proving compelling for its elite patrons who include the Clooneys, the Beckhams, Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop empire – and, if endless speculative tabloid reports are to be believed, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. In three short years, they’ve become the go-to designers for a very luxurious brand of liveable comfort, creating the kind of spaces where people feel instantly at ease, as anyone in the world who has ever flopped onto a giant sofa at Soho House can attest. Not that Charles is one for pandering to her starry audience. “It’s about how you communicate. It comes down to listening and trust, whether it’s the Beckhams or anyone else,” she says.

Corden agrees. “They respect Vicky because she’s not just telling them what she thinks they want to hear,” she says.

Raised in rural Gloucestershire, Charles attended a local comprehensive where she existed somewhere in between what she calls the “Hunt Ball and council flat” crowds. Though well-travelled and interested in sculpture – something she’d still love to have the time to dabble in – she was unaware that interior designers even existed in her youth. After graduating from Exeter University, Charles waited tables at Café Bohème in Oxford. Before long she’d leapfrogged to Soho House in London, then on to New York, heading up the stateside opening as club manager in 2003. “It was the hottest club in town,” she recalls. “You’d do a shift, then go to Bungalow 8 until dawn and come back to the hotel to watch breakfast television and eat spaghetti.”

The fun and frolics were offset by intense focus. It was while creating Soho House pop-ups at Cannes and the Oscars that Charles’s own decorative dexterity came to the fore. After working under the tutelage of designers Ilse Crawford (“She really approached things from an emotional place”) and Martin Brudnizki (“He runs an incredibly tight ship”), she eventually took the helm as design director, overseeing Soho Farmhouse, Little Beach House Malibu,

This page: luxurious, liveable comfort is Charles & Co’s winning design ethos. Opposite: Vicky Charles, left, and Julia Corden

PHOTOGRAPHS: STEPHEN JOHNSON (3)





Above: Charles was design director of Little Beach House Malibu, as well as other Soho House outposts. Below: Julia Corden with her husband James

Soho House Istanbul, Soho House Chicago, The Ludlow and The Ned, as well as the launch of the Soho Home product collection. “There are a lot of talented interior designers out there, but they don’t know the process or what’s necessary to get the job done,” says Nick Jones, founder of Soho House, who spotted Charles’s skills early on. “Vicky has a natural flair for organisation, the ability to get on with people and really great style.” For him, it’s this holy alliance of practicality, personality and innate personal taste that’s seen Charles & Co excel. It was Jones, in fact, who first introduced Corden and Charles.

Corden describes her role in the partnership as more of a business strategist, which involves fostering client relationships from the company’s Hollywood outpost. “Vicky is very much in the weeds,” she says of the bi-coastal business, which includes a satellite office in Italy. “My aim is to fer her up as much as possible so she can get on with being creative.”

Today, barefoot in jeans and cashmere sweaters, the two women are the living embodiment of their firm’s feel-good philosophy. We’re sitting at a vast table of their own design inside the basement kitchen of Corden’s almost-home in north London – she’s in town for fashion designer Misha Nonoo’s Roman wedding (you know, Meghan Markle’s matchmaking best mate). After renovating from the ground up while heavily pregnant with her second child, Corden moved to LA in 2015 when her husband James became the host of *The Late Late Show*. He FaceTimes mid-shoot to update her on the antics of their three children, including their son’s piano rendition of *Aladdin*. Charles, meanwhile, lives on New York’s Upper West Side with her husband and two children during the week – collectively decamping upstate to Dutchess County on weekends – and spends her days managing the Manhattan office. Theirs is a business partnership founded

on friendship – Charles always holes up at “Hotel Corden” on her trips to the West Coast, and “we speak about 25 times a day,” says Corden.

And no wonder, considering the escalating demands of their dizzying array of international projects. “It’s actually quite scary,” Charles admits, reeling off the list of 18 homes that are currently under their careful watch, from Brooklyn to Barcelona, Dublin to Devon and Lyon to London and LA. Some have just signed, others have requested costings for a build or are having final furnishings installed. Not that she actually looks the least bit daunted. “We’re a very lean operation,” she says of the very deliberate decision to keep the 12-strong team small. “They do complain, but you don’t want to take on too much.”

It’s a smart (and one can only assume sanity-sustaining) move for a designer whose approach is less about a signature aesthetic than the ability to attune to the minutiae of her clients’ often high-profile lives. Working exclusively on complete renovations or new builds, Charles directs everything from finding the architect to collaborating with them on the structure and materials, right down to advising on the placing of plug sockets, light fittings and every other seemingly minuscule finish. The delight for her is in the detail. She wants to know where the breeze comes in as you sit at your desk, the feel of each fabric, and how big you want your bath to be. “The architects are the qualified ones. I go with my gut but ultimately it’s the materials and the build that determine the feel of the space,” she says of her 360-degree approach. “The furniture and fabrics are the clothes of the house but if you have a healthy body, you look good in everything.”

Speedily executed do-ups are not for Charles. Her rigorous, all-seeing role lasts for an average of three years



Soho Home linen Manette bedstead, from £1,995



Soho Home brass drinks trolley, £495



Soho Home mohair House Porter chair, £2,495. At sohohome.com.

– enough time for things to become pretty personal. “We’re working together because you’re not happy with the space you’re living in. You’re starting a dialogue about the future you,” she says. “That begins with talking about how you currently live, what works and what doesn’t work and what you want to change. Those are as much emotional questions as they are practical ones.” In this sense, Charles almost becomes a decorative therapist, albeit one with an eye for micro-details. So invested are clients in their relationship that even months after contracts come to an end – the so-called “break-up period” – Charles still receives texts seeking her approval on furniture purchases. “People get very used to having us in their lives,” says Corden. Nick Jones has witnessed this relationship first-hand. “When you create a personal home, you’re often in the middle of a relationship between two people,” he says. “Vicky’s background in hospitality – which can be really tough at times – makes her perfect for dealing with that. She always had a firm opinion and a nice, firm way of putting it across.”

Such tenacity no doubt comes in hand. Charles is currently working with architect Howard Backen on the Beverly Hills home of Mila Kunis and Ashton Kutcher – a project that’s nearing completion. “When we first met, I was still pregnant with my second child,” says Kunis of the relationship that has evolved over the course of more than three years. “Things quickly become very personal. Her design is so specific to the details of your life and your family – where you like to make coffee, the fact that your kids like to stack the dishwasher – you get to know each other very well, very fast.”

“Initially, they wanted a very traditional barn vibe,” says Charles of Kunis and Kutcher, who first encountered her work at Soho Farmhouse and Soho House Chicago. “But as the house came up from the ground it was actually very contemporary – from the inside it feels like a cathedral. Until you’re in the completed space it’s often really hard to visualise it.” Prompted to recalibrate her scheme, Charles’s prescription was to banish decorative lighting while keeping the palette neutral and the furnishings contemporary – imagine the original Cotswolds retreat upscaled and seen through a polished Hollywood prism. Not that muted minimalism is always her MO. Charles simultaneously worked on a pink 19th-century Dublin house for a fashion and coffee business founder that’s a flurry of pattern and playful materials. “Every client and every location is different,” she says. “I’m such a whore for it all – though my own house has white walls because I can’t commit.”

Over the years, Charles has evolved a fast-track method of discerning clients’ tastes. When creating mood boards, she arms them with a red pen to mark each image with a heart or a cross. “Words aren’t always useful when it comes to describing a visual world,” she says. “People will say they don’t like ‘traditional’ when what they actually mean is that they don’t want anything floral – the image boards evoke much stronger reactions that help me to build a visual diary of their likes and dislikes.” Once the look and feel are established, things swiftly move towards material inspiration. “Mood boards only get you 30 per cent of the way,” says Charles, who lugs back-breaking heavy suitcases packed with tile, fabric and wallpaper samples to client meetings all over the world. Though she follows the odd interiors Tumblr for what she calls “late-night visual porn,” she sees Instagram as akin to ocular noise. “Most projects evolve from a single fabric, wallpaper or piece of furniture,” says Charles, who often finds inspiration among the textiles and ceramics at the Met, for example, close to where she drops the kids off for school. “What I do is still very tactile.”

Right: Charles’s design for the bedroom of a Dublin client. Below: Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis, whose Beverly Hills home Charles is currently working on



“Her design is so specific to the details of your life and your family”

MILA KUNIS

Outside the success of her residential work, it’s clearly been hard for Charles to find a match for the financial and emotional commitment of Jones. “He’s a complete mentor,” she says. “He knows me inside out.” To date, Charles & Co has consciously steered clear of commercial projects – partly to avoid replicating her Soho House style. But now, with a serious run of homes under her belt, she’s warming to the idea – and talking to Jones about the possibility of teaming up on a stateside project. So with the benefit of hindsight, what does she feel has made the Soho House aesthetic such an erasing success? “We changed the rules,” she says, pointing to the much-mimicked bare-bricks-and-leather industrial aesthetic as one of many influential looks. “None of us were trained designers, so we weren’t purists. We were winging it, and subconsciously that meant we were able to totally mix things up.” Interiors imitators get ready. It’s time for the remix. ♦
charlesandco.com