

STYLE

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Long, hot summer

Make a splash
this season
(cocktail optional)

PLUS

TEN BOOKS TO READ BY THE POOL
BY PANDORA SYKES

HELP! WAS MY HEN DO TOO TAME?
DOLLY ALDERTON ADVISES A BRIDE-TO-BE

BRINGING THE HOUSE HOME

Vicky Charles is the designer behind the much copied Soho House aesthetic — oh, and the Beckhams' Cotswolds home. She tells **Katrina Burroughs** how to get the look



How to describe the Vicky Charles vibe. A cocktail of old and new, with a splash of British craft and a twist of what the self-effacing designer, 49, describes as “nonsense”. Her name will be forever linked to the interiors of the Soho House private members’ clubs, where she worked her way up from waitressing, in the late Nineties, to global head of design. For hints at Charles’s handwriting, see Soho Farmhouse in the Cotswolds, the Ned in London, Ludlow House in New York, Little Beach House in Malibu and Soho House Chicago.

Many of her more recent projects are under NDAs. Since 2016, when she left to found Charles & Co, with Julia Corden, wife of the British comedian James Corden, she has been attracting celebrity clients, including George and Amal Clooney (for whom she has created two nurseries in a trio of homes), Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis, and David and Victoria Beckham, whose Oxfordshire home she worked on. According to several reports, it was Charles & Co that delivered Meghan and Harry’s update of Frogmore Cottage. She won’t be drawn on the rumours but confirms she will not be working for the world’s most famous non-royals on their Montecito pad.

Despite the glamorous roster of clients, Charles presents as more messy than glossy. Sitting in her Hague Blue Shaker kitchen in upstate New York, she is explaining her commitment to imperfection. Home life, she says, is “Chaotically calm ... you know, dogs, children, mud, wellies. The house is never quite tidy. I have had paint swatches on the walls for seven years because we haven’t got around to making a decision. I have lovely old floors that just have to forgive everything. My house is full of sofas that didn’t quite make the cut [for projects] because they were too short, or prototype chairs that are a bit wobbly. There’s a saying about cobbler’s children.”

This particular cobbler, from her offices in Bassano del Grappa, near Venice, London and Manhattan, has just completed a new Nespresso store in Covent Garden, is putting the finishing touches to the Ancora hotel in the Dolomites, for the founder of Diesel, Renzo Rosso, and is



working on private homes in Rome, Geneva and the south of France — plus a handful of New York apartments. “The Soho House thing was about the home from home, right?” she says. “I do believe that your home should age really well with you — materials that work hard, that get better with age. So it’s never about perfection. We try and finish clients’ homes about 70 per cent because they need to grow into them. I say, You need that year to make sure it’s yours. You choose the art. You choose what goes on the bookcases. You buy a ridiculous pillow on holiday.”

Charles herself is no slouch at ludicrous cushion collecting. She is on a permanent shopping trip for clients’ homes, squirrelling away vintage vases, fabrics and furniture from flea markets, and topping up her own cache of curiosities. “I have a bizarre collection of garage sale art that makes me smile. In the office in New York, I have a 1950s box with drawers of threads from a sewing machine factory with all the threads sorted by colour, which my husband won’t have in the house. He’s like, ‘I live here too.’”

The house was originally the family’s country escape from New York, but they moved to the Hudson Valley full-time in 2020, during Covid, and the space and freedom of a more outdoorsy life clearly suits them. Charles grew up in rural Gloucestershire, before studying fine art and English at Exeter. “I really didn’t know interior designers existed. My mum did it herself, you know, like it just wasn’t a thing.”

She waitressed first at Café Bohème (owned by Nick Jones, the founder of Soho House), before working at Soho House in London. It was Jones who picked her to manage the club’s first American opening in 2003. “I was like, hell yeah,” she says. “Why wouldn’t you? I started to organise the private parties for them at the Cannes Film Festival and the Oscar parties before they opened Soho House LA. The hospitality industry is a great training ground for [residential interior design] because it has to work. I think that’s a lot of the job in interior design — logistics and budget.”

Sometimes, she says, her creative clients simply need practical support. “I say, I’ll give you my complete supplier list. I’ll tell you how you can do your vision, but you don’t actually need me to contribute to your vision. We’ve got the Rolodex, we’ve got the knowledge, we’ve

This page, from top Vicky Charles at the Covent Garden Nespresso store she has just completed. Combining the rough with the smooth, Charles mixes velvet, leather, oak and concrete. A cosy living room for a New York brownstone.

Opposite The art collection in this Brooklyn dining room adds life



Above, from left A custom checkerboard tiled splashback is a feature of this New York kitchen. One of Charles's favourite kitchen nooks, in a Chicago townhouse, is defined by a change in flooring

got the cheats, you know. They've designed maybe two bedrooms, I've done like 120! Interior design is about the thousands of decisions you have to make. A lot of my job is curating decisions before it costs you time or money. Which things to think about first, and where to spend your budget?"

And where should the money go? "Spend on the floor. You'd never go back and change your floor, right? A throw cushion doesn't matter, but take care with things that need an installer. Another important area is lighting. Levels of lighting: a table lamp, tall lamp, wall sconce, ceiling light. If you have an awkward space, try to do something built in, spend the money to get the maximum functionality. A good mattress is a good investment, because if you wake up crabby the next morning, then everything is just a bit off."

And where to save? "On the accessories. I like car-boot sales. You know, the one-off little things that make it yours. If it makes you smile, then it's perfect. There isn't a wrong if it makes you smile."

"Colour does make you happy," she adds. "Especially if it's a fun one, like yellow. But never do yellow in your bathroom. It's a terrible idea. Nowhere with any mirrors."

She makes renovation projects sound like fun — when lived experience tells us that the opposite is true. "My job is to make it easier, and also to make it a little bit fun as well," she says. She gets clients to go through her sample boxes in the New York office and make their own mood boards of favourite surfaces, colours and patterns. "They

think they are having a play but it's a really revealing moment." She takes them to showrooms to test drive bath tubs (fully dressed) before they buy. "Test everything," she says, "because, you know what, the internet lies. It just doesn't always look like it does when you've bought it. I mean, we've all had that moment where you've seen a beautiful lamp photographed in the right light. You get it and it's really cheap and plasticky and you're like, oh, yeah, the internet lied." It's good to know that even Vicky Charles gets things wrong. "Oh yes, all the time. I ordered a sofa for my own house and couldn't get it in the front door. It wasn't that big. It was pretty normal. It was like an inch off. How embarrassing is that? Now I'm fanatical about measuring doorways."

She is on the verge of a gut renovation at home. "We built this house as week-enders and now we live in it full time. It has all the stuff from the city in it and it's too small — I think you fill as much space as you have, actually." She has been in the States for almost 25 years now and her life has transformed from perma-party, when she first hit New York in the late Nineties, to country living — hiking and choosing upholstery suitable for muddy paws. Her (70 per cent repeat) clients have grown-up too, which means Charles is on their second or third house, and possibly second or third spouse. "You go through their whole family life with them. Kids get older. Sadly, divorce." Then she adds: "People don't cheat on their interior designers. You might change architects, but you don't really change interior designers, because you know, I know all your secrets. I know what's in your bedside drawer." ■

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A mohair velvet headboard dominates the bedroom in this Amsterdam canal house. **Below, from left** This bathroom features a portholed tub by The Water Monopoly. The cabinets in this bedroom are covered in leather

