

Original features or sympathetic restorations make a property feel complete and in proportion, providing an ideal canvas for interior design. Here, Manhattan wallpaper and fabric from Thibaut enhance the classic proportions of this room.



A House *with good bones*

HOW TO RECOGNISE ONE OR HOW TO
RESTORE ITS ORIGINAL INHERENT BEAUTY

When you walk through your front door, does the feeling of calm propriety, easy function and subtle aesthetics envelop and embrace you? Or is there a sense of nagging discomfort, of something missing, or that somehow needs to be altered? In other words, why do some houses feel just right, and others, not so?

Like a supermodel who has fabulous bone structure, meaning that she (or he) always photographs beautifully, a house has an underlying composition that may (or may not) give it pleasing form and function. As James Greenwood, managing director of independent buying agency Stacks, says: “You just know when a house has good ‘bones’. You feel it the moment you come across it – it’s got soul. Sometimes you don’t even need to go through the front door to get excited about a house, because there’s an aura that you get from it.”

VALUABLE INGREDIENTS

Whilst it may seem tricky to pin down what gives a property charisma, it is entirely possible to sum up the key factors that create almost universal appeal. Greenwood, for example, lists first of all the way in which a property sits within its setting, and the balance between the size of the house and the size of its curtilage, as well as how the house is framed by what is around it. “What is often critical is the sense that both garden and house are in harmony with

one another,” he says. “Then, windows are vital – they are the eyes of a property. The facade has to be the right shape, and the roof needs to sit properly on it.”

Dorothee Junkin, of Architecta Interiors, adds: “The way I see it, ‘good bones’ entails more than just the literal: solid foundations, a sound roof and well-built and intact structure. Other aspects include good quality and lasting materials and a coherent design. Every once in a while you cross a threshold and feel like you walked into one house but arrived in another. It feels awkward if the exterior and interior of a house conflict or have no relation to each other. ‘Good bones’ usually also means personality. A property feels more authentic and unique when original architectural details are maintained and put into the right context. Rooms should be well proportioned, with the ceiling height appropriate to the footprint of the space, and they should be logically arranged, with a flow from one space to another. Good sources of natural light are important, too, as are the connections from inside to outside.”

One might ask why such ingredients are so vital; what difference do they really make? The answer is simple; they provide the essential nature of a house. “A great property is a bit like a beautiful woman,” says Laure Ghouila-Houri, property developer and founder of the property website arkitexture.com. “Take away the make-up, and the bone structure is still there. With regard to

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George Saumarez Smith, director for ADAM Architecture

a house, if you take away the decorative features, it should still be attractive.” Or, as George Saumarez Smith, director for ADAM Architecture, explains: “The shapes and proportions of the rooms, and details such as staircases and cornices, are important because they provide the structure and character around which everything else is arranged. The first time I look at a house, I find myself counting up ‘good rooms’. These are not necessarily the largest rooms; they are usually just rooms of a sensible size and shape with windows and doors in the right place and an overall symmetry or balance.”

LOOK PAST IMPERFECTIONS

When assessing a property, whether buying it or restoring it, it is not always obvious what potential might be uncovered, particularly if there have been a number of insensitive alterations and additions. Different eras, styles, tastes and budgets may have come together in a confusing hodgepodge, as Junkin puts it. She says that the best way to make sense of this is to figure out the original style in which the property was built and then try to imagine it without all the conflicting changes and additions, as well as to focus on the potential of the layout. This helps to evaluate what would be worth keeping and where to go from there. You may also be able to consult friendly neighbours whose properties seem more intact, and who may know something about the history of your home, and local history societies. The more you research, the better equipped you will be to make decisions on any alterations you decide to carry out.

SENSITIVE RESTORATION

It is not necessarily easy to restore the ‘soul’ of a house. There is always a delicate balance between inappropriate modernity and the sort of slavish reproduction that simply looks phony. If the house is not working as well as might be wished for, consider what sensitive alterations might improve it, from introducing new sources of natural light to opening up a series of too-small rooms. Less is usually more, is the consensus from experts. Saumarez Smith feels that

“new elements work best when they are kept simple and elegant, using natural materials wherever possible”. Interior designer Chester Jones argues that a gentle approach is essential: “Try to establish what were the original proportions,” he says. “If the windows have been changed, try to recreate what was there, and put in a chimneypiece that’s appropriate – either an old one, or a simple modern one that doesn’t try to reference a bygone time. Always be sympathetic and understated. And think very hard about surfaces – something that people miss all the time. In an old property, for example, modern plasterboard looks completely wrong, whilst new cornices – even in the correct style – have no character if they are completely straight and true. Ask for a cornice to be delivered ‘green’, which means it is slightly soft, and will follow the undulations of the ceiling that have taken place over the years. These are the subtleties that make a difference.”

John Thursfield, managing director of specialist builders Broseley, emphasises the importance of good planning. “Having a house that just feels right is mainly achieved by the thought processes and the skill of how it has all been put together. The flow of rooms has got to be properly planned – even such a simple thing as re-hanging a door can make a big difference. And ensure that the house will work for your family life. When you walk through the door, is there somewhere to put down your keys and take off your shoes, for example? It’s about getting down to the ‘nitty gritty’ of how people live.”

Perhaps this is the key point here; if a house is well planned, then it will function efficiently and be a pleasure in which to live. Is the kitchen layout efficient? Is the sitting room comfortable, the bathrooms delightful, and is there plenty of storage? If not, then some subtle improvements will go a long, long way. “The ‘bones’ should be inherent, so the best thing is to work with them and alongside them,” says Greenwood. There is inherent beauty in functionality. A house is a tool for living in and it has got to work for you – and if it works, then it will have a good vibe.”





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT This new staircase blends with an old property and was constructed from a mild steel carcass clad with oak and stone. Prices from £22,000, *Bisca* Tucked-away areas should not be overlooked and this bay area is a restful place to sit. Chair covered in *French Ticking in Mushroom and Raspberry*, £45 a m, *Vanessa Arbuthnott* A generous entrance hall provides a welcome to the home, and a link between exterior and interior. *Whitehall wallpaper in Moutarde*, *Revolution Papers*, £60.50 a roll, *Little Greene* Coarsely finished wall plaster is perfectly suited to the rustic style of a modest cottage. From *The Interiors of Chester Jones* by Henry Russell, £40, *Merrell*.

What could be more elegant and appealing than a pair of tall arched sash windows? *Catherina sofa*, £1,529; *Geometric rug*, £325, both *Barker & Stonehouse*





ABOVE LEFT There are many features that define a property with good 'bones', and period features such as window shutters have aesthetic and practical appeal. Add simple furnishings that do not detract from the beauty of internal architecture. *Hugo Ivory curtain fabric, and Goddard Brown upholstery fabric are both from Colefax's Hugo Plains range*
ABOVE RIGHT Think of the front door as the handshake to the house, and ensure that it looks immaculate with beautiful paintwork and brasswear. *Front door painted in Fynedon Red water-based gloss from Mylands*



PROPERTY ATTRIBUTES TO LOOK FOR

- A pleasant setting, in balance with the size of the property
- A well proportioned facade and roof
- Elegant, correctly proportioned windows
- A solid, sound and well-built structure
- A coherent design that relates inside to outside
- A well-planned layout in which rooms flow naturally from one to the other
- Rooms that feel symmetrical or well balanced
- Doors and windows in appropriate places
- ceiling heights that relate to the size of the rooms
- Original architectural details, such as staircases, fireplaces and cornices
- Functionality – a house that works for the way you live, with adequate storage, good bathrooms, a family kitchen and a comfortable sitting room

ASK THE EXPERTS

When researching the original authentic ingredients for your property, take expert advice. There are several organisations that will make a good starting point:

- English Heritage english-heritage.org.uk
- Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) spab.org.uk
- The Georgian Group georgiangroup.org.uk
- The Victorian Society victoriansociety.org.uk

If you can find old photographs of your property online, in books about your village, town or locality, these can also reveal how the facade may have been insensitively changed. Or you might like to consider working with a professional house historian who can uncover information more quickly and with a professional eye.

A quality architect is an essential resource when undertaking sympathetic restoration – particularly when working on a listed property. In-depth training gives them a huge knowledge base from which to read the language of your property and assess what might be hidden beneath or have predated insensitive modern renovations. The Royal Institute of British Architects, RIBA, can help source an architect who specialises in property of the same period, in the same locality. For help with finding an expert visit architecture.com ■