

Fully formed

A Notting Hill townhouse inspired
by a Barbara Hepworth sculpture

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There are certain endeavours that benefit from a collective effort, as is the case with an elegant townhouse in west London designed for a film director and her husband, an entrepreneur. Built by William Chadwick in the late 1850s, it is part of a picturesque, half-moon terrace of stucco-fronted homes in Notting Hill. After drafting in design practice 23 Architecture to refurbish and start again, the owners then turned to one of London's most exalted young designers, Fran Hickman, to create interiors that would live up to the storied building and appeal to the couple's divergent tastes: his, resplendent drama; hers, Scandinavian calm with a focus on materiality.

"In the interest of keeping them both happy, they wanted to do something quite bold and had the idea of designing a feature stair," says Hickman from her west London studio. Previous plans had involved an enclosed staircase made of concrete, moving like a monolith up through the centre of the narrow building, but when Hickman came aboard she began to rethink things and open up the space.

"It's lovely living in a townhouse. I grew up in one, and when you have a lot of people under one roof, you can all be on your own floor and have a real sense of privacy, but you're still aware of those above or below," says Hickman. With that in mind she conceived of a new, gestural staircase that would connect the lower ground floor gym, wine cellar and office to the ground floor kitchen and dining area; and from the first floor (a space for entertaining guests) to the bedrooms above. Taking inspiration from sculptor Barbara Hepworth's 1946 work, *Pelagos*, its spiral is the focus of the home and creates a restrained, quiet sense of drama.

"We were keen to move away from cement because it's so cold and it looks a bit like a Bond villain's lair," chuckles Hickman. "We

wanted to soften it – and one of the softest materials to play with and live with is wood." The team worked with Dinesen on all of the flooring to make a seamless transition between the timber stair treads and the white plaster finish. Elsewhere the palette extends to copper, marble, lime-washed oak, concrete and steel – used in the custom-made Crittall doors in the kitchen and lower ground floor, which allow extra light to come flooding in.

Most of the flourishes are in the textures, materials and bespoke fittings, although there are a few moments throughout the house – such as the decorative painting on the cupboards and wet bar, and feature wall in the dining room, by French artist Pierre Bonnefille – that show the compromises made between the couple. "While working together we developed a point system, so each of them would give a point to the other if they gave in on something. Which is why, in the interest of finding as much common ground as possible, we tried to approach the house as simply as possible," explains the designer.

Having cut her teeth at Soho House Group and Waldo Works, Hickman was bound to be in demand after launching her practice five years ago. She has designed spaces for rock stars and premium fashion brands, and has just completed a penthouse at Television Centre (the former BBC headquarters) as well as Gwyneth Paltrow's *Goop* pop-up in London. "I try to get to the essence of a space. It's a little bit like writing – you try to get your idea across in as few words as possible," she says.

The Hickman ethos is perhaps summed up on the quote the designer cites from Hepworth herself: "The sense of feeling...is the first one we have when we're born...with a sculpture you must walk around it, bend toward it, touch it...walk away from it."

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Fran Hickman
was inspired by a
Barbara Hepworth
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when designing
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Beehive lights



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Namibia white marble has been used in the master bathroom, which leads off a bedroom with a bespoke bed and chest of drawers



The staircase spirals up the house, lending a quiet sense of drama to the interiors; its white finish echoes the external stucco facade