



From period clutter to extreme minimalism



Pared down: Yuki's Chester Square home is full of surprises, including a Zen garden, an electronic screen that can divide the kitchen from the dining area, and bedside tables that disappear

Behind the Georgian façade of fashion designer Yuki's SW1 home, Cheryl Markosky discovers a 'monastic cube'

CHESTER Square, a smaller version of Eaton Square in London's Belgravia, has been home to a number of luminaries. Baroness Thatcher is currently in residence, alongside Andrew Lloyd Webber, Mary Wollstonecroft Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* and widow of the poet, once lived here, as did Matthew Arnold, Harold Macmillan and Yehudi Menuhin.

In an area where tradition reigns supreme, you are unlikely to find cutting-edge design nosing its way past the antiques and swags. That is, unless you visit the low-slung brick building, more radical indoors than it appears from the outside, belonging to Japanese designer Yuki (real name Gnyuki Torimaru), who worked for Norman Hartnell and Pierre Cardin, and the first designer to show a retrospective collection of his work at the Victoria & Albert Museum in the 1970s.

Yuki is best known for transforming the shy ingénue Princess of Wales from "Cinderella to stateswoman". This is how fashion doyenne Suzy Menkes from the *International Herald Tribune* described her in a flowing Yuki blue silk pleated dress worn during a royal visit to Japan in the 1980s. The elegant outfit later fetched in excess of \$25,000 at a New York charity auction.

After more than 40 years of living in the small, elaborately furnished rooms of his redbrick 'infill' house on the Square, Yuki teamed up with minimalist architect John Pawson to raze it to the ground and replace it with a 21st-century, four-storey "monastic cube". To show how serious he was about leaving all his annoying clutter behind, Yuki auctioned off the entire contents of the house - including silk curtains, mirrored radiator covers, chandeliers and sketches of dresses designed for Princess Diana.

It took several years to get planning permission, Yuki, a youthful looking 70, says. "Surprisingly, Westminster council okay-ed a modern façade, but the residents' association and the Grosvenor Estate said no. After amending the exterior so it fitted in with the Georgian buildings on the square, we were eventually able to start construction."

Gradually, a serene three-bedroom house with light wide-planked Danish oak flooring and white walls emerged. In keeping with the clean Pawson minimalist design ethos, white doors can be pulled over to hide televisions, home office clutter and kitchen gadgets.

Yuki thought the house would be a mixture of ideas from himself and Pawson, but it was not to be. "I shouldn't be saying this, but my suggestions were completely ignored - but I am very happy with what Pawson has done."

The concept is simplicity, with nothing unnecessary, says Yuki. "This is very much how I make a dress, working on what to take out rather than what to add."

Selling off his worldly goods today would certainly be a less messy affair than it was five years ago. The minimalist Pawson sweep means the house is sparsely furnished, with many bespoke items such as pull-down side tables in the bedrooms, a Jacuzzi surrounded by dark oak and extra-wide drawers under the sink in the master bathroom.

Yuki believes you can get trapped into buying minimalist-looking furniture that just isn't comfortable.

"After trawling round the furniture

fairs, I couldn't find what I wanted, so had most of the furniture made in Denmark," he says.

The designer likes materials that are sensual and soft to touch, which explains the tan leather chairs in his study and dining room, all of which he would sell to a new owner.

For those chilled by the coldness

of some minimalist dwellings, Pawson has had a bit of fun here. Instead of skirting boards, the architect has run lighting strips along the floor of the ground floor reception room. An oak staircase with a light strip running down the right hand side - a kind of shadow gap - helps guide you up the stairs.

"Stairs are essentially functional, but these are more of an art form," points out agent Seamus Wylie from Ayrton Wylie, who is selling Yuki's unusual house for £5.5 million. "It feels a bit like *Jack and the Beanstalk*, as it can be a bit baffling at first what level you are on and whether you are going up or down."

Another whimsical idea is the big walk-in power shower on the second floor with the base made from one big limestone slab and a glass roof. "It is like being in Thailand," announces Yuki, "and being able to

look up at the sun first thing really gets the day off to a good start."

Touching buttons so things happen discreetly is part of the design ethos too. Soft white blinds on the full-length windows are set on timers so that they slide down at night and glide up in the mornings. Far kinder than an alarm, or a clock radio clicking on to *The Today Programme*.

The other clever bit of button-pushing is in the kitchen/dining room, where you can lower a screen to mask the cooking zone from the dining area. A small maid's room is tucked off the kitchen with its own bathroom. And there is a Japanese garden off the dining-room based on the principles of Zen, with a boulder and raked sand - like an island surrounded by rippling water.

With Yuki spending around a month a year with his family in Japan and a good deal of time in his apartment in Cannes, he believes it is time to sell his minimalist London home. However, he won't be leaving London behind.

"I own a secret Japanese garden in north London and I want to build another house there if I can get planning permission. I must be crazy, but I feel it is time to do something new."

Contact Ayrton Wylie 020 7730 4628, www.ayrtonwylie.com