

There's no place like home

In the heart of opulent central London is a house inspired by its owner's minimalist fashion designs. It is a rare fusion of luxury and austerity.

TEXT: **RICHARD WARREN**

Left to right: Japanese stone garden; the orange-brown chairs and green leaves provide the only splashes of colour in the reception room.



Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava says a home is an extension of its occupant's coat and should be designed as such. This view takes on a whole new dimension when describing the London abode of 71-year-old Japanese fashion designer Gnyuki Torimaru.

Co-designed with British architect John Pawson, "the father of minimalism", the interiors of this four-storey villa in Belgravia echoes the sartorial style of its resident right down to its last clean line. During a career that spanned 30 years, the award-winning fashion designer – widely known as Yuki – clothed many of the world's most famous women, including Princess Diana, Baroness Thatcher, Twiggy and Farah Fawcett. The simple, flowing garments he made would look completely at home hanging in a wardrobe in this house.

From the outside, 83a Chester Square, stands out as something different from other houses on the street. Neighbouring homes are largely Georgian, while Torimaru's abode is a recently built simplified version of this style but shorter because of planning restrictions. However, the cubic form of the new home, compared to the decorative grandeur of the 200-year-old houses around it, does not prepare visitors for what they will find inside this property.

The interiors are not just contemporary and minimalist, they verge on the monastic. Yet, it is luxurious, especially in the amount of space freed up by a design that focuses on stripping away unnecessary ornamentation. It is best summed up with an oxymoron – austere glamour. Put another way, here is an example of how less can be more. Six years ago, after much wrangling with local planning authorities, Torimaru started work on demolishing his former two-storey

house which had been home since 1959. He found that Regency-era house too small and ornate for his needs and tastes. After several years of designing, building and fine-tuning, a home was completed which more closely reflected its owner's personality. So minimalist is the interior that it is more revealing to describe what it does not have, rather than what it does. There are no paintings on the walls, no sculptures, no photos, no coving, no skirting boards, no walls painted in any colour other than white. There are no mirrors, bookcases or fancy light fittings. There are no visible electrical goods like TVs or music systems, nor visible gas appliances like ovens. Like the home's white goods, these are hidden behind white doors. Surfaces are free of clutter, indeed objects of any kind, except for two glass vases. This reflects the spirit of the fashion designer's creations.

"My design is very much a similar style," Torimaru says. "Always I think: 'What can I remove, what is not necessary?' I refine it down to the minimum, focusing on the detail. I think simple things are timeless. It means everything has to be perfect, so it is the same spirit as this interior design."

Aside from an abundance of white, other colours are scarce. The Danish oak floorboards and staircase are pale grey-brown and the lightweight, modernist, Danish leather upholstered chairs in the reception room are orange-brown. A solitary palm and those two vases of flowers (white petals) provide sparing dashes of green. There are some beige bed coverings in the bedrooms, but colour-wise, that's it.

As befits such modest, understated decoration, almost everything is matt. Textural contrast focuses on rough versus smooth. Rough fabric upholstered Italian sofas, armchairs and bed coverings complement smooth white cabinetry.

An unbroken line of doors conceal the home's utilities.





Left to right: minimal stairway; kitchen surfaces are free of all clutter.

Cabinetry is the thing in this house. If there is one element found in luxurious excess it is storage space, which comes in the form of floor-to-ceiling built-in wardrobes and cupboards. In some rooms they range the full length of a wall. There are six double wardrobes in the master bedroom and 10 drawers in the master bathroom.

The *piece de resistance* is the open plan kitchen and dining room, where 14 doors hide apparently unsightly utilities, like the oven and washing machine, or lead to small rooms, like a laundry, utility room and maid's room. All 14 identical doors are ranged in an unbroken line along one side of the kitchen/dining room into the corridor leading to it. Only the experience of opening and closing them on a regular basis would ensure you knew what lay behind, but for a novice, behind each door lurks a surprise. As with all other cabinetry in the house, these doors sink into the background and appear much like a wall. They do not have doorknobs, just a discreet groove in which to slip your fingers, so they run flush with each other and the wall.

To complement the opaque in this house, hiding ugly parts behind doors, is a bold transparent dimension – revealing parts considered beautiful. Examples include the glass roof in the master bedroom's shower cubical on the top floor which allows the user to see the sky to be seen as water pours over the user.

Also, the lower set of stairs leading from ground floor to basement can be seen from two floors above, through a floor-to-ceiling window in an alcove of the master bedroom. The staircase's simple form is an impressive sight, so too the other staircase which rises two levels from the ground floor as a single flight. The master bedroom alcove's window also allows light pouring in through a window behind it to filter down to the entrance hall below.

The key transparent detail is found in the basement where the kitchen/dining room is located. Visible through full-width French windows from the kitchen/dining room and the corridor leading to it is a Japanese-style garden that lies at the bottom of a light-well. It consists of a rock, a circle of small green plants growing around its base and pebbles, lots of pebbles.

Psychologists tell us that it is better to give a children a box to play with than the toy it might contain if we want them to develop their imagination. So it goes with adults. The fashion designer, whose work is all about allowing the imagination to run free, wants his house and garden simple, so his mind can wander without being influenced by the results of other peoples creativity, such as floral displays, sculptures and paintings, or distracted by clutter, like old newspapers lying on sofas and books sitting on coffee tables.

Torimaru likes to look at his garden and contemplate. Just as a box might become a house or a piglet in a child's mind, so the rock and its pebbles can become different things to the fashion designer. He likes to watch the light flicker on the white walls of his garden, to see how it subtly changes colour and how shade grows and retreats.

"It is inspired by Japanese stone gardens, very much in that spirit, with its pebbles and rocks," he says. "By looking at it your imagination can run free, so in some kinds of lighting you can imagine you are looking at a lake. For me it is a very peaceful thing to look at. Also, it is very solid, very safe, an indestructible garden."

Torimaru's days of looking at the rock are numbered. He is selling the three-bedroom house to spend more time at his equally spartan Cannes residence, although he will keep a small place in London. The Dhs40 million house is on sale through Belgravia estate agent Aryton Wylie. 