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the great indoors

...with **Fiona Barratt**

Interview by **Judith Wilson**

There can be few designers who, barely two years after setting up their own practice, are master-minding the complete overhaul of an 8,000sqft house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, not to mention assorted London residential projects, and the design of a luxury ski chalet or two. Indeed, one of Fiona's very first commissions was to design a 12,500sqft luxury ski chalet in Verbier for Sir Richard Branson, Virgin Hotels – Limited Edition. But then again, Fiona Barratt – still only in her late 20s – is a cool-headed powerhouse of a designer, unfazed by big projects and keen on luxury with a capital L. “But I also like to provide attention to detail and deliver an efficient service,” she says crisply. Currently she operates a small team from her

offices in Worlds End Studios in Lots Road, but 2009 looks set to be a busy year. Like many designers, Barratt doesn't like to be pigeon-holed in style terms, but her look is unmistakable: clean-cut, textural and deeply sophisticated, with a delicious mix of modern, bespoke and antique pieces. She is originally from Northumberland, but now lives and works in Chelsea. She studied Interior and Spatial Architecture at Chelsea College of Art, then Interior Design at the highly regarded Parsons School of Design in New York. She topped that off with three years at Kelly Hoppen, latterly as Head Designer. With so much valuable experience, it's no wonder that she is unafraid to tackle high-spec projects, or to deliver her own distinctive style. “I do like to design beautiful and current interiors, but they are not design-led,” she says. “My interiors have a certain longevity – I'm not interested in following fashions in magazines.” Right now, she's working on

a “very modern” bachelor pad in Notting Hill, using a masculine but discreet mix of dark wood, leather and linen.

Yet what particularly marks out Barratt is that she treads a refreshing line between bespoke design, and a healthy appreciation of the high street. On the one hand, she loves to create custom-designed furniture for her clients, and is often to be found, pen in hand, sketching a new idea.

“I love to draw, and I'm very visual,” she says.

In her South Kensington flat, she has one-off hammered steel and embossed leather tables, and she has just designed a two-metre high chandelier, featuring polish nickel and glass, for the new Chelsea house.

But by contrast, she will also use inexpensive

accessories. “Don't write off the high street – it is a fantastic resource,” she says. She also loves to do her own photography, and her own home is dotted with framed examples of pictures that she has taken.

Given her comparative youth, does she, one wonders, prefer always to work for younger clients? She shakes her head, and says the opposite is true. “Not at all – it's great to have a diverse mix, as it pushes my creative boundaries,” she says. When it comes to divining what a client wants, she uses a multi-faceted approach to get to the heart of a design. “I look at how clients are dressed, how they live, where they go on holiday,” she says. “I'm very honest with people – I'll tell them if something isn't going to work, and I like to create a bespoke interior that reflects their own personality.” The Cheyne Walk project, now nearing completion, is a brilliant example of her mix of a crisp, modern style teamed with an appreciation of existing architecture.

“There are beautiful old fireplaces, cornices and doors – teamed with a custom-made, modern Boffi kitchen and specialist plaster finishes,” she says. She also lists a centralised bath, a vaulted ceiling, and a spectacular walkway leading down into the garden, as look-at-me design features.

In today's economically gloomy times, it would be very easy for designers to tread a neutral, “safe” path, but Fiona remains eclectic in her choice of colours and finishes. She does admit to having a long-term love affair with all shades of grey, something of a signature colour for her, and to preferring a mix of textures, rather than too much pattern.

Last summer, she went to South Africa on safari, and was stimulated to find herself in surroundings that were so different to city life.

“I took a photograph of some mud, which had huge, dramatic cracks in it,” she says. Now, she is in discussion with plaster specialists to find if it's possible to create the effect onto a plaster wall, featuring silver leaf in the cracks. And as for colour, bright flashes are constantly on the horizon. “I've just finished a dining room in lilac and silver, and a kitchen with two huge orange velvet love seats,” she says with relish. And at the beginning of a new year, what could be more cheering than that?

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Fiona's living room in her Edwardian apartment on Cheyne Walk

