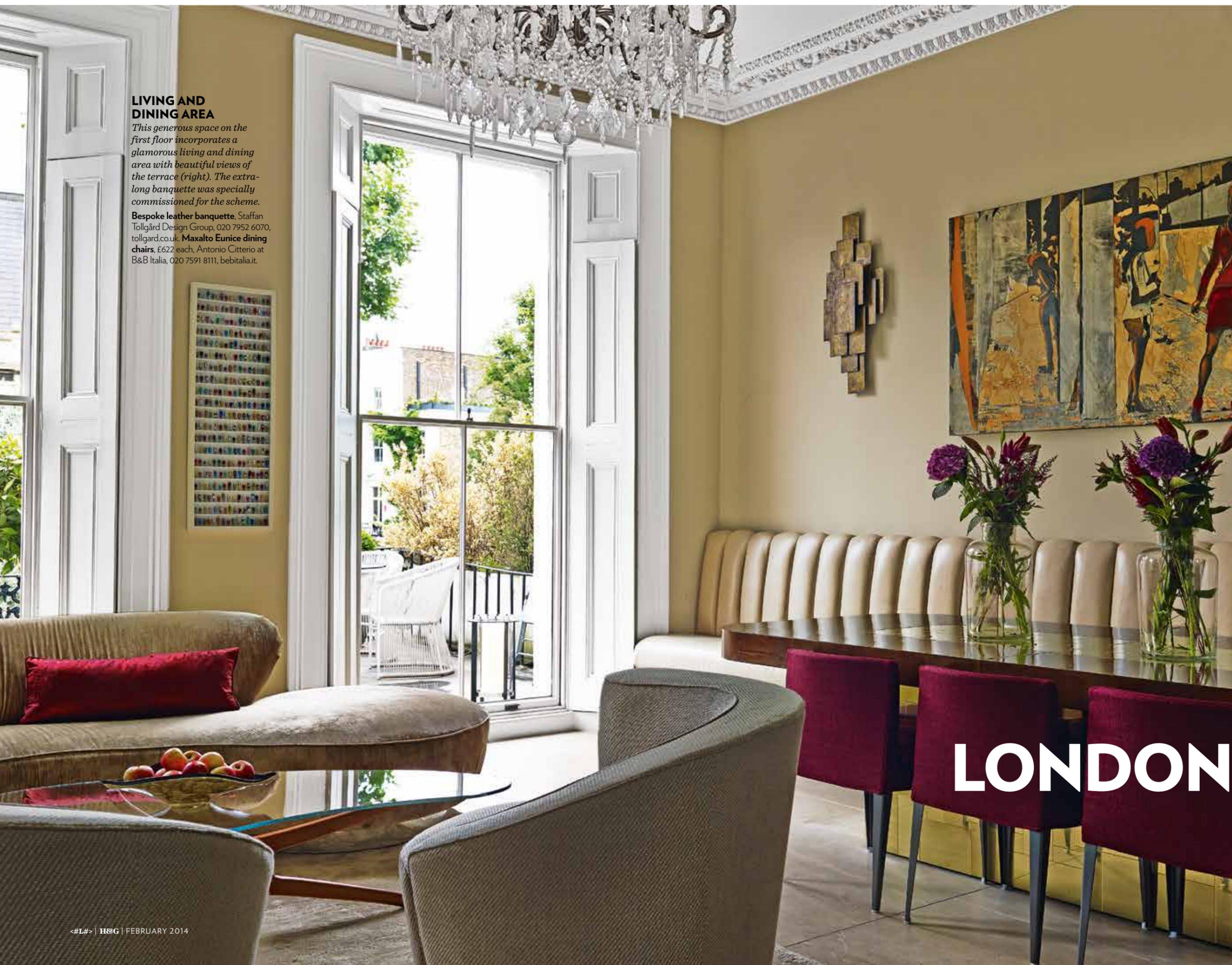


LIVING AND DINING AREA

This generous space on the first floor incorporates a glamorous living and dining area with beautiful views of the terrace (right). The extra-long banquette was specially commissioned for the scheme.

Bespoke leather banquette, Staffan Tollgård Design Group, 020 7952 6070, tollgard.co.uk. **Maxalto Eunice dining chairs**, £622 each, Antonio Citterio at B&B Italia, 020 7591 8111, bebitalia.it



Drawing on their cinematic backgrounds, Saul and Rachel Balston have used a sumptuous colour palette and a mix of mid-century-modern pieces to produce a theatrical décor

WORDS SERENA FOKSCHANER
PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID CLEVELAND

LONDON DRAMA



KITCHEN

A wall was removed to create an L-shaped space that allows the kitchen (left) to flow into the living and dining area.

LIVING AREA

A clever mix of contrasting materials, textures and wonderfully curvaceous shapes defines this elegant seating area (below left) within the larger open-plan space.

Nautilus armchairs, £3,019 plus 4m of fabric each; **Sculpture coffee table**, £3,216; all Kagan at Interior Supply, 020 7352 0502, interiorsupply.co.uk.

CLOAKROOM

A 16-foot-long fish tank running the length of one wall (right) makes an eye-catching addition to this intriguing space, finished with jewel-coloured velvet seating.

Fish tank design, Aquarium Group, 01732 760991, aquariumgroup.co.uk. **Similar sofa**, Eaton buttoned sofa, £2,990 plus 10m fabric, The Odd Chair Company, 020 7352 4700, theoddchaircompany.com.

ENTRANCE HALL

Curios such as a stuffed bear (below right) and a lighting installation by designer Alex Randall set a Gothic tone.

Bespoke lighting, Alex Randall, 020 3302 7136, alexrandall.co.uk.

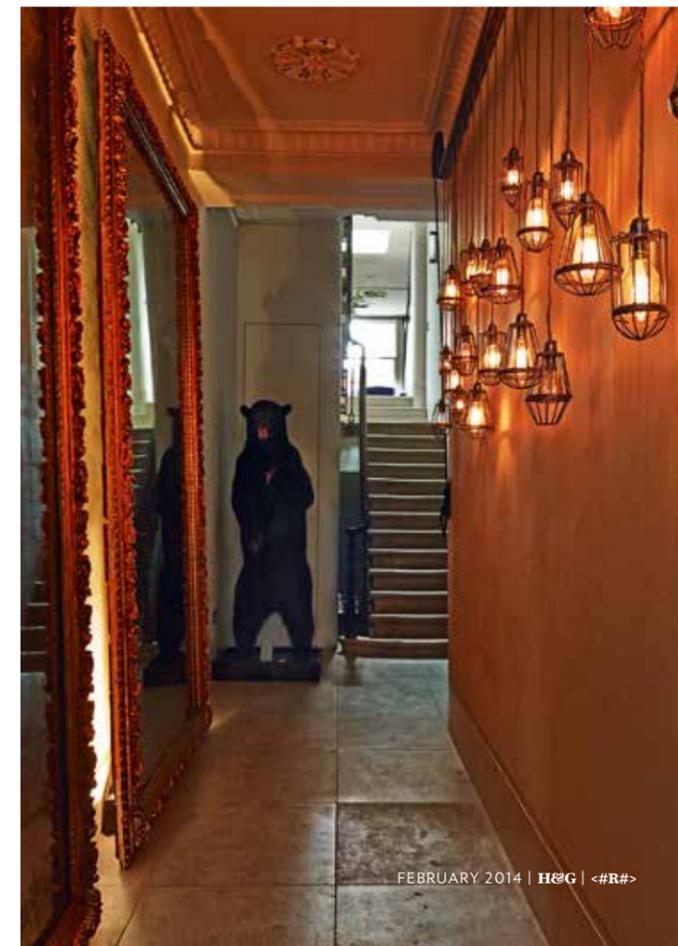


A sweep of claret-red velvet curtains screens the entrance to Saul and Rachel Balston's north London home. Part them and you find yourself plunged into a thrillingly Gothic atmosphere. Antique mirrors, silvery with age, soar towards 19th-century cornicing, while a stuffed bear, its jaws frozen in a menacing grin, stands guard. On another wall, a parade of suspended glowing lanterns by designer Alex Randall casts flickering shadows across the interior, like Victorian nightwatchmen prowling the city streets.

Part Edgar Allen Poe, with a dash of film noir, here is a house that confounds contemporary expectations. Ask homeowners what they value most about their interiors and the word "lightness" usually tops their list. Saul and Rachel, however, have taken a defiantly different tack, shunning sun-saturated modernity for a brooding palette of plum-dark velvets, burnished bronzes and ebony furniture. "We wanted somewhere different: a house for entertaining. It's a bit dark and enticing with random surprises," says Saul, as he meets us at the top of the staircase, where giant, faintly sinister iguanas prowl across the Timorous Beasties wallpaper.

To accomplish this idiosyncratic look, the Balstons commissioned interior designer Monique Tollgård of the Staffan Tollgård Design Group, who was quick to grasp her clients' (albeit loose) brief for a "house where the original architecture is infused with drama and eccentricity". From the start, original details were meticulously restored: Portland stone was sourced to repair the sonorous staircase, while windows now gleam with bronze fittings commissioned from Joseph Giles. Incongruous features installed by previous owners – a château-esque fireplace and rustic flagstones among them – were removed in the Balstons' quest to restore a Victorian aura to the property's interior.

Yet, as the Balstons (who, unsurprisingly, both work in the film business) point out, there is nothing traditional here. On the first-floor landing you encounter a giant fish tank, which took "ten sweating men to install". It was another year before





SITTING ROOM

This second floor space comprises two areas: the evening room (left) and the study (right), both of which are filled with the Balstons' favourite American 20th-century furniture and artwork sourced from fairs and local dealers.

Charles sofa, from £8,475, B&B Italia, 020 7591 8111, beitalia.it. **Bespoke ottoman**, Ben Whistler, 020 8576 6600, benwhistler.com. **Similar armchairs**, Mars, £1,795 each, Andrew Martin, 020 7225 5100, andrewmartin.co.uk.

MAIN BEDROOM AND BATHROOM

The third floor is devoted to Rachel and Saul's bedroom (below right) and bathroom (below left), where original cornicing and architraves have been preserved as the background for a mix of commissioned and antique pieces.

Similar double bedspread, Dimple silk bedspread in Nude, £269.40, Gingerlily, 0843 216 9902, gingerlily.co.uk. **Metal Curl wall lights** in French Brass, £716 each, Porta Romana, 020 7352 0440, portaromana.co.uk.

the micro-marine environment was ready for the piscatorial inhabitants that dart around in dazzling shades of cadmium yellow and cobalt blue. Nearby, a sliding door opens on to a loo with black walls, potted plants and guttering candles. "We sacrificed a bedroom and bathroom to create this space. An impractical but satisfying move," says Saul, drily.

Unabashed glamour was also achieved by removing walls in the main reception rooms to create open-plan spaces for entertaining, although the L-shaped room on the first floor, Monique admits, "presented a challenge as we had to find a way to tie the different areas together". This was managed by deploying clever links: in the kitchen, pale lacquered storage is contrasted with a sequence of low stained-wood units that connect the kitchen with the seating area. Here, vampishly curvaceous sofas by Vladimir Kagan contrast with the linear feel of the dining area, where an ivory leather banquette is offset by burgundy leather chairs and a weighty 1950s table by American designer Paul Evans. To strengthen the link, the table's bronze pedestal inspired the choice of lustrous lights on the wall above.

"Saul and Rachel had a cinematic vision of how each room should look and feel; you can see this in the materials we chose," says Monique, pointing out the chocolate-dark doors with exaggerated proportions that strike the appropriately grand note. In the sitting room upstairs, a wall of reclaimed, unpainted bricks in the study area contrasts with the Balstons' favourite chrome-edged mid-century-modern furniture. Opposite, in the "evening room", a taxidermy bird flits above the television opposite a modern *Venus de Milo*. More juxtapositions abound – leather against velvet, hide against silk – enhancing the air of decadent elegance.

"This is a home," says Rachel, "that comes in to its own on winter nights," when curtains are drawn and sconces glow, enticing guests towards amethyst velvet sofas. Occasionally, visitors disappear only to be found downstairs gazing at the fish tank, absorbed in a world every bit as darkly captivating as the rest of this house. ■

