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Like a gallery, his finds are displayed by type: lustrous tiles, engravings, and amulets clustered in groups. A 'naked' patch on a wall is a rebuke, he says: it has to be filled. 'One object is never enough; it always sparks a collection.' Simon points to a row of keys displayed on the wall like a decorative frieze: a basic wooden peg, followed by more sophisticated metal versions. 'My father, who was in the Merchant Navy, gave me one when I was a child. After that, I went on a quest to find more. The Victorian one came from Brick Lane Market; the others from different places, including Uzbekistan. I'm fascinated by how objects have developed over time. The two themes that bind my collections are architecture and travel. Anything else, and I'm not interested.'

Over two decades, the 1930s interior has evolved: the theme of each room loosely based on his collections. He built the garden room himself, its soukish layers of textiles, cushions and decorative furniture sparked by a trip to Morocco when he came back with 15 elaborate lamps. 'Looking back at early photos I feel embarrassed. It looked almost minimal. Many subsequent trips were needed to fill it with plates, rugs and other objects. I love tying things together. Collecting the picture frames, display shelves and the plant stand helped unite an overall theme.' It's not about amassing things at speed, he says, but more about a gentle accumulation. Simon designed the glazed pocket doors in the garden room to disappear when opened. 'I wanted it to feel like a loggia in summer,' he adds.

After leaving university, Simon won a travelling scholarship from the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Knowing how buildings were made in the past informs his

approach. One of his most rewarding commissions was for the Art Workers' Guild in London. 'It's a Queen Anne building, but most people don't notice that an architect has been in and glazed over the courtyards – or added the wrought iron lanterns. The interventions have hints of the past.'

Simon recently made the decision to wind down his architectural practice to focus on painting and craft. 'I've always been a maker at heart. I would rather produce something myself than buy it.' In the sitting room, he designed the faux malachite wallpaper inspired by the interior of a Russian palace. He has also found ingenious ways to house his collections. 'I'm fascinated by the playful deceit of architecture; the jib doors, and secret panels. The way buildings are not quite what they seem,' he says, pointing to a vivid green and orange cabinet. The top, with its stepped profile, was inspired by the city gate into Fez, in Morocco. The cupboards below open to reveal the washing machine and dryer.

Not all his 'quests' start abroad. During a visit to the Horniman Museum, in south London, he spotted a fretwork plaque based on the decorative interiors of the Alhambra Palace, in Granada. 'I discovered they were made as souvenirs, from the 19th century when the Palace was being restored, to the 1930s when they were still churning them out. But that doesn't matter. The intricate plasterwork is exquisite. I don't see the difference between something that was made 200 years ago or now. Collectively they talk to each other. They're part of a story.'

He cites Sir John Soane, the 19th-century architect, as a constant influence and the inspiration for his studio upstairs. The picture-gallery red of the walls was originally formulated by historic paint expert, Patrick Baty, for The Art Workers' Guild. Simon made the console, with its trompe l'oeil surface, to display his 'Grand Tour' collection of antiquities: some old, others tourist trinkets.

Which brings us neatly back to the subject of posterity. Simon thinks he may have that covered, and he unfurls a hand-drawn proposal for a mausoleum – his entry to a competition run by Sir John Soane's Museum – featuring a gallery of his finds. Whether it materialises or not, it is an uplifting way to end our conversation. ☒



A Living Museum

Architect and artist Simon Hurst
has spent years turning his
everyday terraced house into a
beguiling cabinet of curiosities

FEATURE SERENA FOKSCHÄNER
PHOTOGRAPHS JAMES BALSTON

The eclectic mixmaster was an auction bargain. Although Simon says it doesn't really go with the Art Deco fire surround, he has plans to 'weave' the surround to make it work. The leaded glass bookcase houses several collections of eggs, spindles and paperweights.



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PREVIOUS SPREAD The dining room started as a repository for things brought back from three trips to India. The large central lamp is Moroccan, but came from a Moroccan lamp supplier in West London. The fireplace and ruby tiles are original to the house, but Simon added a projecting cornice to accommodate the elephant gong. The caryatids came from the plaster shop at Columbia Road, and the Biedermeier secretaire was bought in a distressed state at auction before being restored.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The exquisitely carved Japanese display case houses a multitude of collections. The woodcuts are all from St. Petersburg, while the chairs are Swedish and were bought at auction; the conservatory doubles up as laundry room, so Simon designed the cabinet to hide a washing machine and dryer. It's decorated in Valspar paint, which he favours for its sophisticated colours; Sir John Soane had an orrery in his library dining room, and this modern German version is the closest Simon could get at an affordable price. Peruvian "illas" – amulets used to say prayers to protect one's farmstead – and a candlestick bought in Budapest also feature in the display; Simon added the glass block window and alcove to house more collections. The hand-cut screen is a radiator cover he made.



The large central wall mirror was bought on Simon's first trip to Morocco and the small 'bow-tie' shaped glazed tiles are all from a recent trip to Uzbekistan. Simon built the sofa from two-by-four timber, adding some bun feet from eBay, and using cut-up mattresses and rugs to upholster it. Cushions are from trips to Marrakesh and Istanbul.

The settle-like bench in the corner of the bedroom is very finely inlaid with a tree of life and other motifs. It came from an auction in Dorking, and Simon believes it is probably Syrian. Another of Simon's clever decorative additions is the Greek Key frieze around the walls, which he designed on the computer, printed onto yellow card and then cut into strips and glued to the walls. The black marble and ormolu candlesticks were an auction purchase, and the clock was designed by the late architect Michael Graves for Alessi.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Some of the mirrors in this collection are genuine early 19th-century convex mirrors, while others are mid-20th-century retro versions. A few of them have been 'cobbled together and painted black and gold to complete the arrangement.' The chest of drawers was a cheap auction purchase, and is styled with a Georgian wig-stand and other objects. Black and white etchings and a calm green-grey on the walls is 'as minimal as I can get,' says Simon; the dining room was once a shade of pink, but as soon as the Moroccan yellow was used on the conservatory walls, Simon felt he had to 'beef it up', choosing a burnt orange shade instead; walls are hung with watercolour studies of India, while chests of drawers display architectural models of spiral staircases and domes.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP On the stairs, Simon displays a collection of pictures, some of which were picked up at Bonhams, 'back in the day when they ran sales of pictures with no reserve'. The ecclesiastical wall sconce came from Hemswell Antique Centre in Lincolnshire. Walls are painted in Snake Charmer by Valspar; Simon refitted the bathroom when he moved in, with a tile layout to fit the period of the house. The original wall colour was green, but after buying an original Art Deco ceiling light, he decided to paint the walls aubergine and the ceiling silver; Simon's apothecary collection started many years ago and includes examples from Argentina, Hungary and the Czech Republic, amongst others. The Coco Chanel perfume bottle came from a local charity shop.



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£1,535.75.
circular convex
convex mirror