

## Shaping the future

How is a new generation of interior designers responding to changing lifestyles, proliferating choice, the challenges of sustainability and the tireless demands of social media? Arabella Youens asked some of the profession's brightest lights

Photographs by Simon Brown

**O**VER the past 50 years, the British interior-design industry has grown up; back then, the land where the three glass domes of Design Centre, Chelsea Harbour stands was an unloved waterfront and the profession was still in its infancy. Today, London is home to some of the world's most prolific multi-disciplinary practices that undertake work around the globe, led by founders who have become household names, garnered honours and written books.

It is also a sphere that has become much more democratised; Instagram and Pinterest have fuelled a greater interest in the subject and, in many senses, it has lost its mystique. Previously, the only way to see inspiring interiors was in the pages of magazines and finding specialist painters, artisans and specialist upholsterers relied on those in the know. 'Decorators held their cards and contacts close to their chest,' says Stella Weatherall ([www.stellaweatherall.com](http://www.stellaweatherall.com)).

‘People are a bit tired of seeing the same thing again and again’

'Now, several leading names, such as Rita König and Beata Heuman, are happy to share their knowledge and sources through online classes. Technology has meant that it's a much more open field these days,' adds the decorator, who studied at the Inchbald and worked with the Dorset-based interior designer Flora Soames and Kit Kemp before setting up on her own. 'It's not only what the client sees. We use software to manage projects and procurement that allows small businesses such as mine to operate in a way that would have previously been impossible.'

Bath-based Canadian decorator Sean Symington ([www.seansymington.com](http://www.seansymington.com)) admits that social media has been a big boon for his young business. His brightly coloured rooms feature clever and unexpected mixes of patterns that are hard to miss on Instagram. With a design →



Sean Symington with his dog Penny at the designer's Victorian home in Bath, Somerset



Interiors should evolve, according to Stella Weatherall, pictured at her Kensington home

degree from Ryerson University in Toronto under his belt, Mr Symington took advantage of his mother's dual Irish-Canadian nationality by moving to London in 2015 with nothing but a suitcase or two. He secured a position first with the designer Samantha Todhunter and later with Sims Hilditch, before setting up his studio in 2019. 'I learnt that not everything had to match, to be brave with colour and was introduced to English country-house design.' The combination has proved hugely successful and he works on projects in London, the Cotswolds and East Anglia. 'I think people are a bit tired of seeing the same thing again and again. Being North American and one step removed, I can do traditional decorating or I can be more playful. My clients may have grown up with carpet in the bathroom, but they want a fresh take on their parents' decorating style.'

## ‘Formality has fallen away. It affects how rooms are now used’

A key skill in decorating remains as true today as it was 40 years ago: listening to a client's brief, understanding what they need and seeing the opportunities that might otherwise lie hidden. 'It's about giving them something they didn't know they wanted that elevates how they live in their home,' says London-based interior designer Pandora Taylor ([www.pandorataylor.co.uk](http://www.pandorataylor.co.uk)), who trained at the KLC and cut her teeth at the interior-design practice Kitesgrove. 'Interior design is a bit like your clothes—you want to wear them, you don't want them to wear you. An interior design should reflect you, not define you.' However, all the content available on social media can detract slightly from these aims, she agrees. 'I get design fatigue. There's so much to see, much of which is the same and, as a designer, you ask yourself: what can I add? On the positive side, it forces you to push things because the clients are very often design-savvy.'

What's easy to miss in the image-dominated world of the internet is that the value of using a professional interior designer lies in what they do long before decisions are made about fabrics and upholstery. Space planning and layouts are key. 'A big thing that has changed in the past few decades is the way people live in their homes,' says Isabella Worsley ([www.isabellaworsley.com](http://www.isabellaworsley.com)), who also trained at KLC after studying Architectural History and History of Art at Edinburgh University. 'Formality has fallen away in many ways. It affects how rooms are now used. For example, →