

One out of the box



Urban industrial meets French flair in this tiny Auckland apartment

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THIS PAGE Transparent polycarbonate Victoria Ghost chairs by Philippe Starck help to maximise visual space in Barbara Drake's tiny Auckland apartment; the denim curtains hand-stamped with fleur-de-lis motifs hide her wardrobe.

OPPOSITE Barbara sits in front of a decorative panel salvaged from a film set; it has been reworked and used to conceal her foldaway bed.





THIS PAGE Implements and ingredients are always near to hand in the compact galley-style kitchen. **OPPOSITE** Industrial-style shelving displays Barbara's collection of metallic and transparent objects.

AS A PRODUCTION designer and specialist in interiors, Barbara Drake's professional skills were put to good use when she set about creating the atmospheric interior of her tiny Mt Albert unit. Though she's accustomed to crafting inspiring settings for films, television programmes and private residences – often within fairly tight spatial and budgetary constraints – she found the makeover of the “concrete block box” a challenging project.

Her home, which measures just 21 sqm, is one of 25 units in a three-storey 1970s former motel that have been cross-leased and sold individually. “No way,” was Barbara's first thought when she saw the space in 2008 – then a cramped, dark and unimaginatively furnished room with few redeeming architectural features. But it was that utilitarian nature that ultimately led her to buy it. She was also seduced by the idea of totally transforming an unappealing space. “It got my creative juices flowing.”

Upon further consideration, Barbara realised that this virtual cube would allow her to put her belief in the benefits of downsizing into practice. Her own home could become another proof of the maxim that bigger is not necessarily better. >





Barbara has responded pragmatically to the confined space with low-profile accessories such as an unobtrusive plasma television and a narrow metal vegetable rack to hold the stereo speakers. The three transparent Philippe Starck Victoria Ghost chairs are functional yet don't squander visual space.

A predominantly blue-grey palette was chosen for its serenity and ability to give the illusion of a larger room, with bright pink cushions as staccato shots of vibrant colour. "It's such a small unit," says Barbara. "The only way it really works is to be very careful about what you use and how you use it. There isn't an inch anywhere that hasn't been accounted for."

Reflectivity, sheen and texture bring the surfaces to life. Barbara glamorised the concrete block walls with a silvery metallic paint. Pewter, gold and stainless steel also feature in an aesthetic best categorised as urban industrial meets 18th century France. "There's a certain kind of romance associated with that period."

An ornate gilt mirror and a commercial filing cabinet, a curvaceous chaise longue and a vertical row of seven storage lockers, fleur-de-lis motifs stamped on heavy denim curtains; all are testament to Barbara's knack for mixing up unconnected styles and eras to great effect. "I've honed my eye over years and years of looking for just the right object. I have an understanding of spatial relationships and shapes and colours and how they all work together," she says.

"I do have a particular style but it's hard for me to articulate what it is. I don't have anything around me that I don't like. Most of my finds are from thrift shops and flea markets." Unable to resist the thrill of uncovering unexpected treasures, Barbara largely steers clear of the predictability of design stores. "I like to find the jewel – something different that I can put my own stamp on. I'm not particularly interested in what's voguish." >



THIS PAGE (clockwise from top) The French reproduction chair from Yvonne Sanders was reupholstered and the Egyptian metal table next to it painted gold. An ornate gilt mirror reflects a stone-topped table; Barbara found the table base in New Orleans. The fruit bowl came from a thrift store.

OPPOSITE Barbara had the chaise longue, an adaption of a 1920s design, handmade in Los Angeles. A narrow shelf becomes a bedside table when the bed is lowered; Barbara spray-painted the (originally pink) 1950s goose-neck lamp silver. Lockers used for storage have custom-made stainless steel doors.



Barbara brought the pair of French-style chairs on the north-facing balcony back from Los Angeles; the terracotta tiled space contains potted greenery and it's out here that Barbara operates a Bokashi compost system. The exterior of the former 1970s motel.

Barbara says her home enchants all who visit it – one guest likened it to a jewel box. “I like places that appeal to everyone; it’s very important to me,” she says. “There’s a certain kind of peacefulness, calm and a light quality. For me, the eye needs to be able to travel seamlessly around a room.”

The single room works hard, functioning variously as a sitting room, dining room, office and bedroom. A decorative golden panel – once used on set as part of a Parisian jewellery store – marks the front of a foldaway double bed that pulls down from the wall in the evening. “Nobody knows it’s there.”

Yorkshire-born Barbara first came to New Zealand about 20 years ago but it’s the three years she spent in Kenya from the age of eight that continue to influence her. The “huge skies, prehistoric animals, wonderful plants and vibrant culture” left an indelible impression. “Africa is in my blood. It underpins who I am and what I like. I’m very drawn to colour and light and am fascinated by other cultures.”

Barbara likens her role as a set designer to being an anthropologist; to create a space for a character, she needs to get inside his or her head. Production and design projects here and in Los Angeles have made for a peripatetic existence over the last 16 years and she regularly crosses the Pacific. (See more of her work at decorum-inc.com.)

New Zealand is likely to figure more strongly in her immediate future, however. At the top of her to-do list is a project that couldn’t be more different from the transformation of her intimate Mt Albert pad. With her partner, LA-based journalist Peter Huck, she is landscaping an 11ha coastal site she bought in 1994, on the road to Colville on the Coromandel Peninsula. The pair plan to build a “completely off-the-grid” hilltop home that harnesses solar and wind power and generally abides by environmentally responsible principles.

Barbara’s green tendencies are also flourishing back in Auckland. As a member of the owners’ committee of her complex, she has been allocated space in a raised vegetable patch in the communal garden. Growing food is an activity that gives her great pleasure, she says, and also creates a natural gathering point for residents. A Bokashi compost system on her north-facing front balcony recycles kitchen scraps into nutrient-rich liquid fertiliser for the garden.

And in her free time she can retreat to an apartment that is a triumph of form and function over size. It may be small but it represents all the core values of any successful home: it’s hard-working, versatile and beautiful – a fitting backdrop to the life and work of a production designer who views interiors as “a series of still lives coming together”. ■

