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In London, Downsizing From a Penthouse

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When April Russell and her husband decided their expansive four-bedroom penthouse in Holland Park was too big for their current needs, they bought a three-bedroom apartment in Chelsea — and turned it into a one-bedroom home.



“My husband and I have six children between us and we felt that, since the children had all moved to their own homes, we didn’t need such a large property,” said Ms. Russell, 51. She is also properly called Lady Thomson as her husband, Sir Mark Thomson Bt, 69, a retired investment manager, holds the hereditary title of baronet.

“My husband wanted to live in Chelsea and we liked these beautiful old blocks near the River Thames and nearby parks,” she said. “So we sold our home and rented while we looked for a flat.”

Ms. Russell, who was born in New York, studied interior design in Boston and in London, at Sotheby’s Institute of Art and at the Inchbald School of Design.

“In 1979, I met my first husband, we had our two daughters, and among other projects, I did up our own houses and a property for development investment in Belgravia’s Chester Square,” she said. In 1999 she started her own company, April Russell Designs.

Her projects have ranged from refurbishing rooms in private homes to working with developers on large projects. “I have recently worked on a number of homes in London’s Lowndes Square,” she said.

It was three years ago that Ms. Russell and her husband found the spot they were looking for: a second-floor apartment in Cheyne Court, a Victorian-era red brick building that dates to the 1880s.

“I came to see this apartment and decided in 10 seconds that I wanted to buy it,” Ms. Russell said. “The aim was to create somewhere for us to live where I could also work. We also wanted space to entertain our friends and family.”

As soon as the purchase was completed, the 1,534-square-foot apartment was taken right back to the brick, with the ceilings, floors and walls all removed. “We put a lot into the flat. In fact we totally refurbished it but we knew we would stay here for at least another nine years, if not longer,” said Ms. Russell.



The entrance hall. Ms. Russell, an interior decorator, said she knew immediately that the 1,534-square-foot apartment would be right for the couple but that it would require a lot of work.

Door heights were raised and fitted with bespoke black-stained oak doors. Walls were painted to have texture. Most of the couple's antique furniture had been sold or given to family members, and new pieces were specially made, many by the French furniture designer Christian Liaigre.

"I love 19th- and 20th-century French furniture, but I like to mix them with more contemporary pieces as well," Ms. Russell said.

The 26-by-20-foot reception room, which leads off the entrance hall, had been an open-plan living and dining area. Ms. Russell redesigned it to create one large drawing room with several different seating areas. A new smoked oak floor was laid, bookshelves were built in alcoves and one of the room's two fireplace mantles was moved to the bedroom.



Ms. Russell had the three-bedroom apartment gutted and then reconfigured it, dividing most of the space into this 26- by 20-foot reception room for entertaining, an American-style kitchen and one master bedroom.

Ms. Russell chose largely neutral tones to give the room a bright airy feel and to make the most of the natural light pouring through the French windows. Stronger colors were brought in through fabrics and accessories. “I do like to use accents of color,” she said. “At the moment I love melon and have used it in this room in one or two different places.”

Opposite the drawing room is Ms. Russell’s 9-by-11-foot office, a space that had been a small bedroom.

The master bedroom is 18 feet by 11 feet and, next door, a study was turned into a spacious 11-by-11-foot bathroom. It features an antique cabinet that Ms. Russell bought on King’s Road and had converted into a basin unit.



The master bedroom. Ms. Russell used light colors throughout the apartment to enhance the illusion of space and light.



The 11- by 11-foot en-suite bathroom was originally a study. Ms. Russell found an antique cabinet that she had made into a base for the sink.

Along another hallway is the kitchen. When the couple bought the apartment, the 20-by-14-foot space was the master bedroom and bathroom, but Ms. Russell opened it up to create an American-style kitchen, with cream-colored cabinets and granite counters. There is a work island at one end, and a table and upholstered leather benches at the other.

“I wanted the room to have a good dining space for entertaining but to flow as well,” Ms. Russell said. “We find it really works now.”



Cream-colored cabinetry and granite work surfaces were installed in the kitchen.



Rather than have a formal dining room, Ms. Russell decided to put a table at one end of the kitchen.

Tom Dogger, the director of the Winkworth real estate agency serving Knightsbridge, Chelsea and Belgravia, said a similar property would sell for £1.5 million pounds and £1.8 million (\$2.5 million to \$3 million).

“Interest in apartments like this, which sell for between 1,000 and 1,200 pounds per square foot (\$1,650 to \$1,980) in parts of old Chelsea, like Cheyne Court, tend to be from U.K.-based buyers,” he said. “This means that unlike properties in Knightsbridge or Belgravia — that attract more foreign buyers — they are slower in seeing a resurgence from the dip in the property market.”

But, he added, “While these types of apartments may have dropped in value by about 10 percent since 2007, in real terms there has been a limited change in the market. This is because they rarely come up for sale.”

Ms. Russell and Sir Mark say they certainly have no plans to sell at the moment. Sir Mark, whose hobby is flying his twin-engine Beech Baron 58, finds the location ideal for area airports, as does Ms. Russell for her work life.

“I try to get back to America twice a year to see family but I don’t think I will ever move back there now; I love England and my life is here now,” Ms. Russell said. “But, even after all this time, I think that there is probably a bit of New York here with me in everything I do.”