
Man on a **MISSION**



His design has shaped the look of many of Mayfair's iconic places. From The Connaught and Claridge's to designing the interiors of yachts, Guy Oliver talks about how he is redecorating our world one room at a time

WORDS: KATE RACOVOLIS





FAR LEFT:
CRAFTSMANSHIP
IMAGE: DAMIEN
RUSSELL. LEFT:
FRENCH SALON AT
CLARIDGE'S, IMAGE:
TOM SULLAM

Guy Oliver has figured out how to be in several places at once. After some 21 years as an interior designer, he has restored and redesigned countless projects in Mayfair and abroad, including The Connaught, Claridge's, various London townhouses, luxury private yachts and art exhibitions in Paris – imprinting his own personal style on each.



my spare time I'm still technically working, but it's not work to me. If I think I should sketch something up, that to me is not necessarily work.' There is no time for television or lounging around, except for the odd spot of *Family Guy* – 'If at the end of the day you're laughing, that's a good way to go to sleep,' Oliver says.

Last year he also added Noma's pop-up restaurant at Claridge's to his list of accomplishments, where he transformed the hotel's ballroom into a dining room. He owes many of his formative years as a young designer to, of all places, the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth. Alongside his military training, he had the opportunity to absorb and be inspired by the cultures of the places he visited – so it comes as no surprise when the odd porthole-style window appears in his decoration.

Perhaps it is this mantra – hard work with a bit of kitschy television and a good sense of humour – that has won him the design contracts for some of the most iconic places in Mayfair.

In his office in the 18th century building on Conduit Street above Lalique, Oliver sits among his vast sprawl of books, with copies of *The World of Interiors* and swatches, multitasking – as he calls it – sketching beautiful chairs and bedside tables with one hand and holding a telephone in the other. These are the very pieces that you see at places like The Connaught.

At The Connaught, Oliver has been responsible for the majority of refurbishments over the past three years – from the fresh licks of gold leaf in Room 105 (which also happens to be Jack Nicholson's favourite suite to stay when he is at the hotel) to the walnut woodwork in the Prince's Lodge suite, sourced from the philanthropic project in Afghanistan he supports, Turquoise Mountain. In Kabul, he helped rebuild a small district to encourage and sustain the livelihood of local artisans, who carve the intricate pieces that he uses throughout the hotel and his other projects.

'There are not enough hours in the day. I love to keep myself occupied,' Oliver says. 'When it's

'A lot of my personality is here,' says Oliver, standing in the cedar-scented Prince's Lodge, the smell of which he has become so accustomed to that the aroma doesn't demand the attention of his senses quite like it would for a visitor.



He is excited, rather than intimidated by such vast histories and the designers before him. 'It's like directing a movie. I'm sure that Steven Spielberg doesn't feel threatened by Ang Lee. It's just different visions and there is plenty of room for everybody. It's just that my vision is from my experience,' Oliver notes. 'It's not a formula; you've got to know about the personality that is going to inhabit the space and not just give a prescriptive design. It's more listening to how they live and then understanding. I think the hotels I work on are more like private houses anyway with the Maybourne [Hotel] Group. But I had to create an imaginary client, which happens to be whoever walks into the hotel.'

Oliver's changes to The Connaught were seamless; an accurate example of his current style and previous bodies of work. In the original hotel, his classical style of design prevails in the teak staircase – the centrepiece of the establishment. In the more contemporary West Wing, the interiors nod to Oliver's nautical origins with white walls and nickel finishes – a reminder that his personal style is quite literally in every corner.

'I think you've got to try and reflect the personality or the character of what the building is used for. With the Connaught I didn't originally want to work on it because it had such

a strong identity, but we very subtly created a new one for it,' Oliver says. 'It was funny when the Grosvenor Estate walked around here after we finished. We did a lot of alterations and changed things and undid things that people had done in the past and they walked around and said, "What have you done? It has always been like this." And then I thought, okay that's good.'

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Reflecting eras bygone, Oliver's style is distinct. No piece of wood, doorknob or coffee table book is out of place in buildings like The Connaught. The coming months will see many new projects come to fruition, including The Champagne Bar at The Connaught (to open this month) as well as designing a restaurant in Paris later this year for his friend Hélène Darroze. You may even find him stopping at The Mount Street Deli for a sausage roll in the mean time – necessary sustenance for the next thing on his agenda. **M**

FROM LEFT: NOMA AT CLARIDGE'S, IMAGE: TOM SULLAM; THE CONNAUGHT, IMAGE: DAMIEN RUSSELL; BATHROOM AT THE CONNAUGHT, IMAGE: GUY HILLS; PRINCE'S LODGE AT THE CONNAUGHT, IMAGE: GUY HILLS; BALLROOM AT CLARIDGE'S, IMAGE: NIALL MCDIARMID

