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Designing your forever home

There are ways to avoid downsizing after retirement. *Emily Brooks* meets the people who are building houses that will last a lifetime

INTERIORS

Give your couch the couture look

A pleat here, a tassel there: *Emily Brooks* gets a feel for the tailored upholstery beloved of luxury designers

One of the things that sets decorating professionals apart is their more creative approach to upholstery. Visit a designer's apartment and the headboards take up entire walls; dining chairs are wrapped in intricately pleated, embroidered textiles; and there are subtle contrasts – such as smart piping on sofas – on almost every piece of furniture.

"Decorative upholstery adds glamour, depth and interest to an interior," says Anna Bilton, head of design at Helen Green Design. "These bespoke furniture pieces are so perfectly tailored that they evoke the care and attention taken in the design and fabrication of couture clothing."

The couture analogy is fitting when it comes to the intricate hand-embroidery that decorates the most glamorous pieces.

Fabric house Beaumont & Fletcher supplies museum-quality embroidery in gold and silver threads, pearls and semi-precious stones – made in Mumbai, since the skills no longer exist here. From peacocks wrapping themselves around the sides of sofas to Art Deco geometrics snaking down the backs of dining chairs, each project is unique.

At the Brummell Penthouse at

Nirvana: Aiveen Daly's made-to-order Paradise chair, main; Chiaro Scuro ottomans by Spina, below, are £1,399 each



Peachy: the Lula sofa, by Fern & Grey, is £419; a Brielle chair by Graham & Green, far right, is £506

Beau House on London's Jermyn Street, the influence is – aptly – more made-to-measure suit than couture gown.

Inspired by 18th-century fashion plate Beau Brummell and the street's links with gentlemen's tailoring, interior design firm Oliver Burns has incorporated details such as the two subtly different fabrics used on the armchairs, playing around with texture and contrast just like a suit and its lining.

In one bedroom, a whole wall of upholstered panels is used in lieu of a headboard, with lines of bronze upholstery nails suggestive of a row of stitches.

The penthouse's distinctive dining chairs, with their precision-cut panels in a chevron pattern, are the work of London-based decorative upholsterer Aiveen Daly. "People are beginning to see that there's a lot more you can do with upholstery as a surface to be embellished," she says.

Her pieces are often highly intricate, with complex cuts of fabric, micro-pleating, embroidery and trims, requiring many hours of workmanship. She has noticed more demand for objects that layer up these techniques to dazzling effect, but "it doesn't have to be all bells and whistles", she says. "We also work on some contemporary schemes where the style is more architectural. You might have a highly textured piece, but in a very quiet fabric." Nor is her work confined to seating and headboards: internal walls, doors and stair balustrades can all be decorated.

Like any element of interior design,



upholstery has its fashions. Deep buttoning – the distinctive feature on a Chesterfield sofa – has been dominant over the past decade. Its smart and classic look is being challenged by the current maximalist mood in interiors, so expect to see

Sharp: Brummell Penthouse at Beau House, above, was inspired by Jermyn Street's tailors



Soft palm: a Navarino sofa in Palmeral fabric is £5,495 by House of Hackney

interest – it's best to avoid doing all at once, though!"

There are few ready-made examples of creative upholstery. Graham & Green's Brielle armchair, in turquoise velvet with a vivid African batik texture on the back and the buttons, is perfect for a room where it can be viewed from all sides. Fern & Grey's mid-century-inspired sofas have contrast piping, including blush pink with mint-green.

If you don't like the fabrics offered by sofa companies, seek out a manufacturer that will work on a "COM" (customer's own material) basis, such as Loaf or Sofa.com. For beds, the Headboard Workshop will work with your fabric (or multiple fabrics), and also makes walls of upholstery that serve as a huge headboard, just like those seen in many high-end properties.

There's a skill to pairing the right textile with the style of upholstery: for example, a large-scale print will distort on a deeply buttoned design. "If it is a busy pattern, let the fabric do the work and put it on a relatively simple shape," says Laura Kelway-Bamber from the Headboard Workshop.

"Deep buttoning looks wonderful in pure wools or velvets, as the texture is enhanced by the detail."

Ultimately, upholstery is a way of injecting both personality and comfort into an interior design. "People are starting to realise that you can't just take an entirely neutral and featureless room and throw in a few brightly coloured cushions," says Duggan. "A well-designed room is balanced, layered and well considered."

That needn't be too costly, especially if you start small, says Daly. "Even if you don't have a huge budget, upholstery is an easy way to make a room your own. If it's just a little footstool or something, you can make it amazing."

'If it is a busy pattern, let the fabric do the work'

more pattern, fringing and valances, and Seventies-style channelled upholstery in leather and velvet.

"There is limited opportunity to buy one-of-a-kind upholstery on the high street," says interior designer Tiffany Duggan of Studio Duggan. "Our clients want individual pieces that are unique to them, and contrast upholstery is a great way to do this. We like to use a bold pattern on the backs of armchairs and a soft tactile velvet to the front. Brass trim, nailheads, bright contrast piping, tassels, appliqué and fringing are all excellent ways of adding