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I hated my cluttered childhood home growing up. Now I love the lived-in look

Designer Rachael Gowdridge never thought she'd echo the maximalist interiors choices of her parents in her own space

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Rachael Gowdridge photographed in her family home Credit: 000493339113

As you pass an Edwardian house on a quiet north London street, whimsical red fairy lights glowing through the dining room windows hint that this is no ordinary family home. That impression is confirmed the moment you step inside, where a giant disco ball hangs in the hallway. Beyond it, every room unfolds like a cabinet of curiosities: bookshelves overflowing with postcards and family photographs, [gallery walls crowded with art](#), and treasures accumulated over decades.

To visitors, it is full of charm. To interior designer Rachael Gowdridge, who grew up here, it once felt rather less enchanting.

“When I was younger, I felt self-conscious about having people over because our house was so different to my friends’. Theirs felt much more edited with coordinated furniture and bare walls. Mine couldn’t have been more different,” says Rachael, who now acknowledges the discomfort was entirely her own.

“My friends have always loved the house, everyone does. There is something to look at on every surface and it’s [warm and cosy](#). I used to see it as a house full of ‘things’; now I realise it’s a house full of stories.”



"When I was younger, I felt self-conscious about having people over because our house was so different to my friends"
Credit: Rii Schroer

The double-fronted house has belonged to Rachael's mother, who works in media, since 1983, while her step-father, an architect, moved in during the early 1990s.

"Twenty years ago, it was actually much more pared back," says Rachael, who lived in the house until 2018 when she turned 30.

"My mum and step-dad have [created this homage to our family's history](#) and the life they have lived together, but when I was younger, I was always trying to persuade Mum to throw things away. I thought fewer possessions would make the house feel calmer."

Only later did she realise she had confused visual richness with disorder.

"I think clutter is when objects have no relationship to each other," she says. "Their house isn't like that. Everything belongs. Everything has meaning. It's abundance rather than clutter."





Today, Rachael's [childhood home](#) has become a big and ongoing influence on Rachael's own home and her work as an interior designer.

Throughout her mother's house, white walls provide a gallery-like backdrop for paintings and family photographs. The hallway displays Rachael's artwork alongside pictures of her step-father's architectural projects, while the sitting room combines a grand piano with a Victorian mantelpiece crowded with figurines and sculptures.

In the dining room, [floor-to-ceiling bookshelves](#) become a living archive, filled with all manner of literature, postcards, photographs and mementoes. Male and female busts occupy one corner like permanent dinner guests; another fireplace is scattered with treasured ephemera and Venetian masks bought on a family holiday adorn the walls.



Holiday souvenirs in the form of Venetian masks form part of the decor in her childhood home Credit: Rii Schroer

One of the house's defining quirks is its [lighting](#). Rachael's step-father dislikes ceiling lights so much he has removed them entirely, leaving the original Victorian ceiling roses intact. Instead, every room is illuminated by table and floor lamps. "You almost have to take a tour of the room switching them all on, but it creates this wonderfully layered light," says Rachael.

"My step-father introduced beautiful design classics which my mum has gradually made her own. The Flos Arco floor lamp, a timeless design from the 1960s, is wrapped in spiralling fairy lights, while an Eileen Gray Lota sofa is piled with faux-fur throws and geometric cushions. I love that. Nothing feels too precious to live with; it's simply part of the fabric of the house."

Growing up, Rachael and her brother were encouraged to do "whatever we wanted" to their bedrooms. "I experimented with paint and was always rearranging my room."



Rachael's step-father, an architect, displayed his models in his office and around the home Credit: Rii Schroer

Looking back, she now sees it as the beginning of her design education.

After studying contemporary art and then completing a master's in interior design, Rachael worked on sleek, minimalist interiors that reflected the tastes of the early 2010s.

Everything changed when she joined maximalist Martin Brudnizki's studio.

"Watching Martin layer colour, antiques and objects made me realise decoration isn't simply aesthetic; [it's narrative](#). I started to understand how much my upbringing had shaped that way of thinking," she notes.

"Layering still involves editing. It's about choosing to live with objects that contribute to the story of your home. It mixes textures, eras and memories into something that feels authentic rather than overbearing."

That philosophy underpins the London design studio she launched in 2021. "I like to understand how clients live, what their daily rituals are and how they want a room to feel. If they've travelled extensively or inherited something important, I want those stories to become part of the house. It shouldn't feel sterile. Personality should come through artwork, possessions and vintage pieces," says Rachael, who regularly sources furniture and decorative objects through Pamono, Vinterior, Custodian Antiques and Pitch St Leonards.

“[Vintage finds](#) thrive over time; they are enduring. And that’s what we want our interiors to be.”

Last year Rachael, her partner and their cat, Boots, bought a ground-floor Victorian conversion just two miles from her childhood home.

“The flat hadn’t been touched for years, but I could immediately see its potential,” she says. “It had beautiful proportions, high ceilings and lovely Victorian bones.”

Before moving in, the couple undertook an extensive renovation, reinstating cornicing and ceiling roses before converting the front bedroom into the living room to make the most of the generous bay window. Rather than disguising a structural lintel that interrupted its height, Rachael chose to celebrate it, introducing a picture rail aligned with the top of the window before painting the walls below with Bauwerk limewash in Calm and the upper walls and ceiling in the deeper mid-caramel shade Reflection. “It turned what could have been an awkward compromise into something intentional,” she says.

The influence of her childhood home is unmistakable, although interpreted with a lighter touch. Like her parents’ house, the walls are deliberately understated, allowing artwork, furniture and collected objects to provide the colour and character.

A bespoke brick-coloured L-shaped sofa from Andrew Martin anchors the living room, while contemporary pieces sit comfortably alongside vintage finds. Traditional Orkney chairs inherited from her partner’s grandparents share the space with a playful 1980s Matthew Hilton Flipper coffee table from Pamono, its curved glass legs resembling dolphin flippers.



Artwork, furniture and collected objects to provide the colour and character in Rachael's living room Credit: Rii Schroer

“I could have chosen something much more refined, but I wanted something that surprises people,” says Rachael.

Although she hasn’t banished ceiling lights altogether, like her stepfather, there is [no harsh overhead lighting](#). “We’ve got chrome uplighters commissioned through Etsy and, to soften the harder metal finish, a sculptural silk pendant from Gong,” she says. “Together, with the table lamps, they can create different moods throughout the day.”



Rachael uses table lamps to create mood lighting Credit: Rii Schroer

Above the sofa, a large canvas from Interrupted Art is rotated every 10 weeks while Rachael decides on a permanent piece, and nearby hangs a painting by Hannah Ludnow, given to her by her partner as a birthday present. Around the room, vintage finds collected in Rye, St Leonards and at Shepton Flea sit alongside aquatint etchings by Italian artist Massimo Danielis, discovered at Hampstead Art Fair.

Books are equally intrinsic to the scheme. Contemporary design titles sit beside architecture volumes inherited from her stepfather, creating, as Rachael puts it, “a conversation between different chapters of my life”. Elsewhere, a small wooden box from her grandparents’ house sits alongside a ceramic bowl bought during Crouch End Open Studios; objects chosen not because they complete a colour scheme, but because they represent moments and memories.



Books from her step-father, a ceramic bowl purchased from Crouch End, flowers and candles come together to create meaningful decor Credit: Rii Schroer

Unlike her parents' house, whose collections have accumulated over four decades, her own is still taking shape. Each artwork, vintage find and inherited piece becomes another chapter in a home that is growing alongside its owners.

"I wanted somewhere that represents who I am today but can continue to evolve as I evolve," she says. "My childhood home taught me to value objects with stories, and that's something I'll always carry with me."

Five ways to create a lived-in look

Rachael's tips for layering:

1. Combine old and new

Rooms feel more established when furniture and objects come from different periods. An antique table beside a contemporary sofa, or modern artwork above a traditional fireplace, creates tension and stops a scheme feeling too coordinated.

2. Vary scale and silhouette

Layering is as much about shape as it is about pattern. Combine low, solid furniture with taller, finer pieces; curved forms with straight lines; and small decorative objects with one or two more substantial elements.

3. Use lighting at several levels

A single ceiling light flattens a room. Combine floor lamps, table lamps, wall lights and picture lights to create pockets of atmosphere and draw attention to different parts of the space.

4. Include something slightly unexpected

A room often needs one piece that breaks the pattern – an unusual chair, a strong artwork, an oversized lamp or a surprising colour. It stops the scheme becoming polite or predictable.

5. Avoid buying everything from one place

A layered room should feel gathered rather than purchased as a complete set. Mixing high street, vintage, bespoke and inherited pieces gives it much more individuality.