

MAGAZINE

Inside the Loyalty-Inspiring Work of Design Firm Charles & Co.

BY GABY WOOD
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“People tend not to cheat on their interior designer,” says Vicky Charles, who, along with her business partner, Julia Corden, has spent the past decade embedded in the private lives of public people. “You can cheat on your architect or your contractor but not on your designer, because they get to know your life.”

When Vicky and Julia founded their interior design firm, Charles & Co., in 2016, they were 39 and 35, respectively. Their assets included a hard-earned reputation (Vicky had spent 20 years overseeing interior design at Soho House), stellar connections (Julia is married to the actor James Corden), and an instinct for discretion. Other than that they were, in their own words, “winging it.” Since then their client list has grown to include David and Victoria Beckham, Amal and George Clooney, Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis, Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds, Harry Styles, Emma Stone, and many more. Some 70 percent of these clients come back—and those, Vicky says, tend to need, on average, attention paid to at least three homes. (Charles & Co. has designed four interiors, including offices, for the Beckhams.)



SOFT POWER

The living room of the London home, in Marylebone, features a sofa by George Smith with a painting by Alexis Soul Gray.
Photographed by Simon Upton.

That level of loyalty doesn't stem from the color of the cushions. It's because Vicky Charles—proudly adaptable—listens to the way you want to live. This goes for a centuries-old canal house in Amsterdam or a lodge in upstate New York, a house in Barcelona or a hotel in the Alps. “So many people say to me, ‘What’s your style?’” Julia reflects. “Well, our approach means that there is no style.” Instead, she suggests, with the air of a life coach, she and Vicky “take you on a journey to know yourself better.”

We are having breakfast at a restaurant in central London, where Vicky and Julia complement each other with ease. Both British, and friends for some 13 years, they have distinct roles in the company: Vicky gets on with the creative work while Julia oversees finance and thinks about the bigger picture. Julia—Jules to those who know her—petite and poised, blond hair pulled back into a bun, orders chia seed pudding. She's recently returned from Los Angeles to live in London full-time with her husband and three children—in a Victorian house they renovated in record time. Vicky, a warm and pointedly no-frills mother of two teenagers, whose American husband, Joe, works in finance, is here overnight from her home in upstate New York. When not traveling with suitcases full of samples, she's chopping wood or shoveling snow or walking the dogs, and today she's looking ahead to several long hours of rolling up her sleeves on-site. She launches herself with relief at the boiled eggs and soldiers. “I just crave the simple things when I come back,” she says. Plus: “I never know when I’m going to get food again.”

They tell me that they reject clients who are not committed enough to the process. “Vicky is very, very particular about what clients she takes on,” Julia says. “I won’t do it through an army of assistants,” Vicky explains. “If I’m designing your home, we need to have the rapport.”



GOING DUTCH

Charles & Co. recently completed design of this canal house in Amsterdam. In the entry, custom wall coverings are by Watts 1874.

Photographed by James McDonald. Stylist: Sara Mathers. Courtesy of Charles & Co.



A sitting room in the Amsterdam home includes an antique chandelier from Piet Jonker. Photographed by James McDonald. Stylist: Sara Mathers. Courtesy of Charles & Co.

A Charles & Co. project takes two to five years, by the end of which this pair knows everything about you. Once, a husband and wife each asked Vicky—independently of one another—what they should get the other for Christmas. “No names,” Vicky adds with a sidelong glance. Are they still married? I ask. She shakes her head.

“Vicky inspires trust by always listening,” says Amal Clooney, who, with her husband George, was their first residential client. “She is not only a really talented interior designer—she has become our friend.”

“If you were going to set up a dinner party for Amal,” Julia speculates, talking to Vicky across the table, “you’d know exactly the colors, you’d know the scent, you’d know the crockery, you’d know the cutlery, you’d know what food they’ll be serving, you’d know the lighting she’d want....”

“And her shoe size,” Vicky adds.

But unlike a stylist, who dresses a public self, Vicky is interested in what's not on display. If she knows shoe sizes, it's for slippers or Wellington boots. And in our homes, she contends, "we are essentially all the same. We all need a bathroom and a toilet, and we're all trying to raise our kids not to be assholes."

Vicky makes it easy to see what Ashton Kutcher means when he tells me that "great designers could have been therapists."



SOAK IT IN

An original fireplace mantel has been preserved in the bathroom of a 19th-century brownstone in Brooklyn designed by Charles & Co.
Photographed by Gieves Anderson. Stylist: Dominique Baynes. Courtesy of Charles & Co.

It's mid-December, and Vicky and Julia are checking on a mews house in Marylebone. The client—whose fifth home this is with Charles & Co.—may want to stay there for Christmas. Though they're three years into the job, this seems like it might be a challenge. There are several men at work on every floor, and plastic sheeting is everywhere. They've excavated the basement to add a new floor with a vaulted ceiling, and the whole of the back of the house has become a window three stories high. Vicky pauses in the kitchen to adjust an Austrian Woka chandelier: Should it be centered on the kitchen island or on the hood over the stove?

Many of these projects need to sit somewhere between home and hotel. As they pass through, clients want Charles & Co. to have thought of everything, from pajamas in the bedroom to milk in the fridge. Call it the Goldilocks effect: You arrive to find the place just right, only no bears will take offense. It can raise unrealistic expectations. Just recently, Vicky had everything prepared for a client's arrival—Grey Goose vodka, cocktail olives...only to receive a call hours later: "Where are my cigarettes?"

David Beckham has long paid attention to interior design—an interest that has only flourished since he and his wife, Victoria, started working with Vicky. He loves to buy furniture and has been photographed perusing antiques fairs. The Beckhams' country house in the Cotswolds, one of the stars of their eponymous documentary series on Netflix, is a flowing sequence of spaces with pale stone walls and warm-toned velvet upholstery. There's a pool table in one room, deer antlers in another. It's chic, calm, at ease with its context. David tells me that "Vicky helped me translate my ideas to reality. She has great taste and attention to detail and produces work of real quality."

This is palpably true. But if, beyond these qualities, there's one thing that unites Charles & Co.'s projects, it's warmth. The clothing designer Molly Howard, who worked with Vicky on the home she shares with musician Ben Lovett and their daughter, tells me that when you walk into their living room now, it "just instantly feels like a hug." Amal Clooney says that, for her family, "home is our favorite place to be. It is a place filled with love and laughter and we are incredibly grateful for that."

Though it may not have a single style, Charles & Co. does have a touch, and its lack of ostentation has led it to have a stealth influence on the way spaces feel, far beyond those it designs. Blake Lively, who is in the early stages of a Charles & Co. project, tells me that "everyone who knows, knows. Vicky Charles is the talent, heart, and soul who contributed to much of what we see in stores, magazines, mood boards, design shows, hotels, restaurants, and homes today."



WITH THE GRAIN

The dining room of the Brooklyn brownstone includes a custom stenciled floor from Pintura Studio. Photographed by Gieves Anderson. Stylist: Dominique Baynes. Courtesy of Charles & Co.

Vicky and Julia first met through Nick Jones, the founder of Soho House. Vicky had worked for Jones in various capacities since she was an 18-year-old waiter at his Cafe Boheme restaurant in Oxford. For a while, when she first moved to New York, she worked for him in hospitality. "You have to be really good at getting on with the mayor and also be prepared to clean the WCs," Jones tells me. "It's a top-to-bottom job, literally." By the time Vicky and Julia met, Vicky was head of design at Soho House. Julia had moved to the city for six months while her husband, James, starred in a play on Broadway, and both women had new babies. They became fast friends. Not long afterward they were in LA having dinner with Jones and James Corden.

"I was about to turn 40," Vicky remembers, "and James was saying to me, 'What are you gonna do for the next 20 years?'" He pointed at Jones, his friend. "'Are you still gonna work for this loser?'"

She realized she didn't want to be at Soho House when she was 60.

"I was like, I'll help you," Julia says.

"I knew the design world, but I didn't know how to set up a business," Vicky explains.

"Neither did I!" Julia insists.

When they were coming up with a name for their company, Julia paused over "Charles and Corden." She remembers feeling: "I think somebody's taken that name...." (Her husband had it in fairly constant use.) But she liked the old-world abbreviation for "and company," and it allowed her to smuggle in the first two letters of her last name.

Before she met James, Julia had worked in a talent agency and then at the nonprofit Save the Children. Nick Jones had told her that Vicky was, aside from being highly creative, “amazing at dealing with ‘tricky’ ”—a skill Julia felt she could also claim. The two friends quietly evolved a business through word of mouth. “For me, it was a project about elevating Vicky’s talent,” Julia says. “And I suppose,” she reflects, “in a way, I do that in my daily life with my husband.”

Behind the scenes is where Julia prefers to be. (“If more than three people look at me at once I go red,” she says.) Though she is too discreet to say which clients came through her, it’s clear that her experience of the spotlight helps. “They know that we know what an NDA is,” she explains. “The types of clients that we attract really, really appreciate—and probably pass on the message—that we won’t step over that line.”



THE ITALIAN JOB

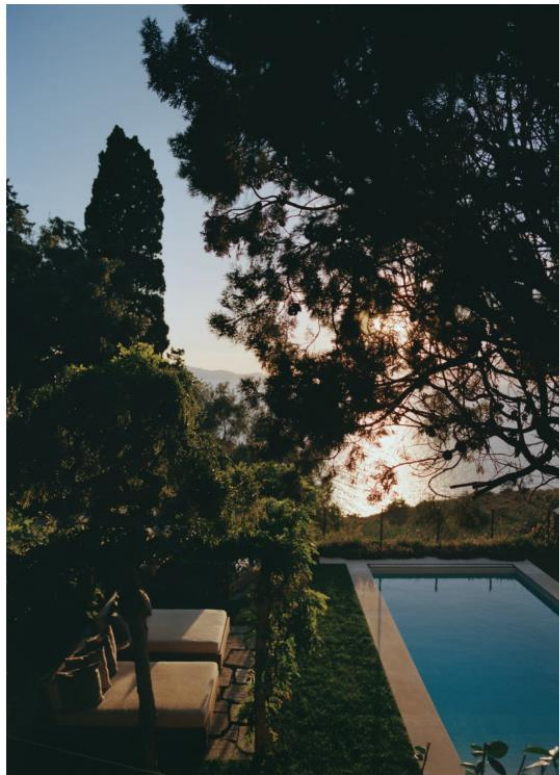
Villa Cacciarella, a vacation property designed by Charles & Co. on Italy’s Monte Argentario peninsula, overlooks the Mediterranean.

Photographed by Danilo Scarpati

Charles & Co. has offices in London and Northern Italy but New York serves as its headquarters: The space is on the 21st floor of an Art Deco building in Midtown. Light streams in from all sides. The main room is surrounded by trolleys of stacked steel trays full of samples—each trolley a different project, each tray a different room. Shelves of Perspex boxes contain fabrics, wallpapers, and tiles in every conceivable color. In preparation for a client meeting, Vicky has arranged some samples on a large wooden table, but the client has canceled: His family has been evacuated from their home in Malibu because of the threat of wildfires. A sign of things to come.

Vicky’s spatial awareness is such that whenever she enters a room, she clocks every inch of space. “She does this thing,” Julia says. “Her eyes sort of flicker, genuinely like a sort of robot vibe.” Then she’ll make a pronouncement: That wall needs to go. Or: You need to move that window. She has a few governing principles: Start with the rug. Have lighting at different levels. Don’t put cold colors in a bathroom because when you’re naked, you’re going to want to get something nurturing back.

But mostly, it’s emotional intelligence that’s required. Though she begins with a long list of questions—what kind of shower head do you like, do you have a coffee machine spec—things only really get going when people touch the samples and react to them viscerally. This process, she says, can be “intense,” because people often surprise themselves. “You put things in front of them, and they’ll gravitate to certain colors. And who knows if they had sunflowers in the fields as a kid, and that’s what makes them happy. There aren’t enough words to describe color and the emotions that come with color.”



The pool at Villa Cacciarella. Photographed by Danilo Scarpati

Whatever they choose, she'll build on it—combining patterns of different scales, using tones in the right proportion. Gradually, she'll find out what holds meaning for the client. It might be a grand piano or an old rocking chair or a piece of furniture fallen in love with while traveling in India. "Is this special to you?" she'll ask. "Then let's make it work."

Molly Howard says that she "never felt bulldozed by her, which I know seems like it should be obvious, but I also know that's not really the case with a lot of these relationships." For Howard and Lovett, Vicky planned a vinyl room around Lovett's giant speakers and made sure stripes appeared here and there to pick up on Howard's clothing brand, La Ligne. The legs on a classic Alvar Aalto table-and-chair set were sacrilegiously cropped to child height. "Things need to live," Vicky explains. "They'll die if they're museum pieces."

Kutcher and Kunis's LA home has a giant board-form concrete barn designed around their 10-foot-long chandelier. But it was also dreamed up by Vicky with their two small children in mind. Kutcher reports: "She was like, Let's make sure that we're not using precious fabrics, because it's going to get crap spilled all over it, and at some point, a kid might take out a Sharpie and decide to draw on it."

If these spaces are designed to reflect human behavior, they can also remodel it. Kutcher says he became a much better compromiser as a result of the design process. "Because, you know, at the end of the day, you're not building a space for yourself as much as you're building a space to share," he says. He describes the different ways that he and Kunis tend to reach decisions and suggests that Vicky was able to "tune in to both of us." "I can look around the room I'm in right now," he says as we're speaking on the phone, "and I can see the beautiful compromises that Mila and I made."



The kitchen of the Marylebone home. Photographed by Simon Upton

January. The Marylebone client decided not to spend Christmas in London after all. Meanwhile, wildfires have ravaged Los Angeles. Julia, who moved back to London just 18 months ago, shows me a map on her phone of the progression of the fires, and of where they used to live, nearby. Some of their friends have lost everything. And as for clients: It seems insensitive, at this point, to ask. “Knowing how much some people have invested in their homes emotionally, the idea of people losing their home, anywhere in the world.... It’s really poignant to us,” she says.

Over the course of a few days I watch the mews house mutate into its final form: extra rugs are auditioned, vintage lamps found, beautiful ceramics are displayed next to Dutch Master-worthy bowls of plums and grapes. It’s what Vicky describes as “an extra layer of love.” All of the seating and joinery is bespoke. Upstairs the bedcovers have been steamed and the bathrooms stocked with products. Candles are burning and the whole house smells of Figuier by Diptyque.

How does it feel? Like it’s always been there. You imagine that any minute, the owner and his children could walk in—into the best version of their lives, ready-made, waiting for them. And isn’t that the point? As Ashton Kutcher points out: “The most important thing about any space is who’s in it.”