

Telegraph magazine

A man with dark hair is sleeping peacefully in a bed with white linens. A long, brown teddy bear is lying on the bed next to him. The bed has a patterned headboard and a matching patterned bed skirt. A lamp is visible on the left side of the bed.

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Newspaper magazine of the year

Some of us are trying to sleep
On patrol with the noise police

Wacky air races
The millionaire fliers who
dice with death

Home, sweet home
Where to find the ultimate
gingerbread house

This Life, ten years on
The reawakening of a
television classic



Take a surgeon, a banker and a headhunter. You might trust them with your appendix, your offshore investments or your next job promotion, but what about the really important things in life – like choosing your new sofa, remodelling the patio or uplighting your en-suite bathroom?

These days dramatic job changes are *de rigueur*. First came the flash City boys investing their wads in gastropubs and country hotels; recently, it was that flood of posh plumbers. But where do the high-fliers head these days, to rekindle the passion that has trickled away on the trading floor or been blunted by NHS bureaucracy?

They come to the Inchbald School of Garden and Interior Design. Inchbald is a discreet, austere and reassuringly pricey Belgravia institution, where former Army captains are transformed into

expert gardeners, and accountants into, well, really quite interesting people, to whom you can chat quite happily about converting your basement into a self-contained granny flat.

Don't dare mention colour schemes or where to place that pretty walnut *escritoire*, though; that is just window-dressing. And the first lesson at Inchbald is that window-dressing is for amateurs. It is a robustly old-fashioned attitude in an age when good interior design is fed to the masses as nothing more than slapping on a couple of coats of Farrow & Ball tallow-white and lining up a row of single orange gerberas in test-tube vases.

'Good design isn't about the tassels on a cushion. It is almost invisible; it makes you more comfortable,' says Jacqueline Duncan, 74, the rather reserved founder of Inchbald, whose handsome bearing and sweep of carefully coiffed grey

mane bring to mind the headmistress of a particularly austere French lycée. 'An interior designer is someone who manipulates space for the pleasure and comfort of those living in that space. When you extend that further you look at furniture and fittings and upholstery, but that's not an intrinsic part of the designer's job, it's just the cosmetic icing on the cake.'

Duncan's *de haut en bas* manner derives, one suspects, from her determination to put clear blue water between Inchbald and its myriad lightweight, prettifying imitators that have sprung up in recent years.

The school's alumni include design luminaries such as Henrietta Spencer Churchill, Stephen Ryan, Diana Yakeley and Christophe Gollut. The Tory leader David Cameron's wife, Samantha, took one of the short interior-decoration courses

Back to the drawing-board

At Inchbald School of Garden and Interior Design in Belgravia mid-life career-swappers are taught that design is about more than muted paint colours and carefully placed flowers. By **Judith Woods**. Photographs by **David Spero**

Above Jacqueline Duncan, the founder of the Inchbald School, is still very much involved in its running.

Right Duncan with her then-husband, the designer Michael Inchbald, and their children in 1960

— useful experience should she ever be called upon to set her stamp on a certain 17th-century Restoration townhouse in the heart of London — as did Nina Campbell and Kelly Hoppen.

At the mention of Hoppen, whose trademark style is well-nigh synonymous with tallow-white minimalism (and, possibly, test-tube gerberas), Inchbald's grande dame visibly winces. 'With minimalism,' Duncan says, 'everything is created for the photographer, but where's your comfortable chair to relax in? Where have they hidden the television? These rooms make lovely images in a coffee-table book, but they're not very liveable. It's interior design as theatre set and it's just such a shame there aren't more perfect people for these perfect spaces.'

'An interior designer shouldn't have a single off-the-peg style. He or she should listen to what the client wants, or rather, needs — and they aren't always the same thing. There's a lot of psychology at work.'

At Inchbald's interiors school, there's not a crumb of cosmetic icing to be seen. No Colefax & Fowler fabric swatches, no regency striped wallpaper, swags or furbelows. Nothing extrinsic to the purpose for which the space was designed. Instead, the five-storey Eaton Gate house resembles an architect's practice: all pale walls and light. On the ground floor, there are students gathered around CAD (computer-aided design) workstations. Upstairs, past the glass-walled conservatory on the mezzanine, are the drawing-boards, where students are engrossed in their latest project, the design of a hotel reception and bar area.

There are flow-charts to represent the guests' circulation and expectations; how they will use the area dictates everything from the siting of the lifts to the materials used in the flooring. Inchbald designers are typically employed in architects' practices because they are au fait with everything from building regulations to health and safety laws. They need to understand industry standards, so they can monitor the contractors on a project. The red leather banquettes and teak panelling come much, much further down the line.

'An Inchbald graduate can design a sweeping staircase or the interior of a yacht, or remodel a country house, but he or she will also be able to be very rude to a plumber who hasn't fitted a basin correctly, or pull up a sloppy electrician whose work isn't up to scratch,' Alan Hughes, the ebullient interiors-school director, says.

'There are other schools that just do decoration and they do it very well,' Hughes says, 'but you can't change your life to match your interior; your interior should match your life. That's the problem with television makeover shows; they pretend anything is possible.'

'A client might love Mexico and have visions of El Paso in his living-room, but he can't have El Paso, particularly if he lives in Penge. The light quality is very different for a start.' With his lopsided Mr Whippy quiff of blond hair and irreverent humour, he makes for a charismatic tutor. But his nickname at the school is 'Jackboot'.

The fees at Inchbald are formidable: £17,000 for a one-year diploma in architectural interior design and £20,000 for the postgraduate diploma, which is validated and awarded by the University of Wales, as is the postgraduate diploma in garden design, which costs £18,400. The links to the university were forged in 2002 and underline the academic nature of Inchbald's approach to design. But the indiosyncratic nature of the school persists.



'IT'S A BLOODY TOUGH REGIME HERE. I HAVEN'T WORKED THIS HARD SINCE I WAS TRAINING FOR THE ARMY'

Carole Nissen, an interiors student, Alan Hughes, the director of the interiors school, Julia Fogg, former director of the garden-design school, and Jonathan Snow, a Scots Guard turned garden-design student

Students with creative block would never be dispatched to Chelsea Harbour's interior-design showrooms to search for inspiration. They might instead be told to head for an arthouse cinema and spend the afternoon watching an old black and white movie, or to take a stroll along the Thames.

About 45 full-time students attend the interiors school at any time and there are up to 20 on the garden course; there's no waiting-list, as Inchbald's reputation for unremitting graft tends to put off all but the truly dedicated. Duncan personally interviews most applicants for the full-time places.

'I warn the people who come here that they will have no parties, no love life; they have to work harder than galley slaves under an unforgiving director,' she notes with satisfaction, and just a hint of steel.

The interior designer John McCall, who graduated from Inchbald 32 years ago, is currently working on Woburn Abbey for the Duke and Duchess of Bedford. He vividly remembers being impressed by the very international flavour of the school.

'One of our first lectures was on kitchen design and we were asked if everyone had been in a kitchen,' McCall says. 'Two people put their hands up because they had never set foot in one — one was a Saudi princess and the other came from somewhere else in the Middle East, and neither had any concept of what a kitchen was like.'

'It's not like that any more at the school. I've been asked to judge the graduate show and I'm always amazed at the technical ability of these students. They're very employable.'

Carole Nissen, a former arts management consultant, lives in Newcastle and commutes to

London during the week to study at Inchbald. 'Changing career was a big decision for me,' she says. 'I've run festivals and I'm used to being the person telling others what to do. It's tough when you come here, as suddenly you're a complete learner again. At 45, it's been a bit of a shock.'

Susan Moore, 28, was two years into her surgical training when she applied to Inchbald. Working as a senior house officer in Dublin, she felt the need to step off the medicine treadmill, and was interested in interiors, so signed up for the two-year diploma course. Like most of the students she woefully underestimated the workload.

'I find myself getting more stressed doing this course than I ever was in medicine,' she says. 'I did think it would be about decoration, but it's more like architectural training. I've been up until 4am, sweating, trying to stick tiny bits of polystyrene on to a 3-D model of a penthouse flat. But I love the challenge and the sense of personal satisfaction.'

There is now a plethora of interior-design schools in Britain, but the Inchbald name opens more doors than the others. As one graduate observed, 'It's like belonging to a good regiment or public school. People know an Inchbald diploma is hard-won and from that they can tell what sort of calibre you are.'

It is no exaggeration to say that an Inchbald-trained designer will know more about a client's movements than would a stalker with infra-red night sights. You won't be engaging in chit-chat about neutral tones and taupe accents, but running the gamut of probing questions about the minutiae of your life.

Do you wear a coat to work? When you come in, how much space do you need to take it off? Do you remove keys from your pocket and if so, where would you place them? What about your briefcase — do you need a cupboard? Will you immediately settle down in a chair with a drink, or head straight to the kitchen? Where do you make phone calls? Leave shopping lists?

The school was featured in the *Sloane Ranger Handbook* as a place for drawling, dim girls in



'MOST PEOPLE HAVE FORGOTTEN HOW TO DRAW. THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE BRAIN IS SO UNDERUSED THEY WEEP IN FRUSTRATION'

Many of the students at Inchbald are in the throes of a mid-life career change

pearls to fritter away a couple of years. That was 23 years ago. Duncan is still fuming: 'I was absolutely livid because I'd worked so hard to make the image of the school serious and these bloody Sloane Rangers thought it was some sort of glorified finishing school.'

In 1955 Duncan met and married the designer Michael Inchbald, now regarded as one of the most innovative designers of the 20th century. It was 10 years after the end of the war and rationing had ended the previous year. Britain was slowly rebuilding itself, but change was in the air and the winds of modernism were blowing through the world of interiors – just three years earlier Peter Jones had hosted a pioneering exhibition of Bauhaus furniture. Designers such as Inchbald (a former architect), David Hicks (a former artist) and John Bannenberg (a former yacht designer) made headlines promoting the concept that interior design was more than decoration and fashion, but a skill in its own right.

Duncan had a good knowledge of interiors and antiques, and helped run her husband's fledgling business. She longed to study in America, but by the end of the decade she was the mother of two young children, which made it impossible, so she created the Inchbald School.

Inevitably, her first intake comprised women of a certain class who had come to learn how to do up the large homes and gardens they had acquired – or would surely soon acquire – through marriage. But Duncan notes that her very first student was an Irish nurse keen to swap her day job and, today, most of the students are mature career changers in search of a more creative way to achieve professional fulfilment.

Duncan's own quest for professional fulfilment raised one or two eyebrows, not least when she and her husband divorced. Her status as a divorcee did nothing to diminish her ambition, although she recalls that in 1965 a woman wasn't permitted to get a mortgage without a husband.

By then her reputation had grown to the point where she featured in a mildly controversial *Sunday Times* magazine special issue on single and

separated women who were pursuing careers. But it was a subsequent *Sunday Telegraph* piece, featuring a picture taken by Eve Arnold of a soignée Duncan in an (utterly chaste) nightgown, sitting on her bed, that caused a shocking sensation.

'She promised me she wouldn't use it, but it was on the roll of film she gave to the paper and they chose to publish it. For a divorced woman to be seen in such a provocative way was regarded as pretty scandalous back then. My mother gave me hell and wouldn't speak to me for six months and I got quite a number of letters from male admirers keen to get to know me better. But the story was a marvellous piece of publicity for Inchbald.'

Married for the third time, to Andrew Duncan, a career soldier and former commander of the Grenadiers, she looks at least a decade younger than her years and is still very much the driving force of the school. (Although they are on first-name terms with every other member of staff, students address her as Mrs Duncan. No one tells them to, they just do.)

The Inchbald garden-design school is based at Eccleston Square. In its own way it confounds expectations every bit as much as the interiors course. There's no time for pottering in the loam – the students barely get their hands dirty. Instead there's a crash-course in Latin plant names, a crammer in planting schemes and seemingly endless hours at the computer, devising drainage systems for three acres in Suffolk or walkways for the grounds of a hotel in Berne, the Swiss capital.

The year-long course is a rollercoaster of hard graft and tears. Former lawyers fare the worst. They really have been known to cry. Give them their day in court and they will wing it. Hand them

a 2B pencil and tell them to draw a herbaceous border and they will go to pieces.

'Most people have forgotten how to draw by the age of six,' says Julia Fogg, who until recently was director of the garden school. 'Lawyers seem to forget more than most. The right side of their brain has been so underused that they end up weeping in frustration. They are trained to find the quickest solution to a problem, but in the discipline of design, you can have 50 solutions and need to choose the best one.'

'The students who come here have taken a year out of their lives for a career change. It's an expensive year in every sense – no job, no social life, never mind the course fees. But when they leave they'll be the best.'

By the time former Scots Guards captain Jonathan Snow left Afghanistan in 2004 he had seen his fair share of action in both the Army and the private security sector. After working for a stint in sales, the 31-year-old was bored, so he applied for a place at Inchbald, following in the footsteps of Marcus Barnett, another member of the regiment, who is now running a successful design partnership.

'I considered getting involved in property development, but I realised that I'd always been interested in gardening,' says Snow, who is on the year-long postgraduate diploma course. 'It's a bloody tough regime here. I haven't worked so hard since I was training for the Army. They demand a lot of you, but I came here because I felt it would be challenging, and that if I was going to do this, I would do it properly.'

Students at both the design and garden schools are taught how to run their own business. They have access to a wide network of high-profile contacts, and after graduation are encouraged to visit the school if they feel in need of career advice.

Again, emphasis is on usage more than appearance: does a client view the garden as an extension of the house, a place to unwind, an outdoor playroom for the children – or all three? What are the other factors to be considered; the microclimate, soil and, of course, the drainage?

Once their training has been completed, graduates are advised to study under the Royal Horticultural Society to learn about the craft of gardening. The hands-on, dirty-fingernail side of the job can't come too soon for Snow: 'The course can be frustrating, because design comes first, the plants later. I can identify clippings, I know the names of plants and the conditions in which they will thrive, but I've never actually seen how they grow. I am really looking forward to when I finish and I can start work on a garden, my first project.'

Across at the interiors school, the talk is of cantilevered beams and the attendant building regulations. Inchbald prides itself on attention to detail. 'We don't train people to come up with airy-fairy designs that an architect will see and immediately overrule,' Alan Hughes says. 'The wow factor is all very well, but after a couple of days you have to settle down and live in a space and feel it's your own. I'm wary of designers who say they've got a style – here, the client is king.'

'You can fill your home with chinoiserie or Mies van der Rohe furniture, but when it comes down to it, the essence of good design is that you should feel comfortable enough to sit on the sofa in your socks watching the football.'

Inchbald Interior Design School: 020-7730 5508.

Inchbald Garden Design School: 020-7630 9011.

inchbald.co.uk