

CEREAL

In this volume, we consider the subject of preservation. We visit the Goetheanum, and rediscover the work of Auguste Rodin and the designs of Hvidt & Mølgaard. We tour the collections of Sir John Soane's Museum and the Oxford Botanic Garden, and contemplate memory and identity.

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BERDOULAT

Building on History

words

Ollie Horne

photos

Rich Stapleton



Patrick and Neri Williams of interior design studio Berdoulat are specialists in restoring traditional buildings. Together, they have renovated three homes for themselves, and Patrick has worked on six others before that — not to mention the various abodes he has designed for clients. “It’s a bug,” he says, smiling behind his beard. “We both grew up in building sites — Neri just outside Istanbul and I in the southwest of France. My parents bought an old wreck of a farmhouse in the Armagnac region, and my siblings and I used to lay tiles and apply lime render. The name of our studio — Berdoulat — comes from that house. We used to drive out at night in our old Peugeot to historic homes that were due to be demolished in the morning, taking up old tiles with a crowbar. A week later they would be on our floor. I think a lot of that approach has filtered its way into what we do now.”

Their latest project is in the city of Bath, UK: a series of Georgian, Regency and Victorian buildings occupying a long, narrow plot stretching from Margaret’s Buildings to Circus Place behind, a short walk from Grade-I listed landmarks the Royal Crescent and The Circus. The couple purchased the property four years ago, gradually adapting the rear spaces to suit a combination of family living and studio work. They are now in the process of restoring the historic shop front for their first retail space, where they will sell their collection of homeware, kitchenware and furniture, as well as cookery books, coffee and wine, produced in collaboration with local makers. Rye Bakery from nearby Frome will occupy one of the shop counters, and they envision cafe seating spread out across all three floors — from the old servants’ quarters in the basement to the first-floor balcony hugging the walls of the dramatic double-height space. The vaults will also house a fernery by a local florist. “People will be able to visit a space that has received the Berdoulat treatment,” says Patrick. “They will be able to experience our furniture, the longevity of the finish, and the patina that develops over time.”

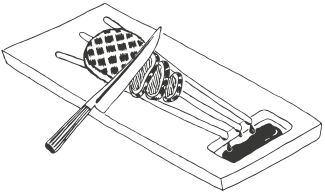
The large shop front dates to 1768, and the mews building at the rear was originally a pub from 1800, while a stable in the middle dates from 1840. The 1768 building was a Georgian home with a shop in the front room, until three Victorian grocers took over the property in 1890 and removed the ceiling and internal walls to create the expansive open-plan space. They also combined the buildings for the first time, using the pub as a wine and spirits merchants, and the stable as their storage area: “They were a wine merchant, greengrocer and restaurateur respectively, called Cater, Stoffell and Fortt, known as ‘The Fortnum and Masons of the West’,” says Neri. “We want to sell coffee and wine to directly reference that history. If it wasn’t for that story, I don’t think we would have thought to sell those things. We have adapted our dream to suit the building.”

The firm had eight shops across Bristol and Bath, and remained in business until the 1980s; their original shelving, signage and counters are all still in place. “The middle spaces that are now home to our kitchen and lounge were where they mixed prescriptions,” says Patrick. “It was almost like a branch of Argos in its format. You came in with your shopping list and gave it to someone in a white coat, who scurried away to fetch your earl grey, medicine and bread, and came back to serve you at the counter. We found a wonderful collection of shopping lists. The counter hadn’t really been touched since they closed for business. We opened drawers and found sugar, sheets of gelatine, and glass vials with needles in alcohol. We want to display these treasures in a vitrine to tell the story of the shop.”

The renovation of the space has involved a process of detailed research. A heritage statement they wrote to support the planning application ran on for 180 pages. “It was like doing a PhD on the building,” says Patrick. “It’s surprisingly easy to carry out research like this in Bath. The records office is incredible. You make an appointment, tell them your address, and two days later, you’re there with white gloves on, going through a stack of original

Left image

A view of the vaults outside the basement — the former servants’ quarters below the Georgian portion of the building.



MAGRET BOARD

Patrick has a magret board made by his father, a keen woodworker, whose pieces provide the inspiration for much of Berdoulat’s kitchenware collection. The board is specifically designed for preparing *magret de canard* (duck breast), with the juices running down the board to the collection point at the bottom. Berdoulat’s own magret board is based on this original design.



drawings and records stretching right back to the 1700s. We were able to date every piece of fabric in the building. It was lovely to know how it had all come together, and it helped inform how we approached the new design.”

Having carried out the main interventions to the central spaces, Patrick and Neri are turning their attention to the shop, preserving its original shelving and intriguing details. “You can still read the history of the space,” says Patrick. “There is the rake of the original staircase that’s just visible in the plasterwork. On the counters, you can see a darker patch of varnish that reveals where a shelf once was. In the attic, we found components of Victorian mirror-backed vitrines and mahogany shelves. It’s a jigsaw puzzle, and we’re gradually putting it all back together. There are some missing draw fronts, which we are remaking in mahogany. We intend to leave them freshly machined and waxed, as an honest restoration.” The design of these draw fronts is not as simple as it seems. The round handle in the middle of each front is turned from the same piece of timber as the drawer front, with the grains of the wood running consistently through both. “We have now worked out a way of turning these on a lathe so we can also keep the grain running through the handle,” says Patrick. “To be honest, I was a bit pissed off when I realised they were made this way — it just makes it so much harder! But we have to do it right. The building has such a strong voice; we can’t mess around with it.”

Patrick and Neri stress they do not want to over-restore. “Patina is really special,” Patrick says. “I find it strange when people buy a Georgian building and then want to make it perfectly flat. I call it lines in a face: there’s a beauty in elderly people’s wrinkles or worn hands that tells their story. When you look at the counters in the shop and see the marks, it’s the same. The shop is so full of these little stories being told.” •



right image

Elizabeth, the Williams family dog, on the upstairs balcony that looks down to the kitchen below. Tuscan columns have been added to reflect a metal column in the kitchen that dates to Victorian times, and now bears a chalk family height chart. Tuscan columns also appear in Berdoulat’s homeware collection, in the form of wooden pepper mills and candleholders.



