

DESIGNER BRIEF

IMPROVISED GRACE

After a decade overseeing Soho House's signature look, Vicky Charles has launched her own design and decorating business.

BY SARAH MEDFORD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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OVER COFFEE in her white-brick kitchen, Vicky Charles apologizes that her house isn't more "put together." It's a little unclear what she means, given the neat column of glass spice jars lining the shelves, the blackened-steel counter that looks like a tonal drip painting and the sink's covetable brass taps. She mentions the master bedroom: One corner is a patchwork of floor-stain samples, the tub by the picture window still unscreened from passing cars two years after she and her family moved in. "Joe is very creative, and really frustrated that his wife doesn't concentrate more on this when she's at home," says Charles, an interior designer by trade (her husband is a marketing executive; they have two children, 8 and 6). "It's the shoemaker and the shoes, of course."

It's also a fact that Charles is trained in the art of making pleasingly imperfect interiors, signs of which are everywhere in this upstate weekend house in Millerton, New York. She's remade it almost from scratch: reconfiguring the ground floor to enlarge the kitchen and add a mudroom and guest suite; building a new bedroom wing upstairs; and sidestepping her way into a relaxed, quasi Scandi/Japanese décor that strikes a balance between easygoing refuge from their Manhattan apartment and B&B for a constant flow of weekend guests.

The high-comfort, high-function strategy is one that Charles, 42, developed at Soho House, the champagne-soaked members' club and hotel based in London. She spent 18 years there, starting as a waitress at the club's Cafe Boheme in Oxfordshire in 1998 and working her way up, eventually helping to establish its style of worn-in glamour under the tutelage of founder Nick Jones. For the last 10 years, she served as the brand's head of design. Charles and her 90-member team were responsible for the look and feel and maintenance of all the clubs—some 18 around the world, over half of which she had a hand in creating—as well as product design (Soho House makes and sells many of its own furnishings) along



with occasional residential jobs for members. When she departed in November 2016 to launch her own business, Charles established herself quickly in the decorating world. Within a few months, she'd hired staff in New York, Los Angeles and London, and she currently caters to a client list (partly inherited from Soho House) that includes Amal and George Clooney, Victoria and David Beckham, Mila Kunis and Ashton Kutcher, and chef Gordon Ramsay, among others.

"I love the fact that Vicky's become a designer purely through on-the-job training, which I really believe in," says Jones, who has long played the role of mentor and friend—though her career isn't quite as serendipitous as he makes it sound. Raised in Gloucestershire, Charles graduated from college with a fine arts degree and took a job with a graphic design firm right out of school before chucking it for a gig as a waitress to pay off her student loans.

At Soho House, she soon became the liaison for consulting interior designers Ilse Crawford and Martin Brudnizki; both turned out influential early projects

for the brand, and Charles says that the lessons she absorbed were invaluable. From Crawford, she learned to evaluate the emotional and sensual potential of space and to make as many design decisions as possible not by studying a plan, but by experiencing what it feels like to stand at a certain window, for instance, or sit in a particular chair. From Brudnizki, she mastered the rigors of making detailed preparatory drawings and working efficiently with builders. Jones, for his part, shared his romantic obsession with English country-house style—and taught her to put function first. "Nick has an amazing ability to see everything as a guest would," Charles says. "I learned completely practical things from him."

Primary among them was how to think on her feet. "When we did [Soho House] West Hollywood, in 2010, we were missing some bar lights at the last minute—they

FRESH START
At her house in Millerton, New York, Charles pairs an oak and marble table with vintage Scandinavian chairs and a corner cupboard.

hadn't arrived," Charles says. "We needed 14 matching lights, each no more than 14 inches high, that afternoon for a party. I went to Liz's Antique Hardware with our electrician and built one out of old chandelier parts, with the ceiling rose as the base. They are still there."

Achieving just the right degree of "put together" for Soho House meant traveling every few weeks from her base in New York, where Charles relocated in 2003 to help open the first U.S. outpost. She oversaw the installation of wall murals and etched-glass mirrors for the bar of the Istanbul club, in a restored 19th-century *palazzo*; she arranged bookcases and chintz-covered armchairs in guest rooms of Miami's Soho Beach House. At any one time there might be 25 projects in play, each a distinct distillation of the brand's signature bonhomie and hotel-grade service.

Charles knew it was time to move on when it all started to feel routine ("reinventing the same things for the same person," as she puts it). Residential projects became a creative lifeline—and, gradually, the foundation of a new solo business. Jones encouraged her to make the move and continues to be supportive.

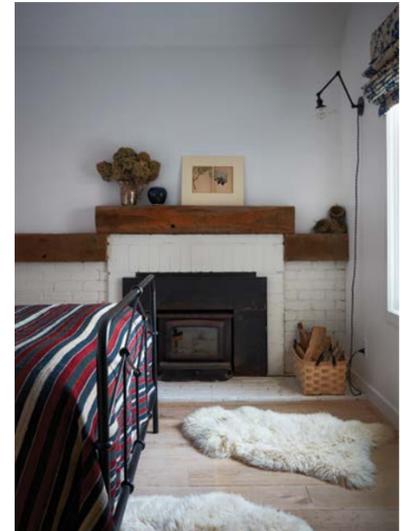
"This company is far from a start-up, in a way," says Julia Corden, who was introduced to Charles by Nick Jones in 2012 and is now her business partner in Charles & Co. The former nonprofit executive handles new business development, strategy and logistics from a satellite office in L.A., where she and her husband, the entertainer James Corden, are based.

"We've always realized we've got different skill sets," Corden explains of her collaboration with Charles. "My role is to be efficient on the business side, to give Vicky room to be creative." They speak on the phone daily and recently completed a gut renovation of the Cordens' house—pale colors, patterned wallpapers and a Shaker-style kitchen ("traditional elements but simplified to make it more Californian and suitable for her young family," Charles says). "What informs my aesthetic is the location, the building and the architecture. And who's using it," Charles explains. "My look is fluid."

Her malleability has been useful for the Clooneys: Last spring, she turned out three nurseries in as many countries for their twins. Over the summer, she designed a pop-up shop for Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop in Amagansett, Long Island, delivering on the cottagey vibe that Paltrow had requested. And this past winter, just days before the Beckhams moved into their compound of stone barns in Oxfordshire, Charles was busy mounting a lavish Christmas for the couple, down to shaggy fir garlands, stockings hung by the fireplace.

"It's been really interesting," she says of the past year. "The first thing clients say to me is, 'I don't want Soho House.' They like that feeling, that attention to detail, that warmth—but they want it in a different aesthetic. Which is great." ●

EASY DOES IT
Clockwise from near right: Charles in her kitchen; the farmhouse dates from the 1860s; vintage Afghan blankets and a cast-iron bed in a guest suite; a newly designed staircase and shelving.



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