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The Lived-In Look

Architect David Rockwell makes a pilgrimage to the antiques-stuffed Sir John Soane's Museum in London—and gorges on design tips in the breakfast parlor

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By JEN RENZI



Corbis

As a specialist in high-end hospitality design, David Rockwell gets around. In the last few weeks alone, the architect jetted to Los Angeles to renovate the Hotel Bel-Air, Las Vegas to finalize the soon-to-open Nobu Hotel (yes, that Nobu) and Playa del Carmen, Mexico, to discuss a potential resort project. Beijing, Shanghai and Paris are on his fall itinerary. And he just attended the London launch of Imagination Playground, a pro bono design project he conceived to nurture children's creativity through unstructured play.

While there, Mr. Rockwell took time to visit a favorite haunt: Sir John Soane's Museum. Chockablock with Renaissance bronzes, Egyptian artifacts and Medieval objects, the quirky institution honors the British architect behind the Bank of England building, the Dulwich Picture Gallery and other celebrated Regency-era masterpieces. The museum overtakes Soane's former home, three

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David Rockwell's favorite haunt in London: Sir John Soane's Museum.

Soane's life—expressed through his vast collection of architectural antiquities—as well as a testing ground for experimental details like flattened domes and top-lit halls," Mr. Rockwell explains. "It was an ongoing laboratory for his work."



Courtesy The Sir John Soane Museum

Soane's house is 'a good reminder that creating a home is a process,' said Mr. Rockwell.

upstate. "My most recent 'experiment' involved a secret passage connecting my son and daughter's rooms," he says. "It's a sort of child-friendly version of the Soane museum." In other words, a perfect place to hide out and dream big. *See soanefoundation.com for more info.*

adjacent townhouses that were rebuilt in successive phases between 1792 and 1824.

"The structure became a sort of narrative of

Mr. Rockwell loves to linger in the museum's picture room, featuring a unique double-sided display system. But he is most jazzed by the atmospheric breakfast parlor, a domed lair that's dramatically lit by concealed skylights and a stained-glass oculus. Lending a lived-in look are overflowing bookshelves, a marble fireplace piled with busts and salon-style installations of framed artwork—including colored engravings by Angelo Campanella and a watercolor of the Soane family tomb. "There's something about the rigorous geometry of the room contrasted with the abundance of things that makes the design feel like it's in process—a combination of the planned and the spontaneous."

The museum has indirectly influenced many details in Mr. Rockwell's own oeuvre, from the flattened coves he's designing for a New York apartment to convex mirrors punctuating elevators in Boston's Ames Hotel. And his Manhattan loft is an architectural R&D lab in its own right: He renovates a bit of it each summer when his wife and kids escape

SHOWCASE YOUR KEEPSAKES

"Although there's very little furniture, there is nothing empty about this room! It's filled with art, books, sculptures and artifacts. Soane was interested in fragments, in a kind of collaging together of different pieces of his life. Consider creating a narrative of your own life experiences by displaying art or mementos collected during travels; souvenirs strengthen your connection to memories."

Create a cabinet of curiosities by arranging personal effects in a bookcase; Mr. Rockwell likes Restoration Hardware's Dutch Industrial Tower.

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Create a cabinet of curiosities by arranging personal effects in a bookcase.



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Strategic placement of mirrors can expand the sense of space in a room.

LAYER IT ON

"Take a cue from Soane and layer views so not everything is revealed at once. Layering gives a room a sense of seduction. He achieved that here via the mirrors, the objects and the art-covered walls that extend upward. You can't do this everywhere—that would be overkill—but layering helps dematerialize solid surfaces and makes small, eccentric spaces feel rich."

TAKE A SHINE TO REFLECTIVITY

"Soane embedded over 120 mirrors in the room: dotting the hearth, above the fireplace, on the arches—he even used mirrored leaves on doorways. The reflective surfaces not only create a play of light but also open up views. Strategic placement of mirrors can expand the sense of space to make a room seem bigger and reveal angles that you wouldn't normally see." Mr. Rockwell recommends convex mirrors from West Elm.

DESIGN IS NEVER DONE

"I first visited Sir John Soane's Museum when I was a student in London in the late '70s. Then, I had one impression of it. But now, having practiced design for many years, I find it even more extraordinary how experimental and personal the space is. Soane's house represents a lifetime of assembly. It's not just fixed in one point in time. It's a good reminder that creating a home is a process. It's more forgiving and interesting to think about design that way: Your home is never complete. Keep adding."

ACCENT WITH BOLD COLOR

"There's a fearlessness about Soane's use of color here. Note the crimson glass in the oculus. That same shade of red threads through the house—in some rooms, it's a major design element. Don't be afraid of using a strong accent color; pick one that's intense but also rich and earthy. Paint is a great way to inject color, of course, but you can also get the effect through colored light bulbs, furniture



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or accessories like Venetian glass." A favorite source for colored bulbs is justbulbsnyc.com.

GET THE GLOW

The ceiling is an important design element here. The dome is an optical illusion: it's flatter than it appears thanks to painted faux moldings. The ceiling continues up to a pair of concealed skylights on either side of the dome that aren't visible when you're standing in the middle of the parlor all you see is this beautiful amber light emanating from above. It's not necessary to have a high ceiling to create the suggestion of more space; a vertical shaft or skylight can do the trick. And if you don't have a skylight, you can exploit ambient lighting to get a similar glow.



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Colored light bulbs can accent a room.

Bio In Brief: David Rockwell



David Rockwell

His résumé: Since founding his firm, Rockwell Group, in 1984, the architect has worked on a range of projects—from cultural facilities to festivals. With offices in New York, Madrid and soon Shanghai, Mr. Rockwell has won a National Design Award from Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt, is an Interior Design Hall of Famer and chairs the board of the Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS. Recently, he was inducted into the James Beard Foundation Who's Who of Food & Beverage in America.

His clients: In addition to boutique hotels, airports (the Marketplace at JFK's Jet Blue terminal) and upscale restaurants (Maialino, A Voce, Nobu), Mr. Rockwell has designed sets for Broadway productions, including "Hairspray" and "The Normal Heart," and the last two Academy Awards. (He also envisioned the latter's home, Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles.)

His goods: Rockwell Group has designed silk rugs for the Rug Company, furniture for Dennis Miller and Desiron, textured wall coverings for Maya Romanoff and chic portals for Lualdi Doors, among other products. For more info, visit rockwellgroup.com.

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