

Continental Christmas

Geometric architecture and a hint of Bauhaus colour-block decoration provide the perfect backdrop for German and Eastern European design classics in this 1970s bungalow

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HOME PROFILE

WHO LIVES HERE

Thorsten van Elten, who runs interiors brand thorstenvanelten.com, and his partner, Karl Vodrey, a technical services manager at the Royal College of Art

THE PROPERTY

A three-bedroom, detached late-1970s bungalow in Battle, East Sussex

PRICE £565,000 in December 2015

WHAT IT'S WORTH NOW

About £800,000

LIVING AREA

Against a simple backdrop of white-painted brickwork walls, the decorations, which are mainly German, bring a festive feel. The handcrafted sheep, which Thorsen sells through his shop, are 1982 designs by Hanns-Peter Krafft, and are sturdy enough to be used as seating →





LIVING SPACE

Swedish artworks from the early 2000s feature on the wall of one of the living rooms. *Totem Poles* by Mike Lemanski is similar Right The 20-year-old

modular sofa by Cappellini has been reupholstered in orange velvet by Raf Simons for Kvadrat, while the Espiga copper rod floor lamp is by Bowles & Linares



A

one-off bungalow, built in the late 1970s, caught the eye of German design enthusiast Thorsten van Elten, much in the same way he chooses stock for his online shop or items for his home. 'For me, design, and my house, should be timeless and uncomplicated and enjoyed for exactly what they are. My aesthetic isn't overly one thing or another: the Bauhaus movement has made a big impression on me, but I also like 1970s and 1980s classics. This bungalow is nothing like other English houses, having a continental look yet located on the edge of a Sussex village, and that really appealed to me,' he says.

Thorsten and his partner, Karl Vodrey, had been living in a two-bedroom flat above a central London tube station for 20 years when Thorsten decided it was time for a change. Their agenda was to find a property within easy reach of channel crossings for Thorsten to return home to Germany, and to London for Karl's job at the Royal College of Art. This brick and black-timber-clad bungalow had everything they were looking for: a large garden overlooking the countryside, a barn for storing Thorsten's shop stock and, of course, a unique design aesthetic.

'Elements of the property are like my brother's home in Germany – white-painted brickwork, floor-to-ceiling windows, black window frames,' says Thorsten. 'Because the plot is on a slope, the layout is split level. Once I saw the sunken seating area – often called a "conversation pit" – I was completely won over. People talk about making their house their own, but this house already felt like my own, so why change it?'

Bedrooms and bathrooms are arranged around the entrance hallway, separated by steps down into a linear layout of adjoining living spaces that look out onto the garden and countryside beyond. 'As well as the conversation pit, we have a living room and glazed "wintergarten", as I call it, to sit in and relax, which are part of an extension carried out in the 1990s,' explains Thorsten.

The couple moved into the bungalow a few days before Christmas in 2015 with Karl's family hot on their heels to celebrate the big day with them. Thorsten was selective →





'The BAUHAUS movement made a big IMPRESSION on me, but I also like 1970s and 1980s CLASSICS'



about furniture, putting the essentials into their home and storing the remainder in the barn until they'd worked out exactly where they wanted everything to go.

'We decorated for Christmas,' he recalls. 'With my classic German decorations, a real tree and our familiar furniture, the house felt immediately like home.'

Thorsten trained in interior design and was a buyer for retailer SCP before opening his own shop, often collaborating with designers to produce furniture and accessories. Before the coronavirus pandemic, he regularly returned to Germany and visited various Eastern European countries, mixing work with pleasure as he sought out the best design classics, both modern and vintage.

'It's never about price – I value items that reach out and speak to me,' he says. 'They need the right balance of aesthetics in shape and colour, and quality is essential. For instance, my napkins from Budapest cost 20p each and are regularly used, while I invested in Cappellini's Cuba sofa 20 years ago and it's still going strong. I don't want to replace something for the sake of it; if it doesn't offend me, it can stay – there are far more important things in life than perfection.'

This is why the bathrooms and kitchen remain unchanged, for now. Elsewhere, wood-panelled ceilings are untouched, and the exposed brick and blockwork were simply refreshed with a new coat of brilliant white paint. This gallery-esque backdrop is perfect for showcasing designer furniture, lighting, art, cushions and blankets, many of which are by friends, such as Daniel Emma and Donna Wilson – whose red felt Christmas placemats Thorsten uses every year.

One dramatic change that came about after the move was a decision to upholster →



DINING AREA

The 1970s dining table and chairs – by German company Rosenthal – were a lucky find at local auction house Burstow & Hewett. The Cherry pendant light above the table was a gift from designer friend

Daniel Emma, and the red felt Christmas placemats were given to Thorsten by Donna Wilson. The green-stemmed Roemer glasses are a classic German collectible that Thorsten sells through his online shop



GARDEN ROOM

A friend gave Thorsten the 1950s Danish daybed, which he had reupholstered in a blue fabric. The rug by Christopher Farr is available at The Conran Shop

KITCHEN/DINER

An oversized cup-and-saucer planter by Gitta Gschwendtner sits on the concrete and aluminium table by Bowles & Linares. The grey Foto pendant is from Ikea →



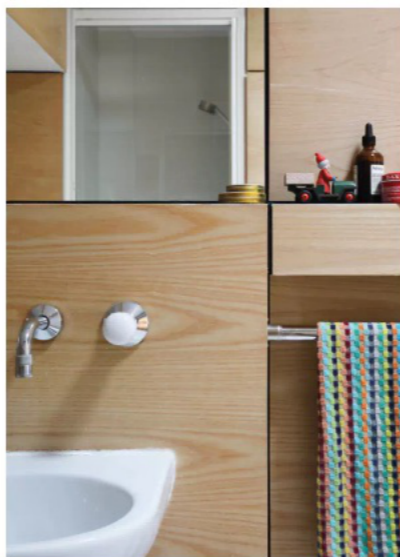
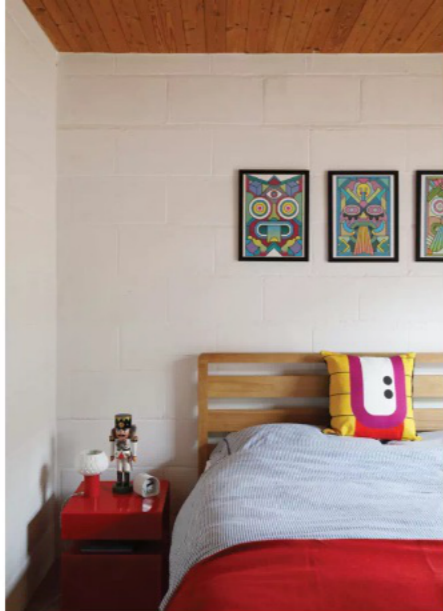
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BATHROOM

Original plywood remains in the unrenovated bathroom, where clean lines echo the geometric forms in the rest of the property. The Restgarn towel, made from leftover yarn, can be bought from Thorsten's shop

HALLWAY

The entrance is at the top of the sloping plot where steps, flanked by thriving pot plants, lead down into the kitchen/diner. The quarry floor tiles and black-framed doors are original



'DESIGN should be TIMELESS and ENJOYED for exactly what it is'

the sofa in orange, a departure from Thorsten's usual choice of neutrals for large furniture.

'I saw the zingy velvet in SCP's shop and thought it looked amazing,' he says. 'It's also the right shade of orange to work with the Bauhaus colour blocks I've painted around the sliding door frame.'

With Christmas around the corner once again, celebrating remains much the same for Thorsten and Karl, though this year they will have a new Christmas tree since the previous one outgrew its pot and is now planted in the garden. The couple also like to buy one or two new vintage tree ornaments each year.

'Our German decorations are made from wood; they're simple, much-loved and timeless, which is very much how our home feels,' explains Thorsten. 'Nothing is overcomplicated here, or over-thought, or too precious. We've achieved a really comfortable way to live.' ■

BEDROOMS

This page Framed black and white posters decorate the walls. The Shadow mirror among them is by Belgian designer Sylvain Willenz, and the framed lady is one of Thorsten's great aunts. Far left The Berlin cushion in the guest room was inspired by 1960s and 1970s architecture in Berlin's U-Bahn stations

