



Crossing the Jordaan

In Amsterdam, whimsical renovations, personal touches, and a couple of life changes turned the shell of an old insurance company into a “tailor-made” home.



Story by Kyra Shapurji
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When Paul Falla first saw the old UAP Insurance building 11 years ago, it took only five minutes to make the decision to purchase it. What he saw in the building on the edge of Amsterdam's once on-the-brink, but now quite desirable Jordaan neighborhood, was an ideal location to realize a dream he'd carried since childhood: "how a space *could* be, and not what it *should* be, for a grown-up."

Falla bought the space for 550,000 guilders (the approximately 260,000 euros today). "It was the easiest decision I ever made," he says.

Looking for the typical loft characteristics, he wanted a space that was open, with high ceilings, but also "something different, not a regular living space." His initial idea was to create the ideal bachelor pad, or in his words, the "perfect tailor-made loft."

The basic renovation took nearly ten months and cost about half as much as the actual purchase of the loft, rounding up to approximately 140,000 euros today (300,000 guilders at the time of renovation). Although the one-time insurance company was reportedly confiscated by Nazi officials during World War II, Falla envisioned the space as more "human rather than a museum." His first act was to remove the eight office cubicles and eight toilets from the UAP days.

Since the completion of the basic renovation, Falla's yearly

PREVIOUS PAGE: A white staircase on casters does double duty as a storage space.
 Fish, the cat, on a wheeled, wooden stump-cum-dining chair by a glass top table designed by Falla.
 A revolving 360-degree wall makes for "total impracticality, but total fun" says Falla. White cube shelving stacks up quite nice.



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changes and additions made the place an ongoing project. “Many nicely designed apartments look like no one lives there or that they come out of a brochure,” explains Falla. “I wanted my place to say something particular about me and my world. I wanted people to love it or hate it.”

A career in advertising certainly heightened Falla’s vision. How about his basic design principles? “I don’t have any principles, I work in advertising,” he jokes.

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During the ten years Falla lived in his spread on the Keizersgracht (one of the city’s main canals), his original idea of a “tailor-made” bachelor pad underwent many transformations in order to accommodate the various twists and turns his

lifestyle quickly took.

First, Falla’s girlfriend moved in. Soon after, they found they needed room for a new daughter. Unable to agree on where to place the baby’s room, they decided to create a moveable one, solving the problem with a 6’ x 6’ room-on-wheels—with lots of color. Falla and his girlfriend didn’t want to get “minimal and ‘design-y’” on a space generally expected to be fun and cheerful, so they made sure to add bright colored panels to the ceiling above the baby’s nook.

All of Falla’s whimsical additions to the loft were his own:

✚ Falla chose to paint UAP’s original safe door an “outspoken, warm” red. He began to see it as the heart of the loft. ✚ What used to be the old safe in the UAP building became Falla’s stainless steel kitchen with Smeg cooker. He knocked down a wall and added bars.





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the jail-barred kitchen, heavy steel doors, various “portholes” that lead from room to room—the one between the bathroom and kitchen is just large enough to pass a glass of wine through. His inspiration mostly came from a combination of memories of a childhood spent on a beach in Ireland and his lifelong fascination with ships.

With all the change over the years, Falla’s sense of color remained constant. Intuitively for Falla, “Color remains one of the most difficult issues in interior design. What is a great color this year is out of fashion the next. Too extreme, and you can’t relax. No color, and it can be a little staid.”

Falla’s UAP loft days ended a little over a year ago when he and his family moved out. Since that time, Falla has supplemented his advertising career by designing two other houses and two offices. But it’s this loft, the site of his very first interior

design project, that still holds a very special place in Falla’s heart—and portfolio.

With each new design, Falla looks to “create something I’ve never done or seen before.” And ultimately, his five-minute decision on an old insurance company more than a decade ago allowed him to do just that.

It also turned his life around more than the birth of any child could.

EXIT

☞ The bathroom, once a men’s room with eight separate toilets. The floor was made from smooth rocks to invoke childhood summers on the Irish coast. ☞ A handmade steel door was made to fit Falla’s fascination with ships, that is, porthole included.

