



The Benefits of Insurance

In Amsterdam, the shell of an old insurance company evolves first into a bachelor pad and then into a tailor-made family home



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

When Netherlands native Paul Falla, a creative director at an advertising firm, first saw the five-story 1928 UAP Insurance building 11 years ago, it only took five minutes for him to decide to purchase his 1,800-square-foot in the building. The apartment sits on the edge of Amsterdam's desirable Jordaan neighborhood, a quaint area dotted with art galleries, and is also the location of the legendary Anne Frank House. It was an ideal stage on which to realize his childhood dream of "how a space could be, and not what it should be, for a grown-up."

Falla bought the apartment—situated on the Keizersgracht, one of the city's main canals—for \$390,000 in 1998, two years after UAP Insurance moved out. While he was looking for typical loft qualities, such as high ceilings with few walls, what he really wanted was "something different, not a regular living

space." Instead, he sought to create the ultimate bachelor pad, as he puts it, a "tailor-made loft."

The initial renovation, designed by Falla himself and executed with a contractor, took ten months and cost nearly half as much as the purchase of the unit itself. He purposefully avoided hiring a designer, concerned that an outsider might generate an "homage to Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, or Frank Gehry."

While the formerly commercial space had its share of

PREVIOUS PAGE:  A white staircase on casters does double-duty as a storage space.  Fish the cat relaxes on a wheeled, wooden stump-cum-dining chair paired with 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 for storage.



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history—the building was seized by the Nazis during World War II—Falla strived to create a space with more human qualities, “rather than a museum.” His first act was to remove the office cubicles—and eight toilets—left behind, along with completely covering the original concrete floor with an oak-paneled version installed by Falla himself. “Many designed apartments look like no one lives there, or that they came out of a brochure,” he explains. “I wanted my place to say something particular about me. I wanted people to love it or hate it.”

His career influenced his eclectic tastes. When asked what design principles he lives by, Falla jokes, “I don’t have any principles, I work in advertising.” He filled an entrance room with an over-sized Italian floor lamp, inviting white sofas, and cubed shelving. His favorite touches? Many of his pieces were on wheels, creating an ever-changing environment. “If the

mood took me, it all could easily be rearranged,” he explains. The kitchen featured a glass dining table of his own design, with chairs of wooden stumps that sat on casters.

While Falla aimed to design a bachelor pad, life had other plans. In 2001 his girlfriend moved in, and shortly thereafter they needed a bedroom for their first daughter. Unable to agree on where it would go, they created a six-foot room on wheels. Falla and his girlfriend didn’t want a “minimal or design-y” space for their child, so they painted its inside ceiling panels yellow, green, and orange panels.

☒ The baby’s 6’ x 6’ nook was transitional and made to move on wheels. ☒ The bathroom floor was made from smooth rocks to evoke childhood summers on the Irish coast. ☒ A handmade steel door complete with a porthole references Falla’s fascination with ships.





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While Falla removed some original details during the various renovations, he added the kind of character usually found by stripping things away: a jail-barred kitchen, heavy steel doors, and various cutouts that lead from room to room. One such cutout, between the bathroom and kitchen, was just large enough for a glass of wine to pass through and inspired by his lifelong fascination with ships, gained from a childhood spent on beaches in Ireland.

Despite all the gradual details Falla built into the space over time, his sense of color remained constant, sticking to a neutral palette. “What is a great color this year is out of fashion the next,” he says. “Too extreme, and you can’t relax. No color, and it can be a little staid.”

Falla and his family moved out in 2008, and since then he’s supplemented his career with interior design, outfitting homes

and offices, both nearby and abroad. But his first project still holds a special place in Falla’s heart—and in his portfolio. And he admits that he made a few missteps along the way. The bathroom’s stone floor, for example, was quite an ordeal to clean. But such is the price of charting your own course. With each of his new designs, Falla looks to “create something I’ve never done or seen before.” And something no one could ever confuse with an homage to Frank Gehry.

EXIT

☞ What used to be the old safe in the UAP building became Falla’s stainless steel kitchen with Smeg cooker. ☞ Falla chose to paint UAP’s original safe door an “outspoken, warm” red. ☞ For handy laundry purposes, he added air ducts to separate whites from colors.