

House & Home

‘If I put my hands on it, I put my hands on it fully’

At home with the FT

Ceramicist Francesca Anfossi's work has an exuberant wonkiness - a style that also infuses her airy Japanese inspired iroko house hidden in Camden. By *Isobel Harbison*

Italian ceramicist Francesca Anfossi used to walk past this house every morning wishing it was hers. "It was different, it was modern, so I always loved it, and always had my eye on it." It captivated her with its dark iroko wood frame rising from the back garden of a Victorian house on London's Camden Square, wisteria spilling over its flat roof.

One day she met the man who lived there and asked him to keep her in mind if it ever went to market. He did and, in 2021, Anfossi and her partner Eric Wragge bought it and moved in with their two sons Filippo and Martino.

By then, Anfossi had experience with adventurous renovations. She had previously converted two adjacent ground-level shops into her first three-bedroom family home. She has not touched the framework of this house, however, but she has enhanced its interiors in a way that only she could.

"I think I have some bravery with colour, and I know my materials very well," Anfossi says with a big smile and a broad Italian accent.

“I think I have some bravery with colour, and I know my materials very well”

Anfossi graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art in 2008, where she was tutored by Scottish artist Bruce McLean, after which she exhibited her works of collage, sculpture and video while balancing a job in catering. She had a breakthrough in 2011 when her first son was born. "I lost interest in going to the studio, I felt lonely and directionless, so I joined an adults' ceramics class at Camden's Working Men's College."

Since then, her work has been shown at London's Whitechapel Gallery, Camden Arts Centre and Canopy Collections, Museo della Ceramica di Savona and Venice's A plus A gallery. Her work is in private collections in the US, UK and Europe.

But it was also at the class that she met the people of all ages coming for both creative and therapeutic reasons and became interested in setting up a shared space for ceramics experiments. In 2016, she found Rochester Square, a half-acre site with an abandoned nursery, a short walk from her previous house. Anfossi and Wragge, who works in finance, bought it. "I'm the kind of person that if I fall in love with something I

see, and I'm lucky enough to be able to put my hands on it, I put my hands on it fully," she says.

They are slowly restoring the nursery buildings that host the square's kiln, used regularly by Anfossi and 40 other ceramicists, and a workshop and event space used by local primary schools and students from the Royal College of Art, the Bartlett School of Architecture and Westminster University, the London Design Festival and Frieze art fair. Around the square are flowerbeds, a bird bath, a rabbit hutch and a chicken coop. This hospitable approach to creativity infuses her Camden home: "every single item has a personal story of a friend or a place."

The house, designed in the early 1980s by architect Peter Bell and inspired by Japanese architecture, feels bright and airy. Its iroko frame is joined by traditional wooden pegs instead of metalwork and central columns jigsaw into ceramic feet. At its centre, a wooden staircase rises to a glass pyramid ceiling. Ground-floor living sections run around it from kitchen to dining area to living room, a zoning that is mirrored upstairs by four bedrooms. Anfossi has changed an annexe into a den for her sons. It overlooks an internal tiled courtyard garden that she has planted with Japanese anemone and irises, passiflora, euphorbia, verbena and jasmine.

Inside, visual curiosity is rewarded at every angle. A series of windows lines the periphery, looking on to surrounding streets, while the raised height of the ground level maintains privacy. When seated, eyes dart between the garden and potted indoor succulents, Anfossi's collections of art, design, ceramics, glass and wooden curios are arranged in clusters on ledges and shelves.

Her collection began at art school, trading with other artists – something she continues to this day. Works by Enrico David, Amalia Pica, Laure Prouvost, Anne Ryan, Shaan Tariq Hassan Syed and Arnaldo Pomodoro are displayed among design by Aude Van Ryn, light fixtures by FOS (Thomas Poulsen) and a mix of Tobia Scarpa furniture. Pieces by amateur potters and family members are peppered around too.

There's an exuberance and wonkiness that resonates with her own work. Her ceramic sculptures are always functional: tall, knobby floor lamps with handblown yellow glass domes; drunken-looking egg cups; spoons painted like bean pods, each pulsing with pattern and colour-sectioned glazes. It is humorous domesticity presented akilter, lumpen and anew.

From the front door, the kitchen ahead dazzles with its bold terrazzo worktops. Up close, its pattern reveals shapes, colours and letters: a snake, a plane, her boys' initials. The family made these embedded elements together at Rochester Square; Anfossi wanted them to remember being involved in the process. Glass rectangles are inset too, their primary colours and shapes inspired by original stained-glass panes in the kitchen windows that filter blue, yellow and red light across the counter on bright mornings.

She worked with terrazzo specialists Diespeker and Co in south London to make the 6-metre-long surface and sink, the first time the company (established in 1881) had inset

ceramics, rather than stone and glass fragments, into a surface. Anfossi laid out the composition by hand at their production unit, but she misjudged the depth with some of the shapes, so they appear half buried or partially erased. The result is a cross-section of a family's interests the year they arrived, their own mini-Pompeii.

Another addition to the kitchen was bespoke iroko and colour cabinetry, continuing her affection for the building's frame and windowpane palette. A yellow-coated sideboard is built into the living room and Yves Klein blue cabinets line the hall, including a water closet (in the truest sense of the phrase: it's a loo in a cupboard). This scheme was assisted by architect Migue Mollá, who was initially unconvinced by her vision. By the end, she'd won. "He said I opened his mind about colour, he was too scared to use it before. I said, I want this blue, he said, are you sure? I'm like, YES," Anfossi says. "I didn't want any white, or grey, or black: the three main architect colours."

Anfossi is confident in her choices. "I have used a lot of different materials in my practice for a long time and I am good at researching and finding things," she says. "I understand fixings. I know how a tap works, and how a pipe works as well as where to get the wood and why one wood is better than another."

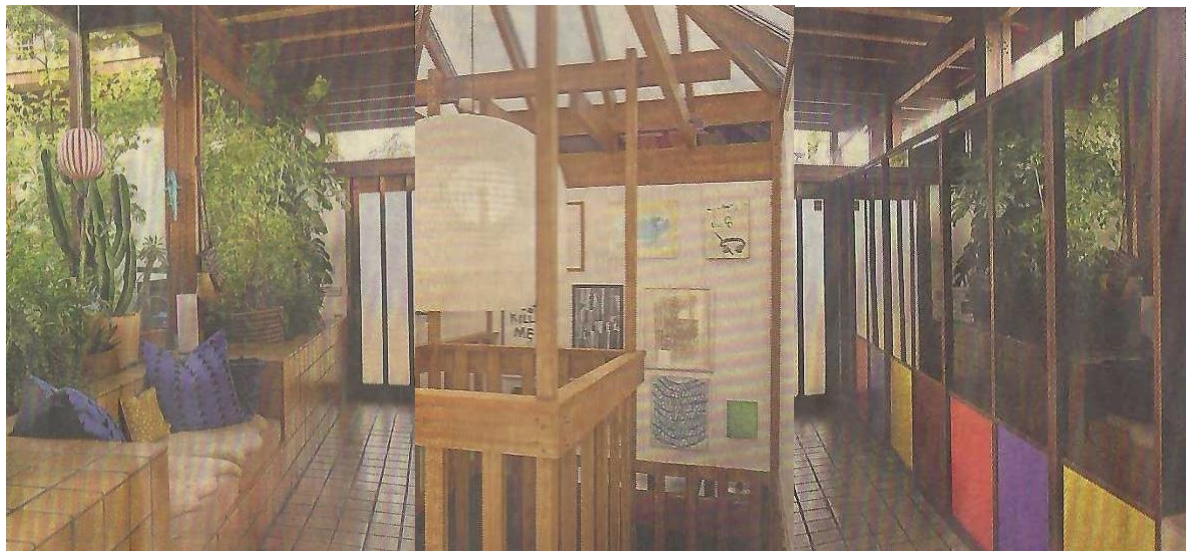
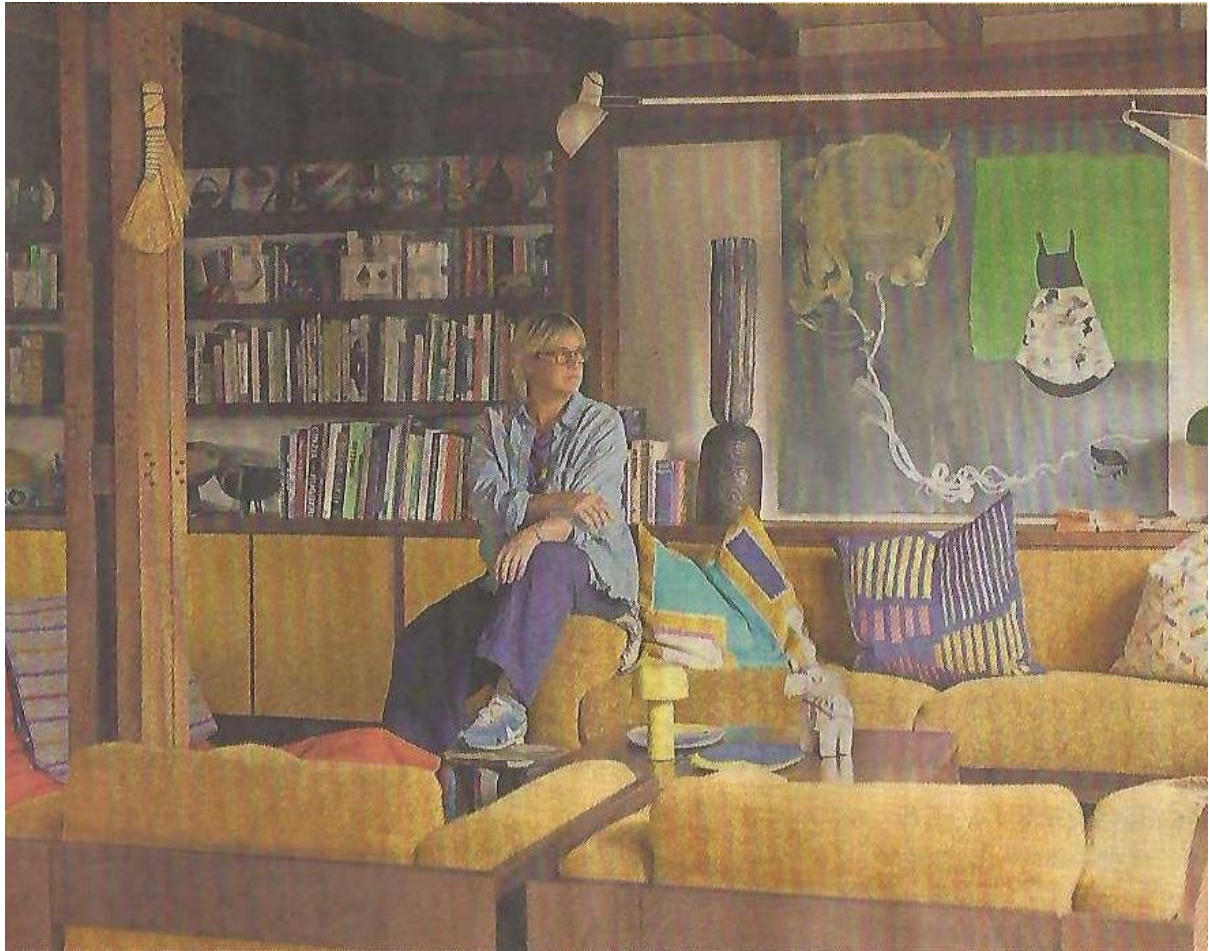
She remodelled two upstairs bathrooms. Again, cues came from the house with iroko cabinets and matt sage-green tiles in the master bathroom nodding to the shade of the bedroom carpet - contrasted with neon orange taps. She designed the tiled bath, which is deep and angular if a little foreboding. Is it comfortable? "I love it. It's big." Anfossi is a chatty person, so it seems apt that everything she has added is in conversation with the original quirks of the house.

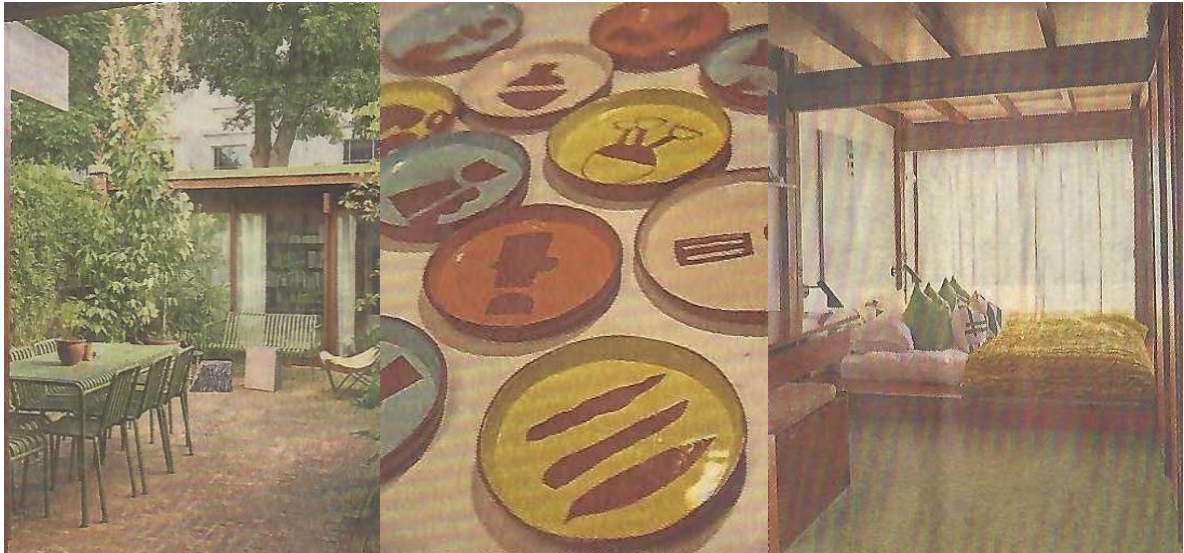
The kitchen dazzles with its bold terrazzo worktops; its pattern reveals a snake, a plane, her sons' initials

What next? She is slowly working with architects on Rochester Square's buildings and to expand the sculpture garden. As for her ceramics, a collector base is growing, as is institutional interest. She is currently making work for several exhibitions including a two-person show at Blunk Space, California. She's also writing a series of children's books about materials with publisher Magic Cat. The first is about clay as the basis for life, fertilising the plants we grow, and thus the food we eat, and the material from which dinner plates are made.

It's the same message that is embodied by her art and her house, encouraging observation, environmental awareness and creativity, and caring for one another by way of the earth.

FTWeekend





The above article appeared on page 6 of the FT Weekend on 15th/16th February 2025

Photographed for the FT by Lesley Lau