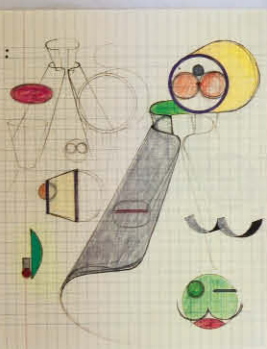


Nipa Doshi's workstation, sprinkled with objects of various shapes and sizes alongside her sketches.

Nipa Doshi's workstation, sprinkled with objects of various shapes and sizes alongside her sketches.



TAKE A SEAT

The 'Paper Planes' and 'Uchiwa' chairs—designed by Doshi and Jonathan Levien—in the Doshi Levien studio.



DESIGN FOR LIFE

London residents Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien—of design firm Doshi Levien—have a studio and home that are enviable examples of their aesthetic

WRITER JUHI PANDE • PHOTOGRAPHER FILIPPO BAMBERGHI



(Clockwise from top left)

OFF THE WALL

The 'Kali' wall-mounted cabinet with scaled models of Doshi Levien's 'Chandigarh' sofas, as well as make-up they designed for Italian cosmetics brand Madina, and other objects. Levien's workstation; mirrors from their Maya series lean against the wall, next to the desk. (Clockwise from bottom right) A mukut (crown), a pakad (tongs), make-up, a scrubbing brush, a Japanese glue tube, and other items arranged around the Doshi Levien studio. A mounted mock-up of the 'Impossible Wood' chair.





At the very beginning there was no studio. When Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien founded the internationally acclaimed design firm Doshi Levien in 2001, the duo worked out of their apartment. At that time, both Doshi and Levien were working with very established studios, but realized that they had reached a time in their careers where they needed to explore their own design language. “I think at some point you have to give it a go and see what you have to say. It was that, more than anything else,” says Doshi about their decision to start out on their own.

Today, the Doshi Levien design studio sits in the middle of East London’s colourful Columbia Road. Its weather-beaten white doorway nestles amongst a row of Victorian shops and repurposed old warehouses. On weekdays, the neighbourhood quietly minds its own business; on Sundays, it explodes with life: plants, flowers, and loud hawkers fill the road for the weekly flower market.

A STUDY IN DESIGN

The studio has a rawness that the designers love. It maintains an aspect of a workshop or an art studio. “The gritty facet is very important for developing new things and allowing [experiments],” says Levien. Doshi agrees: “In some ways, I’m against clean design. I like to make colours dusty. Then I can mix them with other things. There is something about things being used or fabrics that we design; they look like they’ve been faded in the sun, like they’ve lost their sheen and newness. I don’t like things to be so new.”

Revering objects for both their aesthetic nature and functionality is clearly high on the list for Doshi Levien. In 2005, they were commissioned by the British Council for the Lisbon Biennale and were asked to express their world through objects and design. “We created a shop scenario that contained various objects—like a table, a mattress, a water vessel. The idea was to bring together all these objects and find a way to incorporate those into a European lifestyle,” says Levien. “In some ways, I think that became a blueprint of our studio in making cultural connections. Connections between technology and handcraftsmanship, industrial production and storytelling,” adds Doshi.

The Doshi Levien studio is awash with some much needed sunlight, breaking away from the grey shroud London wears all through the winter. The designers are working on their next project, involving textiles and colours for a Spanish company. Their designs have traversed widely across subjects, from furniture and cookware, to make-up and shoes. A central worktable surrounded with their ‘Impossible Wood’ chairs greets visitors first and serves as a meeting space. Their workstations are on the other side of a large, functional cabinet stacked with books, objects, and other pieces of the organized, creative clutter that fills the studio and provides clues to their design process. “I don’t need to have those particular objects around me, but I definitely need to have objects around me that inspire me and have a certain materiality or shape,” says Doshi. Levien, on the other hand, is interested in why things exist. “Especially things that I don’t understand, that I haven’t seen before. The cultural aspect and the reason for existence of objects is what it’s about for me,” he adds.

OBJECTIFIED

On a recent spring Sunday afternoon, I strolled down to the

Barbican Estate—home to London’s iconic, 1960s-era, utopian, brutalist housing estate, and an arts centre—to meet the couple. They chose to live in this estate because of how central it is for them. Their studio is a quick 15-minute scooter ride from home; their six-year-old son Rahul’s school is three blocks away, and central London is a hop, skip and jump away. “The Barbican is built in a way to confuse outsiders. The exits and entrances take a little getting used to, and in that sense it is safe,” says Doshi, as she, Levien and Rahul take me for a walk around the gardens. I’m taken up to a bridge overlooking the manmade lake that is the central vein at the estate. From that vantage point, the Barbican looks awe-inspiring in its rawness, because it visually seems like a misfit in the otherwise modern metal-and-glass London skyline.

Their admiration for objects permeates their split-level apartment just as it does their studio. Mirrors, artefacts, puja paraphernalia, and metal bowls line shelves and cabinets as well as the floor. Photographs by Sooni Taraporevala adorn the walls intermittently; an enormous frame with two men sitting side by side on a public bus dominates the staircase, making eye contact with me as I walk down to the living room. “Sooni’s work takes me back to [Mumbai]. She’s photographed the Parsi community very beautifully and I find that very moving,” says Doshi.

“Ours is not a design home. The way I choose to live is almost the opposite of what you think of as a designer home. A lot of the things have just accumulated over the years,” says Doshi. The ‘Charpoy’, ‘Capo’ chair, and ‘Chandigarh’ sofa—all by Doshi Levien—and the Herman Miller ‘Marshmallow’ sofa might disagree. “Sometimes we take things from the studio and we live with them for a while so we can gain a sense of whether something is there to stay or whether something is a short-lived idea. So the home is an experiment in that way,” says Levien. Their house is not about ostentation or wealth, but more about objects and their humility; and this resonates with their design ethos.

BLENDING SPACES

Doshi loves spending time in the living room where she and her son, Rahul, practise their singing sitting on the intricate ‘Rabari’ rug on the floor. Levien favours the ‘Charpoy’ in his son’s room on the other side of the kitchen. The Barbican’s large, wood-framed windows dominate all the rooms of their apartment, one side looks out on a tranquil road with a neat row of houses, the other has a balcony partitioned only with glass doors extending out from the living room side. Everything is drenched in natural light.

The Doshi Levien apartment is borderless as a result of clever use of furniture. There are no bulky partitions dividing spaces. Their work—a poster for ‘Ice Moon’ (a project for Häagen Dazs), the ‘Kali’ cabinet, and ‘Maya’ mirrors—along with carefully chosen photographs ensconce the space and give it a defined identity. The bedroom upstairs has a low bed with multi-hued, octagonal legs that Levien made.

And yet it is the objects that define the space. Things pop out and grab your attention once you’ve managed to take in the house. Mirrors and metal pots play peek-a-boo in the bedroom. A wooden leg splint made by Charles and Ray Eames is mounted on the wall. Objects are placed with purpose and care, making the space inviting. The home feels lived-in and loved. Materiality is at the core of everything that Doshi and Levien embrace and that extends to their home: a well-lived space with a host of objects, each telling a unique story. ♦

A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING
The large-windowed, sun-washed living room has the 'Charpoy', the soft-toned 'Rabari' rug, the yellow 'Capo' chair and the blue 'Chandigarh' sofa. The stark blue-and-white handmade 'Ice Moon' poster is on the left wall.

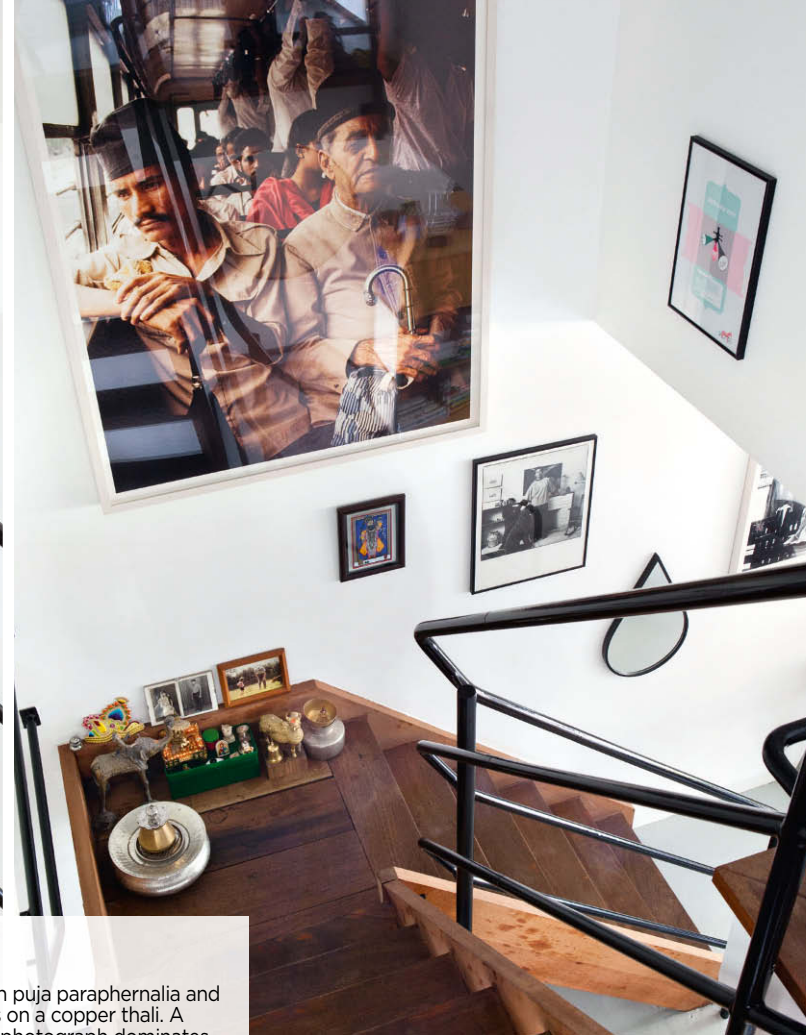




STEPS AHEAD

The staircase winds down to the distinctive Herman Miller 'Marshmallow' sofa, behind which is the dining area with 'Impossible Wood' plastic chairs. The entire space is peppered with all sizes of their 'Maya' mirrors.





(Clockwise from top left)

SIMPLY THE BEST

The dining area with puja paraphernalia and metal and glass jars on a copper thali. A Sooni Taraporevala photograph dominates the staircase. Doshi and Levien with the 'Almora' lounge chair they designed for B&B Italia, on the Barbican grounds near the lake. The master bedroom with a one-of-a-kind bed that Levien made for their home.

