

## FINANCIAL TIMES



Artist Claudia Wieser's geometric murals decorate the vibrant kitchen  
Photo: Anne-Catherine Scoffoni

### ENTERING THIS FILM DIRECTOR'S BERLIN HOUSE RENOVATION IS 'LIKE BEING SWALLOWED INTO ANOTHER WORLD'

BY GISELA WILLIAMS  
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When the Swiss film director Oliver Rihs decided to move with his young family from the vibrant bohemian Berlin neighbourhood of Kreuzberg to the quieter, historic streets of Charlottenburg with its old world glamour, he and his wife Carolina wanted to bring some of Kreuzberg's cool, colourful artistic energy with them. "After having our son Sol, we wanted to slow down some; we chose the former West neighbourhood of Charlottenburg because it is unhurried," says Rihs. But they didn't want to sacrifice joy for pace, or fun for a sense of history. The three-bedroom apartment added atop a historic building in 2011 had light and space (almost 4,000 sq ft), but the interiors were staid and boring: white and square with no real surprises. "As a filmmaker, I need an environment that inspires me, especially when I'm working on a screenplay," says Rihs, who is currently working on a film about the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche — and is also the great-grandson of the writer Hermann Hesse. Colour has always been important, especially during the city's darker months. "Berlin winters can be very gloomy."

Rihs approached renovating the apartment and building a home for his family as he does working on a film: as a collaborative venture, and one that tells stories. He brought on Berlin-based interior architect Jan Ulmer who had helped the Rihs family transform a lakeside cottage into a Japanese-inspired retreat a few years earlier. "Oliver is really good at describing atmospheres or feelings that he wants to evoke," says Ulmer. "I translate that for him into a space. Essentially, I create a set."

"I told him I wanted to feel like I was in the belly of a dreamlike ship," laughs Rihs. "I can't say exactly who made

which decisions in the end, but Jan, Carolina and I enriched each other's visions — and, ultimately, we found everything together."

In the name of cost effectiveness and sustainability, they worked with the original layout and structure, but wherever possible added sensual curves, unexpected surprises and colour. One of the first moves was to open up the space. The L-shaped apartment had corridors with rooms on both sides; interior walls were removed, leaving, as a sort of historical marker, the steel support pillars. The drywall of the fireplace at one end of the main living room was also torn down, its corners rounded and then covered in clay — transforming it from overlooked and conventional to a striking feature, like an adobe sculpture. Ulmer also added a sloping curve to one corner of the roof of the front balcony, painting the surface yellow. They all agreed to terrazzo with small specks of colour for the main floor.

The apartment has two entrances, at opposite ends; Rihs and his wife wanted one end to be for entertaining and the other end to be flexible, but more private. In the former, the 1,100 sq ft living and dining room has an open kitchen at its heart. "The kitchen is the centre of everything," says Rihs. "We love having guests and spend a lot of time entertaining and cooking." To give it focus, Berlin-based artist Claudia Wieser created a bespoke intervention; on the island and splashback she assembled abstract geometric murals using multicoloured tiles in two sizes. Like the fireplace, the kitchen became not just a domestic space, but something sculptural.

The same is true of the small guest bathroom off of the kitchen — here, every possible surface is lined with glossy red and purple tiles. "You feel like you've been swallowed into another world," laughs Ulmer. "The guest toilet is frequently used but typically ignored. I wanted to create a surprising experience for guests."

A hallway connects the kitchen and living room to the more private areas. But rather than just being a transitional section, Rihs decided to give it purpose: "This space in between is intended to be a neutral area for reading, meditating or watching films, and for my son and his friends to play Nintendo."

Around the corner are the two bedrooms — one belonging to the couple and the other to their young son. With a drywall approach, Ulmer shaped one of the walls of the master bedroom similarly to the roof of the terrace: a wavelike, cocooning form. The ceiling is painted yellow. "I love creating echoes throughout a space," says Ulmer, "separate areas that relate to each other." Rihs was delighted: "I love our bedroom with its rounded shape and simplicity. I could spend whole days here."

Beyond the bedrooms is another striking intervention: two large floor-to-ceiling pod structures, both clad in vertical slats of wood. Instead of maintaining the apartment's traditional corridor, the trio wanted to create more of a landscape, "like little houses within a house," says Ulmer. "Something like a small, open village," adds Rihs.

One of the pods is a tall shower room, with a small skylight at the top, lined with a slate blue-hued tadelakt: a hand-applied waterproof lime plaster typically used in hammams in Morocco that is polished to a smooth, satin-like finish. Ulmer laughs and says that one of the workers commented that the surface was so beautiful he almost felt compelled to lick it. Like a tiny observatory or a James Turrell installation, the shower is a contemplative, calming space, says Rihs. "I like to lie or sit down and create stories or reflect on my day."

The other pod, with its round skylight and custom-made shelves, is Carolina's dressing room. When you open the doors to both pods, they create a closed space around a bathtub that sits under its own skylights.

The final room is used both as a guest room and as a late-night workspace for Rihs. "My work is sometimes like being a therapist," says Ulmer. "I need to know everyone's rhythms and quirks." Because Rihs often works on a screenplay late at night, sometimes with other collaborators and friends, they decided that the space should be soundproofed. With its separate entrance, polished wooden floors and rounded green walls, the 540 sq ft space is a connected but separate and self-sufficient apartment, with its own bathroom and kitchen. Currently used mostly by Rihs, in a few years it could be a place where their son throws parties, or somewhere for a housekeeper to live.

Life here is like a movie with plot twists and unexpected endings — and shot in Technicolor.