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THIS PAGE One of Philip's light pieces in the bedroom. 'I like things that are fun,' he says OPPOSITE Olivia and Philip, at the front door of their converted pub, like to take their dogs Joe and Jarvis for walks along the seafront

## FAIRGROUND ATTRACTION

Lighting designer PHILIP OAKLEY and his partner OLIVIA YIP have brought the Blackpool Illuminations to England's south coast with their quirky, cut-price revamp of a derelict pub WORDS *Lauris Morgan-Griffiths* PHOTOGRAPHS *Ben Anders*







THIS PAGE, FROM ABOVE Olivia and Philip on the front at St Leonards; each room tells a different story – in one of the bedrooms, the baroque-style bed is framed by antlers and gold sconces OPPOSITE The pub's function room makes a generous living space, decorated with trompe l'oeil wallpaper by Deborah Bowness and fairground ephemera



When Philip Oakley and Olivia Yip first saw the Admiral Benbow, it was hardly love at first sight. In fact, it was barely sight at all. The estate agent gave them a torch and left them at the door to stumble their way around a dark, rubbish-filled defunct pub. So, when they put in their sealed bid of £110,000 for the property in St Leonards, East Sussex, they hardly cared if they got it or not. That was back in 2009. Since then, through hard graft and invention, the couple have transformed the dank building into an idiosyncratic home, accented with fairground lighting ephemera.

#### PLAYING WITH SPACE AND LIGHT

Philip and Olivia completely revamped the pub themselves on a very tight budget. Over two years, they rewired, replumbed, changed architraves, updated skirting boards, made shutters, built the kitchen and installed reclaimed parquet flooring. 'We've never paid very much for anything,' Philip says. The bathroom walls are lined with salvaged pallet wood and the kitchen units are from Ikea, embellished with old brass door handles from a junk shop. Philip found the old-style radiators at B&Q. The walls throughout are strictly monochrome, from black and white paint mixed to shades of grey.

The result is a 650 square-metre, three-bed house with a unique upstairs living room that features – as a nod to its previous life – a hidden bar, complete with optics, snug seating, holiday postcards... even pork scratchings.

As a designer (Olivia is, too), Philip has always been attracted to lights. 'I like things that are fun. I like the way they transform a room and create a more cosy but interesting environment.' For 18 months in the mid 2000s, Philip was director of the Festival of Light in Blackpool, a sort of fringe Illuminations. 'In 2006, Blackpool won the National Lighting Design Award for the scheme I created around the biggest mirror ball in the world,' he says.

Inevitably, there are souvenirs here from Philip's time in Blackpool. Multicoloured fairground lights cover the hall ceiling. Oversized illuminated ducks fly across a bedroom wall.

#### THE CHARMS OF ST LEONARDS

So why did the couple choose St Leonards? Partly, says Philip, it was a sense of familiarity. 'It's not unlike Blackpool, another deprived seaside town,' he says. 'St Leonards feels like it's going up in the world.'

They had no friends or acquaintances in the town, but knew the junk shops – and that house prices were affordable. Where else, they reasoned,







LEFT The neon piece on the living-room wall is a re-creation of Philip's mother's signature from a letter. The macabre dining table came from a hospital operating theatre. Philip and Olivia installed the reclaimed parquet flooring





THIS PAGE, FROM ABOVE Oversized flying ducks illuminate one of the bedroom walls alongside a vintage travel poster  
OPPOSITE The word 'Fun' in lights is one of Philip's designs and epitomises his signature style. Tapestries found in charity shops and sewn together upholster the sofa and chair



could they afford to buy such a development opportunity and furnish it with local vintage finds?

The house is one block back from the beach. During the renovations, the couple had windows moved to the corner of the building to catch glimpses of the sea. This aspect, says Philip, is preferable to the front elevation, 'because we don't get the full force of the wind'.

Once the structural work had been completed, Olivia and Philip could concentrate on scouring the local shops, picking up vintage items, such as their Saarinen Tulip table and Fritz Hansen chairs.

**THE WOW FACTOR**

Philip, a self-confessed collector, describes his style as 'eclectic. A bit ridiculous, a bit silly. I like silly'. There are wrestling posters next to sophisticated glass vases, a fire alarm with a set of gnashers on top, zebra- and leopardskin sofas, charity shop tapestries sewn together for upholstery, Deborah Bowness's 3D-effect wallpaper and toy figures from the 1960s series *Thunderbirds*. Dig around and you'll come across a distorting fairground mirror, a surveyor's ruler reincarnated as a handrail, even a fire engine's steering valve to 'steer' the loo flush.

His dark side vies with his fun and romantic one. A hospital operating table has been put into service as a dining table, and an overhead light from an operating theatre has been adapted to provide mood lighting over the kitchen table.

Philip likes things to be made in England, so he has begun to produce his own neons and versions of fairground lighting to decorate the home – giant anchors, birds, words, dollar signs, heart-shaped flowers, birds, mirrors, a Union Jack. However, the object he is most attached to is the neon he made – Lots of love Mum x. It is a re-creation of his mother's signature from a letter, the original of which hangs beside the sign with her photo. Philip claims he has stopped collecting 'because I am buying the same things'. He smiles. 'I have three sets of kitchen scales and don't use any of them.'

What is the appeal of collecting? 'I can't talk for others but I am a show-off,' says Philip. 'And that doesn't mean being loud. It's showing off like a fairground showman, standing in his carousel, having created the most amazing place with its lights, carvings, signwriting, music. I like people to come in and say "Wow".' What Philip and Olivia have created in their disused pub is something special – 'wow' really is the only word for it.

To enquire about Philip Oakley's installations, call 07879 810587 or see oakleyilluminations.co.uk.

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THIS PAGE The kitchen units are from Ikea with new handles, while the radiators are B&Q. Fritz Hansen chairs sit around an Eero Saarinen Tulip table. The overhead lights are from a hospital  
OPPOSITE The colourful hall lighting leads to a fairground mirror



### PHILIP'S TOP TIPS FOR COLLECTORS

- Buy what you need and what you like – don't buy anything expecting to make money out of it.
- Do your research. If you want genuine vintage design, make sure you know how to spot the real thing and what's a copy.
- Anything made in England is good to collect. I'm hooked on Branksome China tableware.
- Don't buy things that need renovating – you'll never get round to restoring them.
- Be bold – liven up your home with a big centrepiece. If it's too big you can always hang it off the ceiling.