True to the real-estate mantra John McGrath’s sleek apartment enjoys a premier position on the Sydney harbourfront.

PHOTOGRAPHS PRUE RUSCOE WORDS CHRIS PEARSON
A spiral staircase leading to the home office adds a sculptural element to the entry. The leather handrails bring a touch of luxe and texture. Artwork by John Coburn. Chicken Dance Man by Graeme Townsend hangs at the top of the stairs. The apartment is so close to the water you could drop a fishing line off the balcony.

I love Christian Liaigre," says John McGrath sitting on the sofa, poring over the French design guru’s landmark book Maison. “I like orderliness and comfort, and both are there in his work.” He pauses at an image of a room featuring an exquisite layering of textures, including linens and timber, all in a calming natural palette. “Isn’t it beautiful?” he says. “It’s uncluttered, but not minimalist, a balance of tailored and comfortable, where you can throw off your shoes and not be scared to use the spaces.”

John is a renowned real-estate wizard and one of the judges on television’s The Block, where he exudes expert assurance, but, when it came to designing his apartment on one of Sydney Harbour’s historic finger wharves, he admits he found himself on less solid ground.

However he quickly gained confidence. Drawing much inspiration from Liaigre’s tactile interiors, he called on his friend, interior designer Geoff Lopez to finesse the finer points. “I used him as a sounding board to bring ideas together,” he says. “Ideas are good, but execution is critical – finding the fabrics, for example, was where his expertise came in.”

This is the fourth apartment John has owned on the wharf, which drinks in views of Sydney Harbour Bridge through banks of glazed windows. Having already lived in the building, he prized its attractions, such as the Sydney Dance Company nearby (“I love the sounds of the shoes tapping on the boards in the evenings”), fine restaurants and the kind of harbour views most of us only dream about. “I also love the sea breezes and all those negative ions,” he says. “You’re so close to the water you can drop a fishing line off the balcony.”

Over two levels, this apartment soaks up the sun and the view on two sides. “It ticked every box,” he says. He moved in at the end of 2011, after a makeover that took just 12 weeks. While the basic layout was untouched, he stripped the apartment back to concrete in all but the three bathrooms. His brief to himself?
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A new Poliform kitchen with marble benchtops was installed. The mezzanine office has an Arflex 'Cousy' sofa and Flexform 'Betty' chairs from Poliform. Tripod lamp by Eunice Taylor from Garner Agencies. Ligne Roset 'Togo' armchairs invite relaxation. Orange lampshades from Shady Designs. Tripod lamp by Eunice Taylor. Nude figure by Phyllis Koshland under stairs. Four artworks by Freddie Timms.
EVERYWHERE THERE IS IMPRESSIVE ATTENTION TO DETAIL. “IT’S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT LIFT A PLACE AND MAKE IT SPECIAL,” SAYS JOHN.
“I wanted comfortable spaces for watching TV, dining, meditation and working from home; a tailored look, orderly and neat, but also loose and relaxed.”

To the left of the entry is a double-height living area, a kitchen and dining space, where a bulkhead creates a sense of containment – John loves open plan, but he likes zones to create discrete spaces. Up a spiral staircase is a study, where John, who works from home one day a week, welcomes clients and staff for meetings. Off the entry to the right are two bedrooms, the main with ensuite, and a main bathroom.

With its textured walls, low-profile fireplaces and furniture, dark timbers and tightly controlled palette, John was looking over Liaigre’s shoulder when he created this inviting home.

Walls in the living area and hallway were stuccoed to create an almost marble-like finish, while those in the dining area and main bedroom were upholstered. “I wanted surfaces that were tactile and visual,” he says. He replaced ho-hum carpets with dark stained timber boards and luxe New Zealand wool carpets in the two bedrooms and study.

Everywhere there is impressive attention to detail. Concrete pillars encased in timber match the floor. Similarly, he partially enclosed the spiral staircase underneath to create a sculptural sweep and encased the rails in dark leather. “It’s the little things that lift a place and make it special,” says John.

So, too, do fireplaces, which here create cosiness and focus in the living area, study and main bedroom. “I urge all my clients to include fireplaces,” he says. “They make a room unique.” Surprisingly, perhaps, John maintains you can have too much storage, and he has replaced some in the main bedroom with a modest walk-in. “Storage encourages you to amass things, which leads to clutter. When I buy an item of clothing, I recycle something,” he says, revealing the few suits and shoes he has neatly stowed within.

Also streamlined are the sleek sofas, warmed by textured accessories, such as the retro German ceramics (“It’s nice to mix things, without going crazy eclectic. I can spend hours rummaging through second-hand stores”), which sit beside two comfortable armchairs. Against a neutral base, the colour orange pops in the living area. “If asked, I would never have said orange was my favourite colour,” he says, “but it does seem to have evolved that way.”

This home is also a gallery for an impressive collection of artworks that ranges from John Coburn to indigenous artists whose dot paintings, with their orderliness and meticulous detail combined with an earthiness, sum up what this home is all about.

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If I create my own disaster, I can live with it,” he says with a smile.

**SPEED READ**

Real-estate guru and media personality John McGrath has recently moved in to a loft-style apartment on one of Sydney’s finger wharves, the fourth he has owned in the building. + Keeping the original floor plan, he stripped the apartment back to its concrete shell, leaving only the bathrooms untouched. + He installed a new Poliform kitchen, and clad the concrete pillars in timber to match the floor. A mezzanine space above the living room became his office. + Drawing inspiration from the work of Christian Liaigre, he chose an interior scheme that features an interplay of textures, such as stucco or upholstery on the walls and rich dark timber or chunky wool carpet for the floors, with pops of burnt orange for earthiness and warmth. + Comfort is paramount but attention to detail and a sense of order underpin the spaces.