

## Expect the unexpected in this award-winning French architect's home: the super-swish interior is full of Parisian flair, but the pièce de résistance is the basement pool...

Born and bred in Paris, award-winning architect Annabel Karim Kassar has injected her love of her hometown into her north London family home that's full of colour and texture...

PHILIPPA STOCKLEY | Wednesday 31 August 2016 16:31 BST | 0 comments



**Glamorous, award-winning French architect Annabel Karim Kassar, 55, never stops. With offices in Beirut, Dubai and in London, where she lives, she is now working on three houses and a clutch of offices.**

When we meet, she has been up all night working on designs for the inaugural two-week London Design Biennale, which opens at Somerset House on September 7.

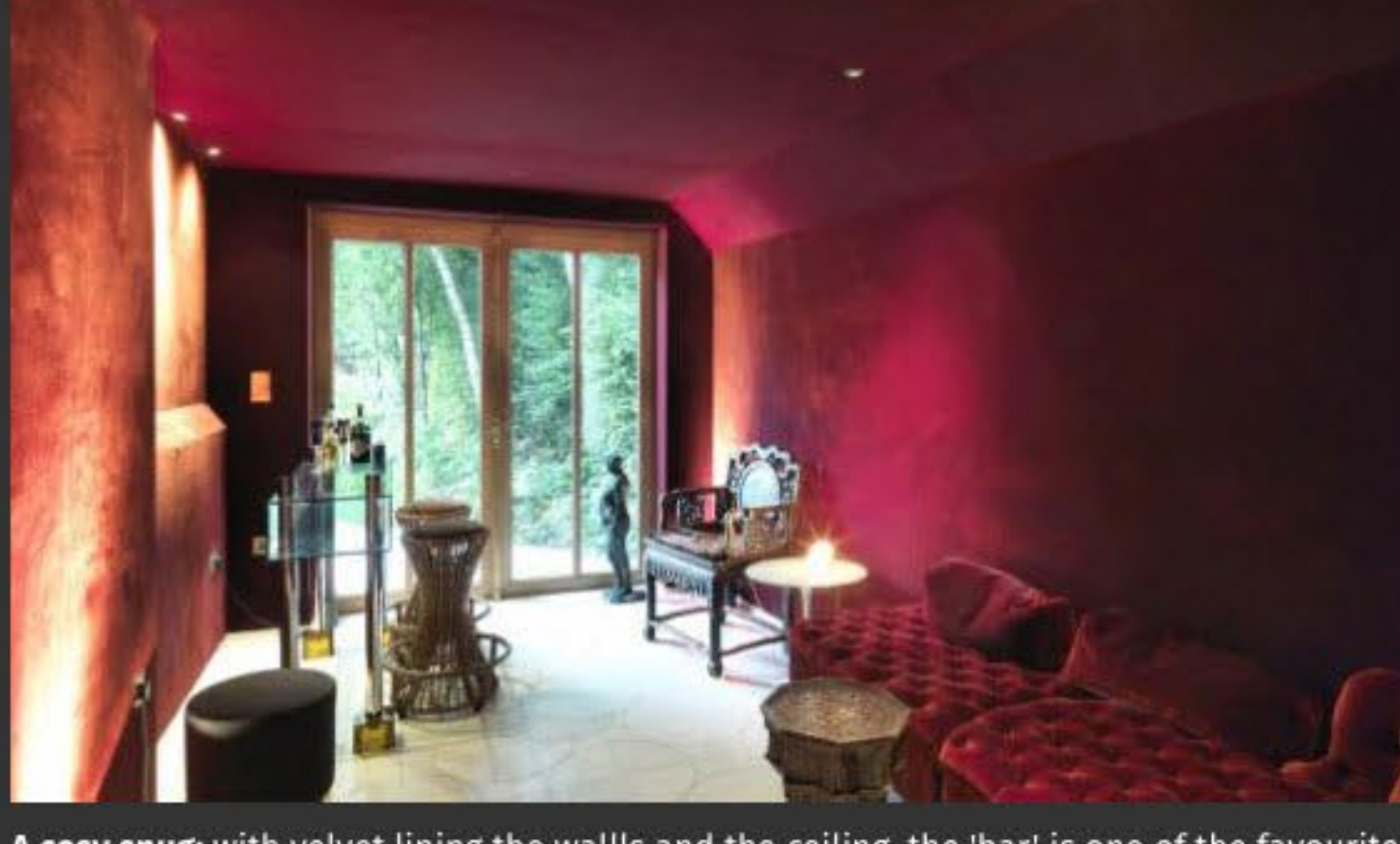
Kassar is designing the Lebanese pavilion, inspired by a Beirut street, with a café serving street food cooked by Momo and Sketch supremo Mourad Mazouz — who just happens to be married to her daughter, Caroline.

Born and raised in Paris, Kassari had several career options. Her father was an engineer, and she was good at both science and art, so started out taking maths and physics, but realised it wasn't for her, and left.

After a spell of theatre design and painting she took an architecture degree, in which all her skills fell into place. She met her husband, Radwan, an engineer, in her twenties.

After working for several architects and the City of Paris, Kassari set up her now-global practice in 1994. She and her husband spent almost 20 years in Lebanon before coming to London.

Their daughter was already living here, so their house search centred around north London, to be close to her. The house they fell for was a huge, three-storey, five-bedroom, turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts classic in a leafy Swiss Cottage street.



**A cosy snug:** with velvet lining the walls and the ceiling, the 'bar' is one of the favourite rooms in the house (Charles Hosea)

### Majoring in luxury

While the outside has cottage-style hints, the inside is super-swish. The enormous white entrance hall has outsize wood-block flooring designed by Kassari, that conjures up chic Parisian apartments.

With a leather-covered ceiling installation, and an avant-garde love seat apparently made of orange string, there's a feel of art gallery.

But throughout the house, magazine style is counterpointed by a homely atmosphere, created by the use of lots of big sofas, plus textures, pattern and innovative lighting, much of it designed by Kassari, who co-runs a lighting company. This house loves entertaining.

Kassar's luxe style is dramatic and colourful, but her handling of texture and pattern is unique and distinctive. She applies unusual surface detail with many different types of handmade tiles, textured wood, hand-painted wallpaper and marble.

There's a lot of embossed leather — even gold-covered in one small bathroom — which adds charm. A giant sliding door that can close off the drawing room from the hall is leather-covered, too, as are the surrounds of the French doors looking out to a romantic garden swaying with foxgloves, roses and acanthus.

A finish used since the 17th century, embossed leather has patina and warmth. It contrasts beautifully here with other doors done by craftsmen in faultless, glossy lacquer.

From family to friends, everyone's favourite room is the "bar", a small and cosy snug with a plump sofa in sensuous garnet silk velvet. The same velvet lines both walls and ceiling. "Large homes need a small, intimate space," Kassari says.



**The hub of the house:** the practical kitchen has a large steel island in the middle (Charles Hosea)

Since she loves cooking, the big kitchen is practical, its large steel island holding pull-out refrigerated drawers — a fantastic idea if you have the space. Opalescent-glazed handmade Portuguese tiles line the walls.

The master bedroom is really dramatic: the bed encased in a circular rail, from which sweep lustrous, weighted silk curtains made from hand-woven Lyons silk in duck-egg and green-gold.

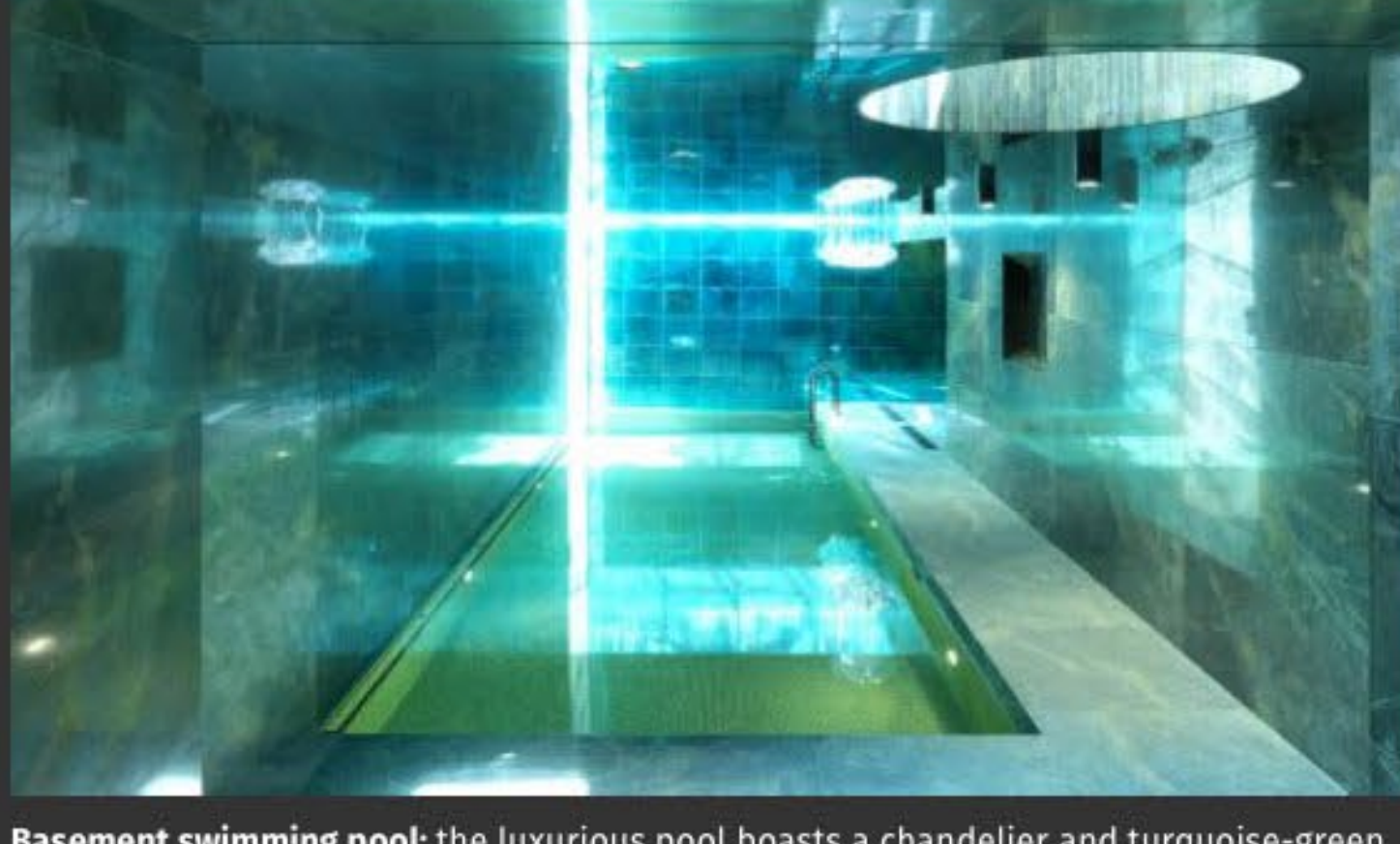
The bespoke carpet is sinkably soft silk, while at the end of the room, a bathroom flames with an orange rubber floor, orange mosaic-tiled shower, and wood-lined walls.

However, none of this drama prepares you for the pièce de résistance, the swimming pool in the basement.

When the Kassars bought the house, it had an Eighties-style sun room at the back, with a circular opening and spiral stair down to a pink swimming pool and a jumble of changing and shower rooms.

Kassar changed the circular opening to a sexy glass aperture you can walk on, and moved access to the corner, via a fluid spiral of African hardwood she designed and had made in one piece.

She then swept the changing rooms to the side, leaving a clean space divided by a glass wall; an antechamber in one section and the pool beyond lined with tiny turquoise tiles.



**Basement swimming pool:** the luxurious pool boasts a chandelier and turquoise-green marble (Charles Hosea)

### London's loveliest pool

The walls are gigantic pieces of turquoise-green marble with riverine veining, while the end wall has bespoke églomisé turquoise tiles, and a chandelier like a glittering spaceship, by Kassari. This is surely the most beautiful pool in London. The constant play of light, reflection, and marble are like the flip of a mermaid's tail.

You'd never believe this lay beneath the comfy, traditional garden room — though even that got the Kassari treatment, with hand-painted wallpaper in a diamond pattern, sofas covered in striped djellaba fabric, and mirrored souk tables.

Yet, when she first saw the house in winter 2012, she felt that it "didn't have a soul", and almost didn't buy it. She really disliked its sweeping marble staircase with cast-iron handrail.

That was the first thing to go, replaced with a simple stair with hardwood book boxes instead of a handrail, all lit by coloured light from handblown glass in the landing window.

Otherwise, her main act was to open up the house as much as possible, then have artisans work on the interior. Her obsession with detail shows everywhere, from asymmetric bronze door handles to a beautiful little perforated light in the bar, which dapples the red wall.

All spaces should be beautiful, says Kassari, "even the inside of cupboards. I draw, and draw, and draw again, and work with a lot of artisans. English houses really suit having things brought into them from all over the world, which has been a tradition since the days of the Grand Tour." ■