

INTERIORS

## GRETCHEN ROSE, PARIS

---

After 20 years of corporate life, Philadelphia-born Gretchen Rose started playing with the idea of a different life. She had always loved Paris and in 2020 she took the leap and bought a small apartment in the Marais.

*Images: Grégory Timsit*





Gretchen Rose’s connection with Paris began in graduate school, when she had the opportunity to complete several courses abroad, including one intensive course in Paris. Frustrated at not being able to explore the city as much as she wanted to, she thought, “I have to come back here. It’s magic.” A few years later, she began to feel that after 20 years of working in corporate America, she was merely shuffling wearily through her days. “I started playing with the idea of a different life; one that was not patterned and expected,” she explained. “What if my path was experimental and adventurous? How does one do that? *Can I do that?*” The question eventually evolved into,

“Where can I do that?” and she realised that the answer was obvious.

Gretchen applied for a French visa, resigned from her job, sold her house and moved to Paris. All the fear, the bureaucracy and the unknowns were a small price to pay for the experience. “When I left France after a year of life and travel, I was unsure how my connection to the country would continue. Turns out, the monotony of a pandemic provides a solid backdrop to continue to dream.”

She bought her flat at the height of Covid. She had been referred to a trusted real estate agent in Paris and paired up with a friend who was willing put on a mask and gloves to view flats

for her. Her budget was limited and she knew whatever she bought would need to have some work done. “It was an imperfect exercise, but I was ready for it. For me, France is a constant education—I continually adjust my approach and my expectations.”

Gretchen’s apartment is in the Marais, an area in the third and fourth *arrondissements* that was originally marshland (hence the name), but known today for its galleries, independent shops and cafés. “Landing in this spot was unintentional on my part. I migrate towards calm, quiet neighbourhoods and by some good fortune, my street is north of the heavily trafficked areas and retains a village feel,” Gretchen explains. “I have found wonderful restaurants, old family butchers, cheese shops and bakers.

Her apartment is in a small building in the Les Archives *quartier* that was once the home of mathematician and inventor, Blaise Pascal, who lived there in 1648. It is unusual to find residential buildings as old as this in Paris—it evidently survived Baron Haussmann’s public works project under Napoleon III, when the medieval city streets were opened up to create the characteristic *grands boulevards* with modern planning and architecture. It is tiny, but the size was a benefit in terms of budget because she was able to have it designed and furnished with handmade fabrics, tiles, furniture and products.

There is a warm, crafted, indigenous feeling to the newly renovated space. Unfussy natural materials, traditional French *tomettes*, simple lines and spacious ceiling height make the flat relaxed and breathable. “The apartment represents many parts of me, but mainly my future. It’s a little jewel box and a quiet haven in the middle of Paris, in the middle of life,” she says.

I ask about the architecture and design process. “I was fortunate to secure an admired French architect and designer for renovations, Marianne Evennou. I had followed her work,

specifically on *studettes* (micro apartments) and small spaces. I could see how beautifully she created liveable spaces and I realised I could make a home in Paris.”

Once work started, Gretchen received weekly pictures of the changes, the space and the materials as they were delivered. “It’s an odd feeling taking on an international project when travel has stopped and the world seemed incapacitated, however I never questioned the decision or my commitment to having a place in Paris. If anything, I found a serendipitous moment to build my future.”

I ask Gretchen how she feels when she is in Paris. Is it different to how she feels in Philadelphia? “Paris is a source of inspiration and new perspectives. The constraints and pressures I feel in Philadelphia or in the United States don’t exist in Paris. Time slows down and I am more involved in moments, conversations, activities. I feel more grounded in Paris—maybe it’s my knowledge of the city, maybe it’s the connections





I have formed or maybe there is a strange comfort in the anonymity of being in a foreign land.”

Gretchen has two favourite features in the flat. One is a tiny cast iron wood stove that she used all winter. “The apartment has lovely heated floors and yet I prefer the wood stove. Tending to a fire reinforces slowing down, being in the moment and the heart of home.”

Her other favourite feature is a chair she bought in the antique markets on the northern edge of the city. “At first look, I viewed the layers of rust and peeling paint and decided it wasn’t the best choice, but my design friends loved it. Unknown to me, it closely resembles Henryk Sztaba’s design for PSS Spolem.” Either way, the chair perfectly completes the space alongside a traditional café table and the cast iron stove.

The local area is also reflected in the decoration of Gretchen’s apartment. “I favoured handmade

items from local shops and vendors. My hope was to have a home with global references, natural materials and décor with welcome imperfections.” The flat is a combination of Tensira (fabrics), Antoinette Poisson (wallpaper), Kilims ADA (rug), Atelier Vime (wall hangings) and nearby merchants: Caravane, Merci, La Tresorerie and Maison Massol. “Some of these makers and shops I have long admired in Paris and some were new to me. Atelier Vime was introduced to me by my designer—they are an old maker in France with coveted handmade wicker furniture and art. They have no retail shops and getting in touch with the workshop is tricky on a good day so I am very pleased to have the Atelier Vime constellation mirrors in my hallway!”

The small size of the apartment has determined the scale of the materials and furniture. It’s an incredibly small yet functional space. “Everything was intentional by the design team—the scale of the bathroom tiles and floor tiles, the use of the banquette as a means to create closets, linear elements and striped fabrics to draw the eye up for light and space. We laughed along the way saying we were building a doll house, but it was true!”

I wonder what it’s like to have a home in two very different places. How does it feel to move between the two? “I am still learning the transition between residences and lifestyles. Life in France requires active engagement. If it’s raining, you will be walking in the rain. When shopping in the open markets, you see the growers and producers. If you are invited for a Sunday lunch, it’s a lovely afternoon of homemade foods and several bottles of wine. In France, there is time for everything.”

During the winter of 2021, Gretchen lived in Paris and worked remotely for an extended period. “It brought me to the intersection of French culture and American professional responsibilities. As much as I wanted to go to an exhibit or have a lunch with friends, my time

is constrained and emails never stop. My work days were extended, but the exhaustion seemed diffused by the beauty of the location.”

What about when she is back in Philadelphia? “Philadelphia is my home. It’s my history, my education, my family and my career. But the patterns of life in Philadelphia feel very traditional. Maybe this is true of any home town, but as I grow older I’m less interested in following a pattern or feeling confined. I gravitate towards Paris because it is an experience. Independently, I have created my life in the city on my own terms. I am still creating, growing and figuring out what lies ahead.”

Architect and designer: *Marianne Evennou*  
*@marianne\_evennou • marianne-evennou.com*

Photography: *Grégory Timsit*  
*@gregorytimsit.photographie • gregorytimsit.com*

