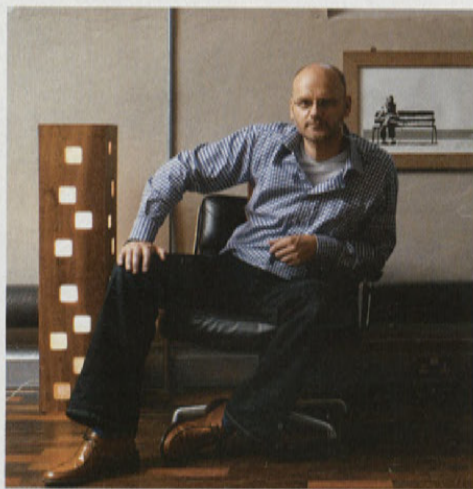


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SO SOLID

Founder of the Solid Floor Company EELKE BLES lets us inside his fabulous home

Eelke Bles is a home-maker with a passion for how his pad looks. Which doesn't make him a home-maker in the winceyette-wearing Hausfrau sense of the word. No, his take on interiors is considerably more butch. 'I don't like cushions and curtains,' he asserts. 'I like hard materials that don't break if they fall down.' And don't even let it enter your head that his bathroom might be carpeted, a peculiarly British affliction, he says, and one which everyone else in Europe naturally 'sniggers at'.

Dutch-born Bles, after all, is the founder of Solid Floor, a hardwood flooring company so adored by design junkies that it now has eight showrooms – six in London, two in Scotland. The newest, in Richmond, opened in January. Its 120 timbers are often used by *Wallpaper** as backdrops for photo shoots. These range from good old oak to such esoteric timbers as the curious-sounding bubinga and panga panga (Bles used the latter as flooring in his flat in a former garment warehouse in Spitalfields, east London.)

Bles originally sold end-of-line wood from factories in the Netherlands to fund his college studies, first in photography, then in urban geography. A student exchange programme, in the early 90s, brought him to University College London's Bartlett School for Architecture and Planning, where he fell in love with London – specifically Spitalfields. 'It was a run-down and cheap area to live in as a student. I lived in two

Georgian houses! How avant-garde: back then only a smattering of eccentrics, notably Gilbert and George, had 'discovered' the beauty of its Georgian Huguenot architecture. Now the YBA-erati, including Tracey Emin and the Chapman brothers, have colonised this gritty urban area, while writer Jeanette Winterson recently opened her organic food shop here.

Although Bles returned to Amsterdam, nothing could tear him away from London's energy for long: 'Amsterdam's cute but lacks drive. It's so open-minded there's nothing to rebel against! Once ensconced in the big smoke, he set up his first Solid Floor office in Clerkenwell. The timing was fortuitous: 'In the early 90s, wood floors were a huge growth area because more and more people were getting into design thanks to all the new TV interiors programmes.'

But he knows he can't rest on his laurels: "With people's salaries not rising now at the same pace as house prices, people have less disposable income than they did until recently." Hence the extraordinary lengths he goes to to treat his timbers to make them unique. "Most people want plain oak, but we treat wood in lots of ways. We burn it, smoke it, tumble it..." By tumbling it, he means putting the wood in a tumble drier (we kid you not) with stones or shards of steel or glass so its surface is roughly pitted.

Originally he was going to use his home – in the fabulously named Fashion Street – as a timber

warehouse. "When I first saw it, it was a box full of boxes. The windows were blocked up. But when I opened up the ones at the back, I could see Nicholas Hawksmoor's famous Christ Church of Spitalfields." That was enough to convince him to move into it. Bles – who also makes furniture – has preserved the raw quality of the flat yet turned it into a lived-in, theatrical home, thanks to his eclectic mix of shabby-chic architectural salvage and sleeker contemporary pieces. He has personalised it too with art – pieces by anonymous graffiti artist Banksy and multicoloured geometric sculptures by Charles Wells. Surfaces of walls and floors are subtly differentiated. The kitchen units were covered with spliced bamboo stalks by Patrick Shilling (with who he shares a furniture-making studio), the wall behind the worktop with mocha-brown wenge. A spacious concrete wetroom is part-nautical (there's a submarine-like metal door with a porthole window) and part-monastic – though geared entirely for indulgence not self-denial.

Some of the furniture and lighting was made by Bles (whose pieces are stocked by local shop Story), including his dining table and a console whose legs are made of brackets that once crowned columns in a 17th-century church in Amsterdam. There are also ornate teak and granite columns that once supported a veranda in India as well as modernist furniture in the Bauhaus vein – one of his favourite design eras.

Bles is very hands-on at Solid Floor, overseeing everything from day-to-day management to the look of a brochure. But he says that if the company grows any more, he will need to appoint an MD. 'The managerial side of a business is not for me. I want to focus on the creative side.' Expect to encounter more weird and wonderful permutations of flooring than you can shake a broomstick at in the future. ☪
Visit www.solidfloor.co.uk for more info. Story, 4 Wilkes Street, London E1 (020 7377 0313)