

The New York Times

HOME & GARDEN | APRIL 19, 2001

DESIGNER SHOW HOUSE

Best-Dressed Rooms For an Age of
Haut Décor

By Guy Trebay



ACCESSORIZING Matthew Patrick Smyth's French-inspired dining room (bottom left) at the Skips Bay Show House has sconces from Bague's, the metalworkers (left), and pearl-dusted silk drapes (top left). Below, a neo-Classical setting by Constantin Gorges was designed in the spirit of the stairwell it reflects.



BY now the tentacles of fashion have twined around so many aspects of the culture that it shouldn't be surprising to find that home décor is caught in its beguiling grip. With the pop cultural landscape jammed with examples of fashion's seduction -- insinuated into areas as diverse as Madonna's "Music" video, the critically esteemed performances of

Vanessa Beecroft, Mark Morris's "Hard Nut" choreography and Moby's runway-style house music loops -- there's no reason decorating should be left behind.

Traditionally it would be hard to find anyone who would accuse the annual decorator show house benefiting the Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club of being enslaved to fashion. Home decorating, as practiced by the brigadiers of chintz, has typically been too fusty, too self-serious and too expensive for that. Fourteen years ago, when Anna Wintour tried to fuse fashion and décor in House & Garden (briefly, under her 1987 stewardship, renamed HG), the effort bombed. It was the right idea, quite a few unfortunate seasons too soon. Sofa-minded readers wanted the upholstery update. Fashion readers griped that sofas obscured the hems.

That was before shelter magazines began resembling Harper's Bazaar, with color and design directions changing not just annually, but by season or month. It was before decorator show houses started looking as if the cabinetmaker had lost the battle to the seamstress. It was before the disciplines of decorating and architecture had not only converged but been subsumed by dressmaker flourishes. It was also before decorators started talking about their efforts as couture.

"Fashion sets the tone for everything," said Noel Jeffrey, one of 16 designers chosen for the annual show house, which opens Tuesday at 713 Park Avenue, near 70th Street. "There's always a lag between fashion and decorating, but strong color is back in fashion, and I used a lot of it in this room."

In the mystifying lottery by which designers are assigned rooms in the show house (over 100 decorators submit portfolios, which are then reviewed and selected in January by a secret committee that one imagines in Doges' robes and conical hats), Mr. Jeffrey drew the fourth-floor master bedroom. He conceived of it as a hideaway for "a glamorous couple."

"I could have done another pretty, safe beige or celadon interior," Mr. Jeffrey said of a space that instead deploys acid-trip colors -- chartreuse, shocking pink, raspberry red -- in broad painterly slabs. "I don't want to do something ordinary or usual," he said.

Parked at the foot of the bed in Mr. Jeffrey's room are a pair of Art Deco-style chairs from Jonas Upholstery, covered in a vivid silk satin and velvet, a tone-on-tone effect that echoes the textures of a dress worn by a languorous woman in a nearby Kees van Dongen painting. With their hand-cut borders of silk volutes, the unlined purple curtains look less like window treatments than a whimsical evening coat by Yves Saint Laurent. A pair of luxurious satin slipper chairs are studded with nailheads. It's the kind of unexpected, and vaguely kinky, detail that tends to induce compulsive shopping disorder in Manolo Blahnik fans.

References to fashion, both the phenomenon and the métier, recur throughout the house -- sometimes precious (memo to stylists: lose the casually tossed pair of Gucci stilettos), sometimes sly (memo to Halston's ghost: check out the Ultrasuede ottoman in

Jeff Lincoln's game room), and on occasion as refined as the details that subtly formalize construction in a suit from Anderson & Sheppard.

In the shoe box allotted to her on the fourth floor, the designer Eve Robinson evokes luxury by quoting from the construction of a bespoke garment. The walls are upholstered, Ms. Robinson explained, in panels of Osborne & Little cotton, each outlined with a hand-sewn running stitch "reminiscent of the inside of a well-tailored gentleman's suit." In Matthew Patrick Smyth's coolly restrained and French-influenced dining room, the silk curtains appear so simple they're almost not there. A close look reveals that they're cuffed, the cuffs sewn with a latticework of silken strips, each intersection affixed with a hand-sewn pearl. "I met the people who made them at a wedding in Nantucket," Mr. Smyth said. "They made the bride's gown."



GORGEOUS MOSAIC Matthew Patrick Smyth assemble a plan of 18th-century Paris with 16 etchings for his casual French “supper room.” The chairs of 1940’s gilt iron cushioned with velvet, and the plaid taffeta tablecloth evoke the feeling of an airy garden room, lighted by a 31-arm Murano chandelier.

The walls in the opulent living room designed by Thomas Britt happen to be the same periwinkle color as a hot-selling Banana Republic T-shirt for spring, of a new light overcoat being sold at Hugo Boss and of practically anything on the racks at Prada. Mr. Lincoln's witty game room -- with its Vico Magistretti table, its 1960 pompon Plus-Ligne chair by Werner Pantoni, its casually arrayed boxes of Twister and Yahtzee -- could serve as a backdrop for any of the seemingly ubiquitous fashion magazine spreads on Manhattan's Bright Young Things.

"I'm not interested in women's clothing in any shape or form," Mr. Lincoln said last week as he prepared his room for the house's official opening. "But I'm a junkie for Vogue or Elle." Fashion magazines, as they have broadened their scope and become more sophisticated, have also, he continued, "elevated everybody's sense of design." The divisions between separate design fiefs are eroding, Mr. Lincoln asserted, "and people are realizing that you can appreciate the cut of a Helmut Lang suit and have that same appreciation spill over to the detail on the arm of a sofa."

As Douglas Keeve's 1995 fashion documentary, "Unzipped," showed, there is no accounting for the origin of a leitmotif. In that film, a "Nanook of the North" theme came to haunt the designer Isaac Mizrahi, when he planned a season around the earlier movie, only to find that another dressmaker had beaten him to the mukluks and anoraks.

At Kips Bay, an apparently unintentional (and distinctly pre-stock-slump) leitmotif is the decorative use of flat screen television. Cyclopean, darkly alluring, it looms wherever you turn: hung in Eve Robinson's study at an angle that guarantees neck cramp if viewed from anyplace but the desk, propped on a specially devised easel in Mr. Lincoln's game room or afloat on a wall in the hyperdetailed kitchen for "a bachelor who probably doesn't cook much," as the room's designer, Hugh M. Owen of Smallbone of Devizes, explained.

In Eric Cohler's fifth-floor bedroom suite, the flat screen television functions as a metaphor for the show house family that has possibly carried its fashionable multitasking too far. "I conceived of it as a space for an imaginary young couple with children," Mr. Cohler said of his rooms, which until recently served as offices for the director of a charitable foundation.

When not occupied watching Elsa Klensch reruns on the wall-hung big screen set, Mr. Cohler's fictitious couple, he suggested, might choose to hang out in the built-in Norwegian fisherman's bed, or else sit by the fireplace, or cuddle, or do homework with the children, or create spreadsheets on the laptop computer. Should all that activity prove too stressful, Mr. Cohler provides an always-stylish solution. Tucked into a closet is a mini-wine cellar and bar.