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House of Your (Vivid) Dreams

The Kips Bay Decorator Show House vanquishes existential anxieties by going to extremes.

By PENELOPE GREEN

Desire is a reliably unreliable guide to happiness, as Alain de Botton notes in "The Architecture of Happiness," the fifth or sixth book from the prolific professional intellectual who has tackled everything from status anxiety to sex. In it, the author observes that bad buildings are like bad relationships, "an example expressed through materials of the same tendency which in other domains will lead us to marry the wrong people, choose inappropriate jobs and book unsuccessful holidays; the tendency not to understand who we are and what will satisfy us."

Enter the decorator, for those who are able to afford his or her services, which is to say, the stagecraft that turns a dog into a jolly ladle. Or at least the ability to make choices that would paralyze others, those of us for whom an ugly room — or perhaps an empty room, to misquote Mr. de Botton — "can coagulate any loose suspicions as to the incompleteness of life."

At the 41st annual Kips Bay Decorator Show House held in a sum limestone town house on East 64th Street, 18 designers have attempted to banish such existential anxieties by ricocheting between two extremes to fill its five floors.

"We do go back and forth," said Jack Levy, a deep-voiced Texan with a taste for the maximalist expressions of '80s French, '80s Italian and '60s American furniture and objects. "Is it enough? Is it too much?"

Mr. Levy said he decided early on to practice the sound decorating principal of horror vacui in his space, a fourth-floor sitting room he wrapped in a loopy Farnesetti wallpaper upon which tropical fish as big as your hand swam wootily in a brown sea. He also deployed sepioid silk taffeta curtains piped with charcoal and terra-cotta silk chaise longue; a pair of exotic wood cabrioles in the style of Lelou on either side of a black marble fireplace topped with a dizzyingly amoebic-patterned oval encaustic painting borrowed from his best friend; and a delicate 19th-century French desk and chairs upholstered in a terra-cotta pink Fortuny silk damask. Then he woke up with a start a week or so ago, he said, and worried that he hadn't done enough.

"We have our fears, too," Mr. Levy said. "You have to be confident, but you have to be humble enough to ask, 'Am I doing the right thing?'"

As it happens, Richard Sharp, the owner of this long-neglected property, was thrilled with Mr. Levy's ministrations. "He

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Clockwise from top left:
Eve Robinson's family room,
Andrew Szalvsky's multicolored
bathroom, James Huxford's
atrium and Garcia/Malmondo's
lounges.

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asked me if he could keep the wallpaper and the curtains," said Mr. Levy, who estimated the cost of the contents of his room at nearly \$300,000. "Which is not only a superb compliment, but something that makes my life much easier, since in a show house you usually have to remove your wallpaper and paint everything white."

Decorating paralysis is a state that Mr. Sharp, a partner at the New York, New York, Hadley & McCloy law firm, says he is all too familiar with. Ten years ago, he bought this house for \$2.5 million and never moved in. (He lives in a two-bedroom condo a few blocks north.) It is the second time he has done such a thing.

"I owned a place at the Majestic, and never moved in there either," he said. "This is going to make me sound strange, but I care too much about the details. I would want to pay attention to every color and every lunge. I'm visually oriented, and



Top, West. This stayed as outdoor fireplace into a terrace and added a hot pot. Above, a dinner chair and table from Thomas Architecture + Design PC's bar and dining room.

as when I sit down to think, 'Do I want to take on this project?' it's overwhelming."

Mr. Sharp, 64, a collector of Hudson River School artists and the chairman of Olinia, the Frederic Edwin Church estate in Hoboken, N.J., said that when he asks his friends to recommend an architect, they will tell him needs a psychiatrist instead. So for years, he has used the house on 64th Street only to store his art.

It was Aster Akshof, a real estate broker whose office is in the same block as the house, who suggested that Mr. Sharp give up the place to Kips Bay, the boys' and girls' club that provides after-school programs for children ages 5 to 18. Fifteen percent of the group's operating funds are derived from the show house (tickets are \$35).

There has always been a disconnect between the history scrolls displayed in the show house and the 12,000 children Kips Bay serves, more than half of whom live below the poverty line. But Mr. Sharp said that contributing the use of his house beats just writing a check, and in return, he would receive what Mr. Akshof called "handing by Kips Bay," a selling point should Mr. Sharp choose to list the place.

Not counting the designers' own labor (about a month's worth for each), creating a room in the show house costs a designer, on average, about \$20,000, said Bruce Williams, the show house chairwoman. While materials like paint and fabric might be donated, the designers pay their installers and fabricators out of their own pockets.

Relationships are the back story. This was the first show house for Kristin McGinnis, a 35-year-old designer who once worked for Stephen Sills and James Hamford, and cut her teeth decorating the Upper East Side apartment of Agnes Gund, the heiress of Modern Art's president emerita. Ms. McGinnis's best friend from sixth grade is Elizabeth Hundley, a freelance artist who just wrapped up a job exhibition at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in Chelsea. For Ms. McGinnis's debut, Ms. Hundley made a poetic assemblage of driftwood, string and neon that she hung from the ceiling of her dining room. Along a wall, a "charred" bronze console by Vincent Dubourg, a French conceptual artist, that Ms. McGinnis pegged from another friend, was divided in two exploded sections, suggesting a post-apocalyptic dinner party among the wreckage.

Last week, Mr. Sharp saw the house for the first time. He had been to it several times in the lobby of his apartment building and came straight to the show house.

"It was a visual overload," he said. "But in a beautiful, magical way. I'm not going to get granular about the objects, but I saw so many wonderful things. The jet lag notwithstanding, I slept at night."

What follows are a few things that kept us up at night.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THEO VAN DER WOUDE FOR NY MAG



Above, Sara Story's Colinet living room. Clockwise from center left: Andrew Szwedsky's bedroom; Rebecca McGinnis's dining room; Jack Levy's underwater sitting room, with Ficus-scented wallpaper; bath of Ines Novira Williams Design; Kathryn Ireland's Anglo-Indian bed hung with Kookaburra fabric.

Story set out in a realm of somber black "art," candelied by Coline Carison; and Mr. Levy covered his with faux brick laid in a herringbone pattern and a clear acrylic fire screen.

OVERHEARD

The front hall, covered in a black floral stair by Andrew Szwedsky that looked like the outline of a Miami motor. "I just say, Go for it," Mr. Szwedsky said. "As you can see, I'm equal opportunity about color."

His walls were lacquered, variously in black, gray, yellow and blue. There were hot pink satin pillows on a mid-century sofa. He designed the turquoise-lake and white lacquer cabinet himself and collected a quartet of African Bronco photos (think Marilyn Minier by way of Gregory Crombini) to mount above them. In case, a tiny (or cowboy) market into a model's lip-sticked mouth. "I don't know what those people are doing, but I'd really like to," Mr. Szwedsky said. "To be going into her mouth, or pulling something out of it?"

UNFINISHED

On the right stand of the house's only bedroom, in a framed print of her raw ad for Scalapour, Kathryn Ireland, the long-link-born Los Angeles designer and collaborator of "Million Dollar Decorators" on Bravo, plays "La Grande Odéon," after the painting by Ingres, wearing only a ring of white stockings and a pair of silk tights.

DECOMPOSED

Marlene James Gomez and Brooke Gomez, her daughter, presented a monochromatic English sitting room that manages to seat 14 (instead of a coffee table, there is a four-foot-square ottoman). "It's become the ladies' lounge," they said.

OBSESSED

Over night in the groovy hookup lounge by Louis Jon Garcia-Maldonado, with its studded leather walls, mirrored bar shelves, gray latex curtains, mismatched daybed and crackling gel fireplace, is threatened by two female archetypes: a flame-haired warrior, a wall-size female nude painted by Eric Pedersen and a hispanic Kate Winslet in a hooded Young photograph, clad in black under and black thigh-high stockings, clutching a teddy bear.

UNHUNG

Mr. Story decided that surrealism and the fractured pieces of Cubism were the best expressions of a designer's state of mind. On the walls of her sitting room, there was a strip of black-and-white stylized bamboo wallpaper that was unframed, the said from doodles she used to make in art school. Mr. Story also designed a pair of lavender sofas to look like the sitting pieces of a Colinet painting. The bathroom, lined entirely in black-and-white squares, was a homage both to André Putnam and to Mr. Story's own anxieties, she said. She had filled the bathtub with crumpled paper scrawled with phrases like "Bamboo: Hips or Love?"

"It's all my insecurities about my work," Mr. Story said. "All the thoughts you have at 3 a.m. I just wanted to be real and honest. To talk about design and not decoration, and how do you get there, and how do you know when it's enough?"

In every dreams home, a heartache.



BEST DRESSED

A tie between two hours and four faces: The flooring in James Hamford's atrium wore custom lac and cross-stitched recycled leather, while that in Eve Robinson's elegant, if impractical, modern family room (improbable because it proposes a decorous night of Scrabble played

by a family of four hopped up on marshmallows) wore silvery-gray pony skin, sliced up and stitched together.

As for the fireplace, West City started his outdoor hearth of succulents; Ms. Robinson steamed hers in polished stainless steel and filled it with silver glass-geometric logs by the artist Suzzi Rubin; Sara

"We do go back and forth," one decorator said. "Is it enough? Is it too much?"

The Kips Bay Decorator Show House is open through June 4 at 181 East 63rd Street, \$35. (718) 950-8000, extension 245; kipsbay.org