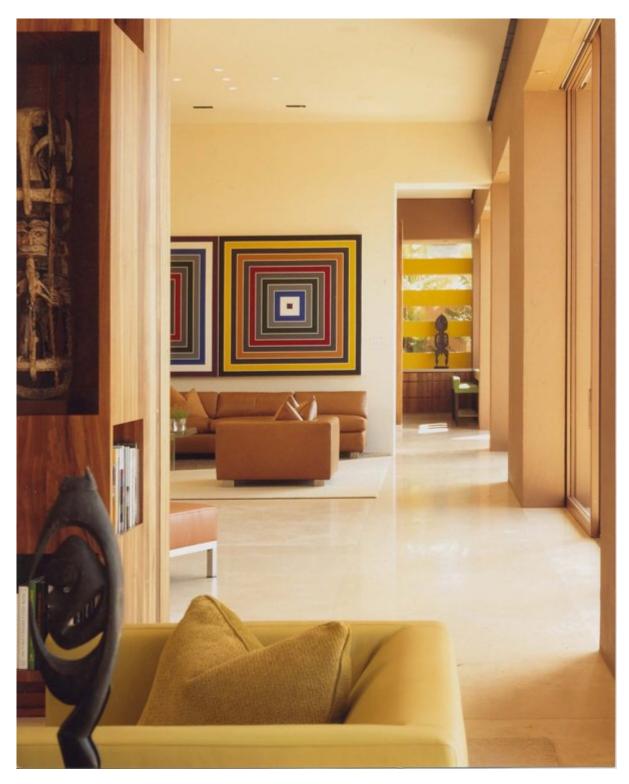


The Buzz on Paul Vincent Wiseman

By Buzz Kaplan | Published: March 29, 2011

By Buzz Kaplan, Decorati Contributing Antiques Editor and author of The Buzz on Antiques, and Executive Director of Decorati manufacturer C. Mariani Antiques, Restoration & Custom in San Francisco.



Photographer: Matthew Millman



Paul Vincent Wiseman. The name alone evokes a certain aura of luxury, creativity, and unerring good taste. He's been celebrated, lauded, feted, admired and probably even envied by many of the biggest names in the design business.

Paul has earned all the praise, honorary degrees, magazine covers and success he's achieved. And he's done it the old fashioned way: he's earned it over the last 30 years by envisioning and creating some of the most exquisite interiors in the world.

So when you read that for the umpteenth time he's one of *Architectural Digest's* "Top 100 Designers," made *House Beautiful's* list of "America's Most Brilliant Decorators" and has won the 2010 Veranda Art of Design Award, among so many others, you really can't begrudge the guy.

I've known Paul Wiseman for more than ten years. But our first meeting was far from auspicious. When I first moved to San Francisco in 2000, he was at the top of my short list of the best designers to hire to do my new home.



Photograp her: Matthew Millman

When I interviewed him, I found him to be gracious, charming, and friendly. Plus, he showed me one of the most mind-blowing portfolios I'd ever seen. Right then and there I blurted out, "Paul, forget the rest, you've got the job! Congratulations!"

I remember expecting him to start jumping up and down with glee. But instead, he gave me a warm smile and politely mentioned that we hadn't talked budget at all and we really needed to. So I told him I would spend a specific sum to do the entire house including the extensive structural modifications. I remember the kind of sad look (or was it abject horror?) that came over his face as he whispered, "Buzz, I really like you and would love to do your home, but your budget won't even cover the construction let alone the furnishings you want." I later found out how right he was.

But the point here is that the first time I met Paul he may have totally rejected me as a client but surprisingly, I wasn't insulted or mortified—ok, maybe I was a little mortified. Paul was so gracious about it that I walked out thinking I'd learned a lot and made a new friend.

Paul even suggested a number of designers whom I might contact, which I did. A lesser person would have yanked that latte right out of my hand and screamed at me for wasting his time. But not Paul. He was as pleasant, courteous and charming as could be.

So I knew this interview would be fun, candid, and maybe even eye opening. And was it ever! Read on and I think you'll agree this guy doesn't pull punches.



Photographer: Matthew Millman

Buzz: How did a nice guy like you get into a kooky business like this? [Laughing] Ignorance and youth.

(Buzz side note: Hey, that's exactly how I got into it, only without the youth part!)

I was 27 years old when I started and my contract read something like, "Hi my name is Paul and I want to make your house pretty....Now sign." Ugh.

Buzz: What does it say now?

Today it's evolved into a comprehensive agreement that the most powerful people in the world sign because it covers every contingency and every client expectation. Over the years I've learned that clarity in defining exactly what you're going to do and how you're going to be paid for it is just plain smart.

Buzz: What would you say is a key factor that distinguishes The Wiseman Group from other firms?

Mutual respect. As the old saying goes, "The face you show is the face you receive." We have a culture at the Wiseman Group that's about respect. Even the lowest person on the totem pole has a voice and is treated with dignity. I don't tolerate snubs, rudeness or thoughtlessness. And that philosophy extends to our client interactions as well as our vendor relationships. We never forget that we're here to help...not to intimidate and certainly not to aggravate. People pick up on this really fast. I think that's why our clients and vendors stay with us year in and year out, often for decades. One good example is C. Mariani, Buzz. That relationship spans more than 25 years.

Buzz: What's another factor that makes The Wiseman Group different than most others?

A big one is integrity. Our reputation for honesty is impeccable and unquestioned.



Photographer: Christopher Irion

Buzz: Do you offer multiple fee arrangements to your clients, like "hours plus markup" or "comprehensive flat fee deals"? No. I offer the same fee arrangement for everyone. There are no exceptions. I charge for hours plus a percentage. Buzz: It seems like every "iconic" designer these days has come out with a book, a line of furniture or fabrics, a home fragrance collection, or a show on HGTV. How come you haven't done this?

Because I see myself as an interior designer, not an author, entrepreneur or reality TV star. If people want my talent, then they should hire The Wiseman Group as their design firm. That's what I do for a living. Over the years, I've seriously looked into doing a furniture line. But it really doesn't work for my kind of client. My clients aren't interested in seeing a furniture piece I've designed for them in someone else's house. The Wiseman Group does have a lighting line with Phoenix Day but anything that was designed for a specific client, I name it after them, they approve it for the line and they love it. Again...it's all about clarity and being up front. With this one lighting exception, we're a custom design house.

Buzz: What do you mean by "custom design house"?

I mean that when The Wiseman Group designs a custom piece for a client, we never copy it again and then sell it to other clients. This is something else that dramatically differentiates us from other top design firms.



Photographer: Matthew Millman



Photographer: Matthew Millman

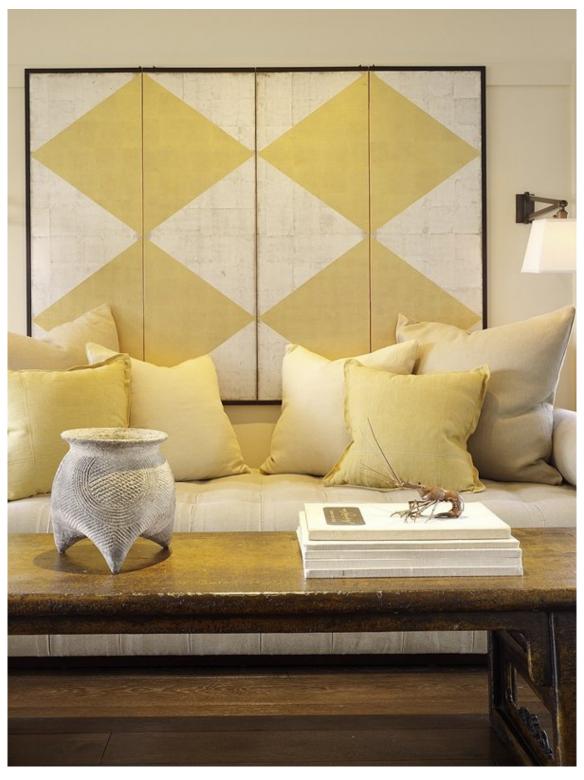
Buzz: If you had a crystal ball 25 years ago, what would you have done differently in building your design firm? Nothing. I have no regrets. I wish I had been more mature about some decisions and I admit I made some mistakes. But these mistakes taught me valuable lessons and have made me better at what I do.

Buzz: What would you say are the three most important secrets to your success? Creativity. Clarity. Integrity.

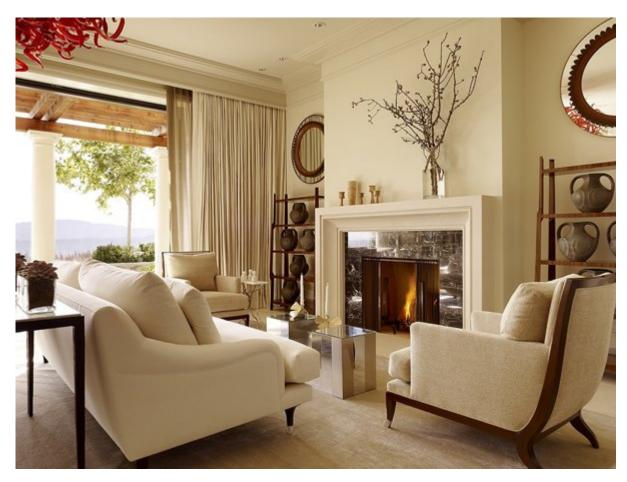
Buzz: With multiple staff persons working on multiple projects at the same time, how involved do you really get in any one project? I guess it's easiest to understand if you think of me as Editor-in-Chief at my firm. The only way one can have a company that can handle multiple large and small projects simultaneously is to have fabulous designers on staff. And that's exactly what I have. I'm involved as I need to be and that involvement varies from item to item and project to project. When my designers are thinking as I do, then I give them a lot of freedom. But I see and approve everything that goes out. And whenever something needs my eye, it gets my personal attention before it goes out.

Buzz: Do your clients understand how this process works?

I think so. Certainly all of our best clients understand this and are sophisticated enough to comprehend that I don't have to be on every phone call and at every meeting. If I were it would be just adding unnecessary expense. My role is to serve as the visionary. I make sure we stay true to my vision for each project and that any adjustments needed are seamlessly made so that we stay on point. I design WITH my team and my client, not just FOR them.



Photographer: Matthew Millman



Photographer: Matthew Millman

Buzz: What makes a particular design timeless?

I think designs that are appropriate to a location, budget, and life style never go out of fashion. Many designers just can't connect the dots between architecture, landscape and lifestyle. When something feels imposed, it's just fashion and will not stand the test of time. When I go back on my projects of the past 31 years, there's really very little I would change.

Buzz: What do you feel are some color palettes that'll always feel fresh and up-to-theminute?

Not to sound cliché, but shades of white. Also, multiple shades of any color working with similar values seem to always stay harmonious and pleasing. I also believe that used properly, very strong colors remain timeless in very strong environments, like the tropics. Tropical colors look good in a jungle; just follow nature and you can't go wrong.

Buzz: Is there a classic or signature style that's always a part of your design and why do you feel it works in any environment?

Again, I follow nature. All the colors and textures of any given environment, be it desert, tropical, mountainous, etc., will always look good as long as they are consistent with that environment.

And I always make sure there's the right amount of texture incorporated. Light needs to reflect softly as well as shiny in the right proportions.

Buzz: Are there any design trends from the past twenty years that came and went not a moment to soon for you? Definitely. I have real trouble with "in" colors. Remember mauve and green-blue? They even made metal window frames in those colors...euwwwwh. Although we all love new ideas, new products and new colors, they're just not always appropriate to use. [Buzz aside: OMG, my whole house is done in mauve and green-blue. Aarrrgggghhhh!!!!]



Photographer: Tim Street-Porter



Photographer: Tim Street-Porter

Buzz: Are there any trends developing now that you would like to see dismissed as quickly as possible?

Yes. Seeing bad things from the 1970's (or the 50's or 60's for that matter) sold as stylish period design needs to stop. Just because a piece of junk is 50 years old doesn't make it period and chic. It just makes it old junk.

Buzz: Is the trend toward green design a fad or is it here to stay?

The greening of design isn't a fad. It's a necessity if we're going to survive as a species. It's been a long time coming and...I'm now starting to see many more attractive "green" designs available. You don't have to look like a geek to have an eco-friendly house. Green can be as simple as products that last longer or require less maintenance. Metal roofs and windows are a good example. Many of our clients now request materials and products that are "as green as possible."

Buzz: Is decorating with antiques a form of green design?

Absolutely. Every antique, by definition, is a piece of history that's being recycled. Can't get any greener than that.



Photographer: Tim Street-Porter

Buzz: How are your clients adapting to the recession we're just coming out of? Are they cutting back?

It's mixed. People are looking for value and I have no problem with this. We have been so excessive for the last 40 years that it really needed to stop. How many rooms does a person really require to live well? And each of us needs to reassess how we live our lives in terms of preserving the environment. One small example: I don't show up in a Jaguar anymore. I drive a Prius.

Buzz: Let's talk about how technology is changing the way you do business?

Technology is changing so many things in design and in wonderful ways. Innovations like CAD and three-dimensional drawing have been fantastic new tools for us. We now take our clients on 3-D tours of their rooms BEFORE construction starts! This saves a lot of stress for people who

have trouble visualizing. And I use my I-pad and I-phone constantly for communicating and actually showing ideas, concepts and other visual images.

Buzz: How important do you believe websites are to the design business? Websites are very important. We were among the first design firms to have one. Although I'm not able to show all of my work on our website-there are privacy issues-prospective clients can still see a sampling of the hundreds of projects we've done over the years. So I get pre-interviewed before anyone calls and that's a good thing.

Buzz: When did you first become interested in design?

I think I was always interested in design and architecture. My childhood friend Chiles Wilson and I took a six-month trip through Asia when we were in college. I think we were both about 21. And he asked me, "Why are you studying political science when all you do is talk about art and architecture?" That was an "Aha!" moment for me.



Photographer: Matthew Millman

Buzz: How did you get started in interior design and did you have any mentors in those early days?

I worked for Robert Hering, who's retired now. He had an antique shop and decorating studio that I managed. I really loved it. But after a while I knew it was time to start my own business. And when I started my firm I also worked part-time for Winfield Windsor, the antique dealer. He was my biggest mentor because he was so generous with his knowledge and information. He'd show me why he was attracted to a particular piece, what made it valuable, and a thousand other "secrets" of the trade.

DESIGN TIPS FROM PAUL VINCENT WISEMAN

Buzz: What are some tips for making a smaller space appear larger?

Mirrors of course. Dark floors with light walls. Window treatments that make the windows look bigger. Those are a few.

Buzz: How about some tips for making a large space appear cozy?

I think the biggest problem with large rooms is the scale of the furniture. If everything is scaled right and the furniture plan is properly designed for human conversation-not conventions-then the feel is more cozy and intimate.

Buzz: What's your method for combining antiques and new pieces together?

I draw on my experience of almost forty years observing, studying and analyzing interiors. It's about seeing relationships that work, knowing the history of objects and having an instinct as to how very different pieces and periods can compliment each other and "will sing" when put together.

Buzz: How have you re-purposed an antique for a particular project (i.e., refinished, reupholstered, changed the original piece's function, etc.)

We try never to rework the finish or structure of a really valuable piece. Although their purpose-how they're used-may change of course. For example, we may use an antique writing desk as a beautiful wall console. And when we do make changes to an antique, we always make sure that the changes don't devalue the piece and look like they're part of the original. This issue comes up a lot with technology components for TVs and other modern entertainment and security systems.

Buzz: How would you describe your design style in 15 words or less?

Connected, appropriate, highly detailed, functional, timeless, on budget, in harmony with the architecture and location.

Buzz: Wow! You actually did that in EXACTLY 15 words! How cool is that? [Grinning] I'm really not sure but I'm very meticulous that way.

Buzz: Ok, new topic: What do you do and where do you go for inspiration? I live life fully and draw inspiration from that. I have a couple of life mottos: "Too much is just enough" and "If you're not living on the edge....then you're taking up too much space!" This covers my extensive travel and constant shopping.

Buzz: What is your favorite paint color to use for walls, ceiling and trim?

That's a tough one. Every job is so different and quite often we do custom colors with Donald Kaufman, Stancil Studios, and Farrow & Ball. When we use a Benjamin Moore color, which we do a lot, "Decorator White" is my favorite. For trim, I love an "eggshell" finish and for walls and ceilings a flat finish because of the lovely way it reflects light.

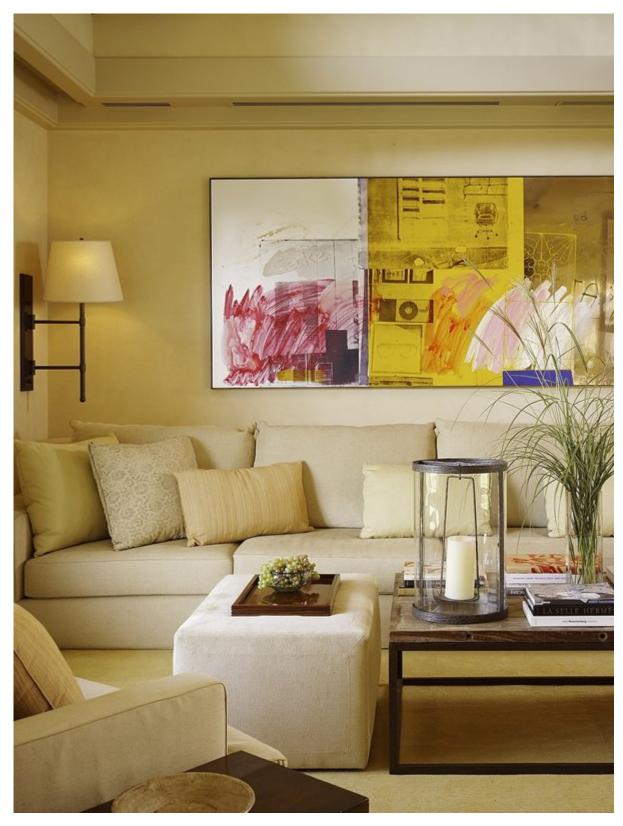
Buzz: Would you agree that a well-chosen paint color and finish are critical to the success of a room design? Absolutely. The color and finish of a paint depends on the light in the room, the mood we're trying to create, and of course the client personally. The color must be flattering and appealing to the client. And the color and finish must work in the unique light that each space has. For example, my office is on the south side of San Francisco and the light there is very different than on the north side where there's more reflection from the Bay. We do a lot of work in Hawaii and that's a totally different kind of light. That's why we do so much custom color.

Buzz: What are your 2011 design trend predictions? I don't do trends. Not interested.

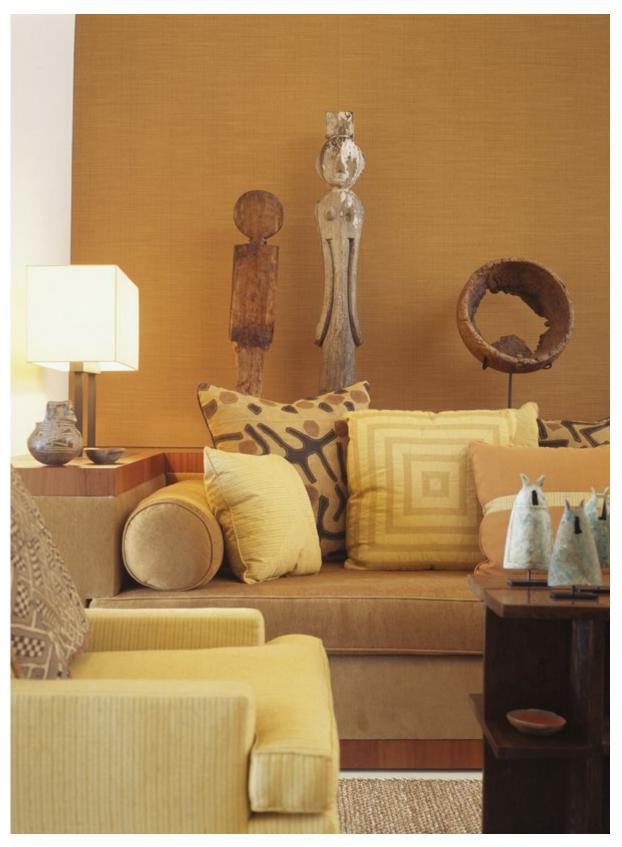
Buzz: What will be different about the interior design industry in 15 years? I think the line between retail and wholesale will go away. There won't really be a wholesale market and everyone will just pay retail.

Buzz: Ok, new topic. What is the one best piece of advice you ever got that has contributed to your career?

I think mine would be: "Communication is critical to success." Decorating is just one part of our clients' busy lives. So you need to be really diligent about staying in touch with and communicating with your client. If the communication link is broken, then things tend to spin out of control and the results can miss the mark.



Photographer: Matthew Millman

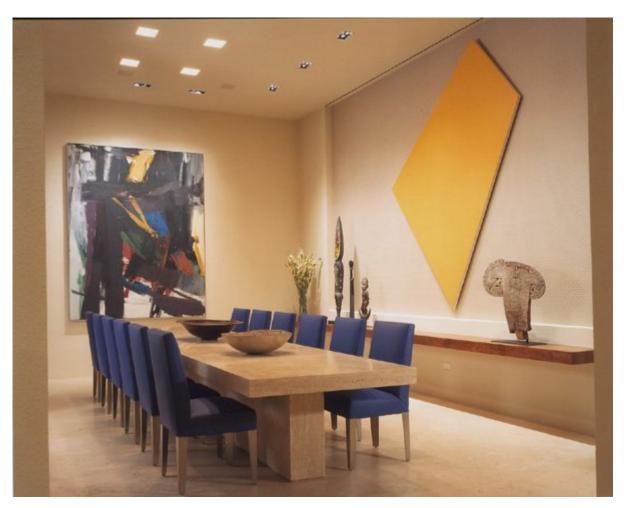


Photographer: Matthew Millman

Q: Actress?
A: Meryl Streep

A: Colin Firth
Q: TV show?
A: I don't watch television.
Q: What's your favorite book?
A: That would be tie between "War and Peace" and "Red and the Black."
Q: Favorite place?
A: My home on Belvedere Island.
Q: Food?
A: Boy that's a tough one. [He pauses]. I'd have to say Jean Georges' Seared Foie Gras with mango
and orange juice reduction.
Q: Cocktail?
A: Yes please.
Q: No, what's your favorite cocktail?
A: Oh. Vodka rocks with a twist
Q: Color?
A: That's a tough one. I love autumn colors. Yellows and golds really resonate with me.
Q: Ok, how about your favorite Parisian fashion designer?
A: Givenchy
Q: What's your biggest pet peeve?
A: Texting while driving
Q: If you weren't Paul Wiseman, who you want to be?
A: Buddha.

Q: Actor?



Photographer: Matthew Millman

Buzz: What role does artwork play in your designs?

Art is tricky. We have many clients who already have great collections. With those clients, I try not to get involved other than advising as to which rooms would be best for which pieces. Other clients look to us to select art for them. That's always fun and challenging because I want my clients to be passionate about their art, at whatever level. For example, I'll be in London next month with clients who want my eye in purchasing art...For clients who want to build important art collections, we'll frequently advise them to work with top advisers. The high-end fine art world can be very dangerous if you don't know what you are doing.

Buzz: Interviews can also be very dangerous when you don't know what you're doing. And although I have serious reservations about my expertise as a journalist, you've been a complete pleasure. Thank you Paul.

Thank you Buzz. I've really enjoyed this too and hope your Decorati readers find my comments helpful!



Poolside: Refreshing Outdoor Retreats »

37 COMMENTS

1.	Jay Jeffers	
	Posted March 29, 2011 at 3:21 pm Permalink	
	Love it!	
	Jay	
		Reply
2.	Mary Wilson	
	Posted March 29, 2011 at 3:23 pm Permalink	
	1 Osted March 20, 2011 at 0.20 pm 1 et mann	
	Lovely, lovely interview.	
		Reply
3.	Ed Takayesu	
	Posted March 29, 2011 at 3:33 pm Permalink	
	Aloha Paul	
	Great interview,	
	From us at "Maui Custom Woodworks"	
	Nice photos	
	Eddie	
		Reply
4.	Eden Wright	

Posted March 29, 2011 at 3:39 pm | *Permalink* I second that! Have always admired your work and very much appreciate your no-nonsense contextual approach to design. Eden Reply 5. Ginger Raphael Gompertz Posted March 29, 2011 at 3:41 pm | Permalink Very Classy guys, both the interviewee and the interviewer. Very good article, thank you! Reply 6. Victoria Dyer Posted March 29, 2011 at 3:47 pm | *Permalink* Fantastic interview! Thank you Decorati! Reply 7. Jerry Jacobs Posted March 29, 2011 at 3:53 pm | Permalink Very good. Thanks for posting. Reply 8. David Posted March 29, 2011 at 4:22 pm | Permalink

Great interview as usual, Buzz!



Posted March 29, 2011 at 4:31 pm | Permalink

What I have always love about Paul's interiors is that I feel like there is always something just a little unexpected. The use of an item as art or in an unexpected way, flanking a mantle with mirrors instead of using the mirror above it as you often see. His interiors are chic, intimate and classic. Great article Buzz.

Reply

10. Cla

Claudio Mariani

Posted March 29, 2011 at 4:33 pm | Permalink

Paul, you've been a good friend and client for many more years than both of us care to remember! Let's just say it's been a very long and happy time. I admire your work as well as your work ethic. And I enjoyed reading your comments in this interview almost as much as I enjoy your visits to my gallery. Congratulations on a great article.

Claudio

Reply



Beryn Hammil

Posted March 29, 2011 at 4:40 pm | Permalink

Great interview with a great designer! I Tweeted it out there! Thanks!

Beryn



Posted March 29, 2011 at 4:42 pm | Permalink

Great! Enjoyed it!

Reply

13. James Stancil

Posted March 29, 2011 at 4:58 pm | Permalink

Wonderful interview!

Thank you!

Reply

14. Robin White

Posted March 29, 2011 at 5:00 pm | Permalink

Nice interview, Buzz. Paul's work serves as an inspiration!

Reply

15. Stacey Lapuk

Posted March 29, 2011 at 5:21 pm | Permalink

Wonderful clarity, Paul. I loved it.

Of note: "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much room" — Bob Proctor. One of my mantras as well:-)

Your work is absolutely amazing.

Thank you, Buzz. Excellent flow.

Posted March 29, 2011 at 5:25 pm | Permalink

I always look forward to Buzz Kaplan's sparkling interviews and once again he brings us an exciting exclusive peek into the work of one of today's most brilliant creative minds. The Wiseman Group has designed stunning interiors for years and now, through Buzz's blog, readers are offered an intimate and comprehensive understanding of Mr. Wiseman's process and passions. "The Buzz" is always inspiring and always such a pleasure to read.

Reply



17.

nancy meadows

Posted March 29, 2011 at 7:15 pm | Permalink

This was a wonderful interview and Mr. Wiseman's design work is beautiful and timeless, yet fresh.

Reply



Posted March 30, 2011 at 8:47 am | Permalink

This is my favorite interview from Buzz thus far. Thank you Paul Wiseman and Buzz for the midweek morning laughs.

Fabulous interview.

Anne

Reply



Charlotte Crystal

Posted March 30, 2011 at 9:04 am | Permalink

Wonderful article, Buzz and wonderful pictures! I particularly enjoyed Wiseman's commitment to clarity with clients—so important!

Reply

20.

Nancy Van Natta

Posted March 30, 2011 at 9:17 am | Permalink

This interview was such an enjoyable read from one of the masters, interspersed with one gorgeous photograph after another. It's inspiration for my day. Thanks!

Reply

21.

TresMcKinney

Posted March 30, 2011 at 10:01 am | Permalink

I enjoyed the interview and Paul's candid and succinct replies. It was also a pleasure to see the photographes of his beautiful interiors ...always such an inspiration. Thanks!

Reply

22. Karyn Wandow

Posted March 30, 2011 at 10:11 am | Permalink

Great article!!!!

Karyn

Wheeler Design Group

Posted March 30, 2011 at 10:13 am | Permalink

Dear Buzz,

I definitely enjoyed Paul's candor and sense of humor in this article, but most of all, his honesty and integrity are quite apparent which ultimately is invaluable in all endeavors. You are lucky to have relationships with such people.....and they with you.

Thanks for sharing.

Teresa

Reply

24. Val Fiscalini

Posted March 30, 2011 at 10:16 am | Permalink

Hi Buzz, Grrrrrrreat article!!! He is a gem isn't he and such a gracious host. I gobbled up every eye full of his home in Belvedere last Fall and was utterly intoxicated for days afterward. What a great high!!

Best,

Val

Reply

25. Greg DeLory

Posted March 30, 2011 at 12:09 pm | Permalink

I have worked with Paul Wiseman alumni over the years with great results. Now I know what Paul Wiseman is all about, very good interview.

26. Mary H. Henry

Posted March 30, 2011 at 9:48 pm | Permalink

I have been a fan of Paul Wiseman's work for many years. He's had so many magazine covers and so many articles praising his work that you'd think he'd be aloof and very taken with himself. But this interview happily proved me wrong. His sense of humor and dedication to treating people like people is so inspiring. And as for Buzz K, I love him! He always seems to bring out the best and the most interesting in each top designer he interviews—he always asks the unexpected. The Buzz on Antiques column is my favorite Decorati feature. He is that rare kind of teacher who makes learning fun. Thank you to Paul and Buzz. MHH

Reply

27. Jenny S

Posted March 30, 2011 at 10:12 pm | Permalink

Paul Wiseman's sense of style, use of textures and sheer soigne sophistication is masterful. And of course Buzz not only elicits great tips but integrates his own delightul albeit unorthodox sense of humor. It make for a great read and super interview. I have only one question: When is this guy going to write a book (Paul explained why he doesn't but what's Buzz's excuse?).

Reply

28. Kevin Derrick

Posted March 31, 2011 at 4:41 am | Permalink

Fantastic interview with a gracious, candid, and witty designer... Quotable lines include "I see myself as an interior designer, not an author, entrepreneur or reality TV star." and "I don't do trends. Not interested." Two moments that speak to his character and distinguish Mr. Wiseman as a person of substance and style.



Posted March 31, 2011 at 10:07 am | Permalink

Hi Buzz,

I really enjoyed this article. I just finished up working on a home that Paul did in the early eighties. And much of what was in the pic is still there! Sign of a great design.

Best,

Stephanie

Reply

30. Martha angus

Posted March 31, 2011 at 9:58 pm | Permalink

Paul is the King of San Francisco design for a reason. Good work Buzz! Miss Martha

Reply

31. Buzz Kaplan

Posted April 1, 2011 at 9:46 am | Permalink

Thanks Martha! I miss you too! And thanks to everyone else who took the time to leave a comment on my interview with Paul (yes, I actually read them!). I'm glad it struck a note with so many people! Paul was very generous with his knowledge just as he mentioned Winfield Windsor was with him when he was just starting out!

Buzz

Posted April 4, 2011 at 11:16 am | Permalink

Very entertaining and educational interview Buzz. Thanks.

Paul Wiseman's passion for life is such an obvious undercurrent in his glorious work, successful business and seductive personal style. I wish he would take the challenge and write a book!

Reply

33. Marie Christine Peterson

Posted April 4, 2011 at 2:04 pm | Permalink

Hello Buzz

Your interview of Paul V. Wiseman was an amazing and captivating story about his work. Paul V. Wiseman is one of my most admired interior designers of our time. I found your interviewing style brought the superb qualities of Paul and his company together so elegantly; he is one of the super stars in our business today!

Bravo to you Buzz,

Marie

Reply

34. George Brazil

Posted April 5, 2011 at 6:57 pm | Permalink

Buzz,

Another great interview but I'm sure that is no surprise considering who you were interviewing. What a consummate gentleman Paul is. You are too, of course.

Reply

35. Valera

Posted April 7, 2011 at 9:29 am | Permalink Bravo Buzz, What a wonderful interview. Paul has been a dear friend for twenty years, and I think you captured him remarkably. Valera Reply 36. Laura McAvoy Posted April 13, 2011 at 7:56 pm | Permalink I love the neutral colors on the first picture. Very warm and calm to look at. It's something I would look forward to when I get home. **Indianapolis Residential Painting** Reply Carol@SofasandSage.com

37.

Posted April 20, 2011 at 12:46 pm | Permalink

Thank you, Decorati. I feel as though I just did a year of design school. This was brilliant.