

INTERIOR VISIONS

Great American Designers and the Showcase House

Chris Casson Madden

Foreword by Mario Buatta



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Stewart, Tabori & Chang

New York

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Published in 1988 by
Stewart, Tabori & Chang, Inc.
740 Broadway, New York, New York 10003

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Madden, Chris Casson.

Interior visions : great American designers and the showcase house
/ Chris Casson Madden ; foreword by Mario Buatta.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-55670-038-5 : \$45.00

1. Interior decoration—United States—History—20th century.
2. Interior decorators—United States. I. Title.

NK2115.M315 1988

728'.0973—dc19

88-15303

CIP

Distributed by Workman Publishing
708 Broadway, New York, New York 10003

Printed in Japan

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Page 1: Mark Epstein Designs, Inc.

Page 2: Mary Dial (see also pages 78-79).

Page 3: Clifford Stanton (see also pages 176-177).

CONTENTS

Foreword

6

Introduction

8

Halls

11

Living Rooms

23

Dining Rooms

95

Kitchens

113

Bedrooms

133

Baths

205

Porches

225

A History of Showcase Houses

244

Index of Showcase Houses

245

Finding the Right Interior Designer

246

Index of Designers

248



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FOREWORD

I was born in an all-white modern house—glass and chrome and steel. I cannot say that I liked it; to me the most unsettling thing in the world is a room that is all white. I remember when I was growing up I loved the lived-in quality of my aunt's house. The walls and tables were covered with possessions that created a private sense of beauty, a scrapbook of her life. A rich variety of decorative objects, stacks of books, photographs, flowers—all spoke of attachments and history. By age eleven I was developing a philosophy about decorating and design—and rearranging my parents' furniture.

It took me a while to find myself in this field, but somehow I always knew I wanted to be a decorator. After studying architecture I began, about twenty-eight years ago, an apprenticeship in the decorating department at B. Altman & Co. I then went to Europe to study under Stanley Barrows in a Parsons School of Design program. It was during this trip that I saw my first real English country houses, and I was intrigued. When I returned to New York I was employed first by Elisabeth Draper, then Keith Irvine, and I ventured out on my own in 1963. Soon after this I took a trip to England, where I met John Fowler of the London firm Colefax and Fowler. He introduced me to the possibilities of combining English design with American know-how, and I became more passionate about and sure of the direction I was taking. Mr. Fowler remains one of the major influences in my professional life.

I love designing voluptuously undecorated rooms, although the need for instant pedigree bothers me a lot. I've been doing my version of the English country look since I began my business and, although I didn't starve in those days, I was nowhere near as successful as I am today. In fact, the English country look is all the rage now. It is flattering to be copied . . . but I know I'll still be approaching design in the same way twenty years from now—only just as current, I hope.

There is no great mystery to design. The real secret is how to make things work, and that is a gift that must be nurtured. Of course, how one designs tells a good deal about oneself. Antiques may speak of mystery or romance; paintings or *objets* may reveal a preoccupation or interest. One would hope that *all* the objects one surrounds oneself with in a room have special meaning. I even fall in love with the pieces I put into my showhouse rooms and find it traumatic to part with them—and the room itself, for that matter—when the house closes.

I credit a great deal of my success to having done showhouses in the late 1960s and early '70s,

for it was there that people saw my work and were able to understand what I was all about. I've done more than fourteen showhouses, and I still remember vividly designing my first in 1969, which was done for the benefit of the Vassar Alumni Club of Fairfield County, Connecticut, and participating in the first Kips Bay Boys' Club Decorator Show House, at 70 Street and Park Avenue in New York.

The pressures involved are terrific, especially in terms of time and expense, but what it does for a young designer's career can be incredible. For a showcase house is just that—a showcase of one's work in the best possible situation with the best possible audience coming to see it. It is great exposure, with total freedom and total leeway. Making compromises is a real part of the everyday job, but a showhouse is the one time when people get to see your work as you envision it (as opposed to projects done for clients, when the work is not necessarily a reflection of yourself), and they can judge you on your own taste. Of course, I always want to do what works best in a room—something I can usually feel as soon as I walk into it—but, unfortunately, with showhouses it is sometimes not only a question of what you want to do, but also what you can afford to do.

Doing a room in a showhouse is like giving a party; it is also an art. You make sure that every element of the room is perfection—the furnishings, the fabrics, the lighting, the flowers. The only sad part to me is that instead of being able to enjoy my work forever, as most artists can with a canvas, this room I have created usually lasts only about three weeks and then is taken apart.

To me, the most crucial point about a showhouse room is that it look lived in. These should be rooms that seem to have been there always. Creating these rooms, one has an imaginary client in mind and the idea that the room look as if someone has simply stepped out for a moment. Your eyes are always seeing things that could be different. I rearrange furniture and flowers, light candles, plump pillows, and straighten paintings; changes are inevitable all through the run to keep the room fresh, to make it not static. It is after the showhouse closes that you can judge your success, for it is then that you hear that people have seen the life in the room. And then you know it was perfect.

Mario Buatta

INTRODUCTION

From beginning to end, a showcase house is strangely comparable to a Broadway show. First, it's a limited run—showhouses are open to the public for usually three to six weeks and then dismantled, demolished, or, in some cases, sold intact. Second, the unprecedented flurry of publicity, tickets, and programs calls to mind the behind-the-scenes frenzy of a Broadway production. And, finally, there's even an opening night—usually a black-tie gala.

Walking through a showhouse is an extraordinary design experience. These rooms are not cohesive in the design sense, nor do they try to be. Even a first glimpse lets us know immediately that these spaces are vastly different from any other design form. Each room in a showhouse is a unique and individual environment translated from the dreams of its creator, an interior designer. It is here that the designer can work untrammelled, for these rooms are pure fantasy, created without the restraints of clients or budgets and dependent only on the designer's own creativity, energy, vision, and powers of persuasion.

Varying in size from a jewel box of a town house in New York City to a Hawaiian beachfront home to a fifty-room Georgian estate near Boston, the most successful showhouses are those where the designers are given full creative freedom and are not restricted to a specific theme or color scheme. Showhouses certainly benefit designers' reputations, but they also raise huge sums which are often donated to local hospitals, libraries, medical research organizations, symphony orchestras, scholarship programs, and children's clubs.

The process by which designers are chosen for each of the rooms in a showhouse varies from city to city. Some use a lottery, some draw straws, others have a waiting list, and still others rely on a mysterious method of selection that only a handful of benefit-committee members know. In most cases, however, designers are picked for their excellence in their profession and for their portfolio. And, although a spirit of togetherness develops once the designers and rooms are chosen, there is an edge of competitiveness beforehand, since a reputation can be built on a single room.

Once the list of designers is finally determined, work can officially begin. Measurements are taken, ideas are debated, antiques are begged and borrowed, insurance is purchased, and contractors can be seen removing walls, floors, and ceilings. And while it seems that these rooms

are transformed overnight, the metamorphosis usually takes three to eight weeks. In the final forty-eight hours, the tension mounting, heart and soul go into these rooms, as the designers strive for a lived-in yet highly polished look.

Because there are no client demands, the designer can create the room of his or her dreams, using colors and *objets d'art* that are personal favorites. This artistic freedom is enhanced by the astonishing cooperation that the designer receives from the design community. Furniture manufacturers, upholsterers, art galleries, antique dealers, rug and carpet companies, fabric and wallcovering houses—all want to be involved in a showcase house and the tremendous publicity that it spawns, and designers will frequently find themselves the recipients of gracious donations from these firms. Suppliers can be remarkably cooperative about short showhouse deadlines: whereas normal delivery of a chair may take twelve weeks, upholsterers have been known to turn out a pair of chairs over a weekend for a showhouse. It's a winning situation for everyone, and for a designer, access to such superb sources can be an enormous help in creating the ambience that he or she is trying to achieve—and can often provide the perfect finishing touches to a room.

Although showcase houses are feasts of inspiration, they also offer a wealth of practical solutions to everyday design problems. Thus, for the public, showhouses are a rare treat and well worth the price of admission. Not only will showhouse visitors see top-notch designers at work, taking the elements of design and reformulating and recombining them in novel ways, but they'll also see priceless antiques and art objects that span centuries and cultures. They'll witness the latest design trends, for it is here that *trompe l'oeil*, *faux* and oxidized finishes, historical references, and *passementerie* were all rediscovered. As guests journey through these different rooms, they'll see myriad unusual window treatments, suggestions for creating more space and improving layouts, the latest design currents, and the newest palette of colors. They'll also have the privilege of viewing architecturally important and, in many cases, historic houses.

Of course, not every room in every showcase house is successful. But in the very best, such as the ones that follow, we see the fresh, the whimsical, the opulent, the prophetic, the unexpected—in short, the best of American interior design.



HALLS

Whether a grand entrance foyer or a cramped vestibule, the hall is one's introduction to a house. The ambience of a hall creates the first impression, often setting the stage for what is about to follow.

Almost all designers of showcase halls and loggias have two major restrictions to contend with. First, their design should reflect the design of the rooms off the hall. Often, however, these rooms are worked on behind closed doors, so the hall designer has no idea of what they look like. A solution for many designers of foyers is to lean toward the conservative or work in the style of the architecture of the room. Second, many of these rooms are oddly shaped or oversized spaces, not the more typical square or rectangular rooms that lend themselves to easy solutions. Some of them, like the 10-by-60-foot Long Island hall that Linda Goodman and Jerry Katz designed, are more like bowling alleys than rooms in a home. These unusual spaces tax the designer's creativity, since general sitting areas and arrangements are much more difficult to map out.

While many of these foyers will have odd architectural details, the designer—through visual tricks such as *faux* finishes and *trompe l'oeil*—will either completely erase the elements or embellish them, as Marianne von Zastrow did with the niches and columns in one of the halls that follows.

A final practical consideration is that these entryways lead to all the other rooms in the house, which are at various stages of renovation and construction as opening night approaches. Designers, committee members, workers bearing furniture and flowers—all are constantly traipsing through the hall, and most designers find it practical to finish this space at the latest possible date. And since halls are not usually roped off, as some showcase rooms are, the flooring must be incredibly durable to withstand the beating that thousands of feet will inflict. For example, besides the fact that the Louis XIII-style Savonnerie rug was perfect for the large hall that McMillen designed for the Kips Bay showhouse, the designers knew that this antique rug could take the wear and tear of visitor traffic, unlike a chenille or a delicate needlepoint. But whatever the floor or walls or window treatment, each of these halls reflects its designer's passionate determination to create a memorable space.

The entrance hall of the Clayton Mark House, designed by David O'Neill in 1987.



Unusual for New England, the original inspiration for the Colonial Revival-style Lyman estate (above) was Dutch rather than English. This prompted designer Jane Viator to incorporate Continental touches such as the thread-lace window treatment and the *faux-lapis* column topped by a flower arrangement that was copied from a Flemish still life. "Practicality, economy, and respect for the past suggested the emphasis on painted finishes as the major decorative strategy," explains the designer. This fresh and welcoming atmosphere was produced through a combination of paint and imagination. Ragged-and-sponged upper walls, marbled dado, and trompe l'oeil "tile" floor recall the gracious prewar era when the house was built: a period of meticulous craftsmanship and informed interest in historic styles.

The round *faux-bois* boxes rest unobtrusively on a shelf, underscoring a nineteenth-



century Flemish landscape print by Koehler that gives the impression of being held up by trompe l'oeil ribbon.

The grand entrance foyer (opposite) in the Kirkeby estate in Bel Air, California, was reinterpreted by Kalef Aleton and Craig Wright as a tribute to the distinguished late designer Michael Taylor. The house, considered by the cognoscenti to be the finest reproduction of eighteenth-century French Neoclassical architecture in Los Angeles, was built in the 1930s. The marble-lined foyer is lighted with a Waterford chandelier, 10 feet in diameter, which hangs over an important Louis XV parcel-gilt console table from the Rothschild collection. An exceptional grouping of seventeenth-century mother-of-pearl is displayed amongst orchids and candles, while four Venetian blackamoors flank the main doors, which lead into the drawing room.

