

# All Show, and Almost No Go

A show house site is sold, and decorators scramble for a good cause.



**HOUSEWARES**  
Katie Ridder covered the entrance to this year's Kips Bay Decorator Show House in her Pagoda wallpaper, left. Far left, Robert Verdi and Deirdre D'Elia's landing with sconces by Lindsey Adelman. Above, Vicente Wolf's wedge-shaped banquette. Below left, Buddha heads sculptured out of Yellow Pages by Long-Bin Chen, in a room by 2Michaels.

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TREVOR TORRINO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By **PENELOPE GREEN**

**I**N New York City, real estate isn't personal, it's all business: in a face-off between a children's charity and a record-breaking deal in a down market, whom would you put your money on? Last March, the Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club took it on the chin, when the property where its organizers had planned to hold their annual decorator show house the next month was sold.

Owned by Adam Gordon, the boutique developer, the limestone town house was already an anomaly for Kips Bay because it was on West 76th Street, miles away from its natural ecosystem, the Upper East Side, and the all-important foot traffic. Still, the sale, for \$19.39 million, was a blow to the charity, which draws about \$1 million — 20 percent of its operating costs — from the proceeds of the show house, which for the last 38 years has been open for one week in April.

As its organizers scrambled to find a new house, the six-month delay caused by the sale, they say, forced them to take a bite out of their programs, and even their endowment. "It put us in a very precarious situation as regards to supporting 13,000 children in the Bronx," said Daniel Quinteros, Kips Bay's executive director.

Although the charity had not signed a contract with Mr. Gordon, he



added: "We thought we had a house. Unfortunately, he thought we didn't have a deal. We've had to delve into our endowment, and we are in litigation right now with the seller. We consider this new house a god-send."

Mr. Gordon's response? "It's very simple," he said. "The house was for sale. We never signed an agreement. We sold the house, and we told them immediately. And we did so in the most gracious way possible."

He added: "It was a very hard real estate climate. The most important thing when you have a house for sale is selling it."

The new house, at 106 East 71st Street, which opens to the public today, looks rather like the old house: a 25-foot-wide limestone construction built at the turn of the last century and rehabbed by a foreign investor, according to its broker, Carrie Chang of the Corcoran Group, who is listing it for \$28.8 million (yearly taxes are \$100,000). Last week, 18 design outfits were finishing up 17 rooms on six floors, seemingly relieved to be on familiar turf.

"It's never, ever happened before — the house was locked; we couldn't get in," Noel Jeffrey, a decorator who practices a maximalism found in the 1940s-to-1970s continuum, said of last spring's real estate

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DOMESTIC LIVES

INSIDE

## A Prime Nesting Place in Nashville



JOHN ANDERSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**DAPPLED** Trees shade Ann Patchett's pink brick home, a place designed by others that fulfills her own dreams.

Solid brick on a tree-lined street, and a porch to watch the world go by.

By **ANN PATCHETT**

**W**HEN I was growing up, the joke in my family was that we moved every time the vacuum cleaner bag was full. We hoped that discontent could be cured by the packing and unpacking of boxes and so we tried it often. The most consistent home of my childhood belonged to the Wilsons, distant cousins by marriage, who let me stay with them for long stretches while other family members traveled. It was from their snug house that I rode my bike

the two blocks over to Whitland Avenue, where I live now.

Whitland is a wide, tree-lined street where the houses, which range from small to large, sit close together, united by a sidewalk. Sidewalks were and are a rarity in Nashville, and so I thought of them as a sign of great sophistication when I was young. I thought that no one could do better than to live on Whitland. Present child that I was, I turned out to be right.

Sometimes it seems in my life that I have made it exactly two blocks, from Brighton Road, where the Wilsons lived, over to Whitland. I have lived in a lot of places between those two stops, but one feels very much like my start, and the other, if I'm lucky, will be my end. I am in love with my house. It would be my final wish to have my ashes quietly deposited behind the garage.

I've been living here for nearly six years, which, at age 46, is the longest stretch I have ever spent at a single address. I got the house the way all the best real estate is secured: I married it. My husband, Karl, a doctor, bought it  
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**ESSENTIAL TOOLS**  
Building a tool box, for around \$250.  
By Bob Tedeschi



## DESIGN NOTEBOOK



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TREVOR TONNERS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**INVESTMENT DECORATING** A pumped-up Syrie Maugham-style bed from Noel Jeffrey, left. Center, Darren Henault assembled a dressing room like a stock portfolio, with blue chip pieces, like a Leleu vanity (\$175,000), and bargains, like a photograph, seen in the vanity's mirror, by Alex Prager (\$6,500). Right, egg-inspired artwork in a room by Joan and Jayne Michaels.

# A Show, and Almost No Go

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debauché. (Mr. Jeffrey has participated in 12 Kips Bay show houses since his first, in 1976.)

"This is a much better location," he said, adding hastily, "Not that there's anything wrong with the Upper West Side."

Mr. Jeffrey's Hollywood-glamorous bedroom, freighted with a pumped-up Syrie Maugham-style bed, its enormous parts tufted in a silvery faux-shagreen print, fit easily into the new space. At each end of the room, sheer white-striped silk curtains hung like gigantic neiglees.

While Mr. Jeffrey highlighted old-school decorating tips, like adding a black suede ribbon to off-the-shelf white shades and reshaping the room from a rectangle to a giant lozenge with those sheer curtains, his peers were largely engaged in a different type of decorating.

The Kips Bay show house has always been a certain kind of marketing opportunity for designers—a victory lap that comes with a community responsibility. This is because its promotional benefits accrue vaguely to the design profession as a whole, rather than its individual practitioners. That is, the show house reminds the world what it is that decorators actually do. It is rare for design firms to gain clients from the endeavor, which is time- and labor-consuming, and expensive as well. Or it used to be.

But now that most decorators have graduated to sell—furniture, rug and



log. For new investors, he said, there was an entry-level work: a photograph of a young woman decked out in a 1940s-style fur stole clutching a liter of Coca-Cola (\$6,500), by Alex Prager, a young California photographer whose images owe a lot to the works of Alfred Hitchcock and who, Mr. Henault noted, was in a photography show at MoMA right now.

"You want a hot stock tip?" he said. "Run to Yancey Richardson and buy an Alex Prager, and you'll double your money in the next year or so."

**M**ANY decorators seemed to be showing off their eye for contemporary art, or perhaps just their relationships with various galleries. Eve Robinson, who had drawn the white trophy kitchen—and what can you do in such a kitchen?—hung two stunning domestic still lifes by the photographer Laura Letinsky.

Alan and Jayne Michaels commissioned Stephen Anton, a Brooklyn artist, to make an egg-shaped faux fireplace in wood and plaster (\$7,000), and it takes an eco-faerie inset, they said for their tiny room, and brought in other egg- and bird-like objects that otherwise seemed to have no relationship to one another. The most intriguing piece was a tower of acrylic vitrines filled with what looked like ancient stone Buddha heads but turned out to be sculptures by Long-Bin Chen, a Taiwanese artist who makes pieces out of the Yellow Pages, Sotheby's catalogs and other paper products. The heads were as soft as velvet; you could see the spine of the Yellow Pages behind each one.

Across the hall, Elizabeth Pyne, a granddaughter of Betty Sherrill, former president of McMillen Inc., had blanketed her little room in brushed gold and aqua linen. Her grandmother, she reported, had made away with the excess fabric and was planning an outfit with it. "She told me I always order too much," said Ms. Pyne, who is 30 and in charge of McMillen Plus, a division of McMillen devoted to younger clients.

Ms. Pyne had decorated with art, too: there was a mandala made from fake eyelashes by Meg Strecker and a little wire tree by Pablo Avilla that looked like a Lewis Carroll drawing. But the most compelling artwork was a piece made by Ms.



Pyne's mother, Ann Pyne, a principal of McMillen. On a television framed in gold linen played a film that Ann Pyne had made of her own mother, Mrs. Sherrill, brandishing clippers.

"It's my dream and my mother's nightmare," the younger Ms. Pyne said, describing how Mrs. Sherrill would arrive at their home in Southampton, N.Y., and clip the privet and move the furniture around. The film was an exploration of that relationship, she explained.

Later, by e-mail, Ann Pyne described it as a film-school effort, with obvious themes. "But I feel quite affectionate toward the footage," she wrote, "and I am so glad I have it, and my mother, still alive."

She added: "By the way, don't think this whole scenario didn't repeat on Thursday. When I came to get something from Elizabeth's room I saw all sorts of flower arrangements that had magically appeared. Elizabeth thinks this is funny, but it drives me insane. How she got up those three flights of stairs with flowers and vases and her cane and all the congestion of objects and workmen in the stairwell I don't know."

Ed Ku and Etienne Coffinier were inspired, they said, by a 1963 fashion photograph from Harper's Bazaar by Melvin Sokolsky, who placed a model in a glass bubble and set her in front of Paris scenes. Maybe the best part of their room—all bronze grass cloth and silverer-wood custom furniture that recalled Frank Lloyd Wright—was a

**FANTASY DECORATING** Far left, top and bottom, a whirl of smoke by Norman Mooney in a sitting room, and hand-blown glass bubbles in a bathroom, both by Ed Ku and Etienne Coffinier. Above, Elizabeth Pyne's bed-sitter; left, Jennifer Post's his-and-hers massage room.

whirl of black smoke on a white panel above a sectional sofa, a piece by Norman Mooney, an Irish artist living in Brooklyn. In the adjoining bathroom, Mr. Ku and Mr. Coffinier filled a tub with startling and lovely hand-blown glass bubbles made by Suzan Elkin, a glass artist.

On the top floor, Jennifer Post was padding around in white terrycloth mules—installation slippers, she said, that she buys from the InterContinental Hotel in Los Angeles. Tiny, toned and prone to aphorisms, Ms. Post looked more like a yoga instructor than a decorator as she pivoted between the his-and-hers massage room, the lounge and the outdoor terrace she had smoothed over in her own image.

"I will only cure on a Bentley; it can't be a BMW," Ms. Post said, pointing out furniture from her new collection—a massive slab of a sofa with Jean-Michel Frank lines, covered in charcoal cashmere, and hunky armchairs covered in Maharam chenille.

Ms. Post is something of a brand herself, and all the elements of her franchise were on display: the black-and-white palette, the movie-mogul minimalism. Every one of her clients gets a black-cushioned, custom bronze bench, she said, sitting down brass plates—added to the steampunk effect. "It's like an old submarine," Mr. Verdi said, plopping down on his love seat. "But in grass cloth."

A white wool rug in an exaggerated basketweave by a German artist prompted a reverie: "I feel like Martha Stewart would want it and be jealous of what we had it," he said. "I always wanted to make rubber bracelets stamped with VWWMW, you know, What Would Martha Want, or What Would Oprah Want, because they are our deities. I figured that's how I'd make my money."

He'd better hurry.

## A real estate deal versus a charity: guess which wins.

wallpaper collections, books — a show can move these objects into a living space room and hope for a more direct response from their audiences. Indeed, this year, three outfits — Jennifer Post, Vicente Wolf practices, and a firm of twin-sister decorators named Jayne and Joan Michaels — have an arrangement with Gilt Groupe, the invitation-discount luxury site, to sell most of the things in their rooms in an online pop-up shop "open" from Nov. 4 to 5.

Mr. Henault left a paneled living room in 1991, explained his decision to be in this year's house: "I think our times call for experience," he said. "It's a chance for the average person to walk into one of your rooms. It shows what decorators do, instead of the stupid TV shows that say you can do it."

Also, he has a book out this week. Mr. Wolf had accessorized a paneled library — "no one else wanted it," he said, proudly, of the room — with oversize, swoopy, Philippe Starck-inflected white furniture with his signature line, VW Home. There were the familiar high-backed wing chairs, like escapees from the Royalton, with white upholstery and his huge, white wedge-shaped banquettes. Behind it stood a clutch of four-foot-high white porcelain statues of Mao, which looked like Pop Art pieces rather than souvenirs from the Cultural Revolution, though Mr. Wolf said a friend had warned him that they were too reactionary.

Darren Henault, who designed two dressing rooms, one for "him" and one for "her," observed: "My job isn't to save people money. It's to spend people's money well."

Here, he said helpfully, handing over a stack of crisp white index cards, each printed with the particulars of one piece, in the style of a notification card.

The Kips Bay Decorator Show House, to be at the Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club, is open through Nov. 11. Cost: \$30. (718) 893-8600, ext. 245; kipsbay.org