

HOME & GARDEN

Rocking the Palazzo

By PENELOPE GREEN APRIL 30, 2014

Mudejar tiles, the appetites of Francis Cardinal Spellman and a colossal sculpture by Ron Arad made from a whorl of steel rods that cost more than \$1 million are just a few of the colliding, often ravishing visions now on view in the elegant spaces that once held the Urban Center in the Villard Houses at Madison Avenue and 51st Street — the home, for the next month, of the Kips Bay Decorator Show House.

Since its inception in 1973, the show house has raised \$19 million for the Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club (or about 15 percent of its operating costs each year). And the container for this effort has always told a story not just about design and fantasy, but also about the city's fortunes. For the first three decades, that container was invariably an Upper East Side townhouse, for years a fairly easy “get,” as so many for sale languished empty for so long.

But as the real estate market has heated up, boiled over and then reignited in the last decade, the show-house organizers have struggled to find spaces. Foreign buyers, who make up an increasingly large percentage of townhouse owners, are a cohort seemingly perplexed by (or uninterested in) the notion of lending property for a charitable cause, said Bunny Williams, the show-house chairwoman, even though many of their houses are empty. “They just don't get it,” she said.

As a result, the last few years have found the show house roaming the city, appearing one spring in the boxy, cookie-cutter apartments of Manhattan House on East 66th Street, another in a grim and glassy new

condo development on the Far West Side.

One year, a developer who had promised a house snatched it back at the last moment when he found a buyer for it, forcing the abrupt cancellation of what had always been an annual spring rite. (Show-house organizers scrambled to find a house, and it opened six months later.) So, when Northwood Investors, the new owners of the Palace Hotel, which also owns the Villard Houses, offered the 51st Street space to Kips Bay, it was a kind of payback.

The Villard Houses are among the loveliest landmarks in Manhattan, six townhouses built in the early 1880s and designed by what was then the young firm McKim, Mead & White to resemble a Renaissance palazzo spanning the rise on Madison Avenue from 50th to 51st Streets. Their developer, a German journalist, railroad magnate and abolitionist who christened himself Henry Villard when he came to this country to make his fortune, spent less than a year there. After hunkering down in the grandest of the houses when his finances unraveled, he fled to Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., his dream house a symbol of his failure, as William C. Shopsin and Momette Glaser Broderick noted in “The Villard Houses: Life Story of a Landmark,” published by Viking Press in 1980.

Though the houses were landmarked in 1968, they barely survived the 1970s, when the city careered into recession and the Archdiocese of New York, which had started buying up pieces of the place after World War II, offered Harry Helmsley a 99-year lease. That was in 1974. After six years of negotiations, Mr. Helmsley was allowed to slice off the easternmost sections to build his Palace there, the “harsh and dreary tower,” as the architecture critic Paul Goldberger once wrote in *The Times*, that now rises from the back of the Villard Houses. It is bland and hulking, to be sure, but the complex deal that Mr. Helmsley struck allowed him his hotel development in exchange for preserving and restoring not just the townhouses, but much of their extraordinary interiors as well.

One bright and chilly morning last week, this reporter stumbled, gape-mouthed, into the blood-red front parlor that the architect William

T. Georgis had imagined, wickedly, as a retreat for Cardinal Spellman, the ambitious and controversial archbishop, Vietnam War booster and pal of Roy Cohn who died in 1967. There were a pair of male torsos (Hercules and Christ, of Roman and Renaissance provenance), antler stools, a Louis XV chandelier, a scary-looking George Condo bronze and a turquoise velvet sofa and club chair designed by Mr. Georgis for Maison Gerard. Blood-red resin dripped down a canvas by Piotr Uklanski.

Santa Sangre is the name Mr. Georgis gave a massive console of his own design, a long hunk of rough-hewed wood from which glossy red resin erupts — Dan Brown meets Marc Newson. (If you missed the point, look to the clutch of three rusty nails as big as your hand that Mr. Georgis has arranged on top.)

“Too much?” he asked, while the chorus of a Philip Glass opera ululated alarmingly.

Not really. It was just hard to believe that Mr. Georgis’s embroidered bishopric was the former home of the Urban Center bookstore. For three decades, the Municipal Art Society of New York, a key player in the deal to protect the Villard houses, had the lease of this, the northernmost house, in which it housed the center and bookstore, and the offices of the Architectural League. Until 2010, when the Municipal Art Society left for more modest quarters on 57th Street, the Urban Center was a meeting place, and a required pilgrimage, for architecture and design lovers.

It says everything about the archaic arts of preservation and book publishing that the Palace’s new owners are marketing the Urban Center’s space (more than 26,000 square feet in three floors) as a retail spot for a luxury-goods company (annual rent, \$6 million).

Certainly there is much here to tempt such a tenant. In the almost 40-foot-long former dining room, Tony Ingrao and Randy Kemper have poured a lifetime’s worth of collecting: Han dynasty pottery; an ancient bronze leg; a pair of voluptuous marble consoles designed by the 18th-century architect William Kent; a 17-foot chenille sofa; and that thunderously huge Ron Arad “fire screen” made from steel rods in a kind

of fingerprint pattern, through which you could see a video of a fire burning.

Mr. Ingrao explained that the screen had been made for a family in Aspen, Colo.: “It’s the only private commission Ron has ever done, and it took a year to convince him.” The room it was made for, however, has “gone in a different direction,” he said, and as for the \$1 million-plus screen, “it is possible it could be available.”

Juan Montoya, the Colombian designer, was clearly having a marvelous time with the scale of his room, which abuts Mr. Ingrao and Mr. Kemper’s. “This is a luxury we don’t see every day,” he said. “It’s a beautiful 19th-century room: how do we respect it and at the same time challenge it?”

In the middle, a swoopy, double-sided faux astrakhan sofa is 16 feet long. A polished stainless-steel desk is 12 feet. A 3,000-pound basalt table by the Korean artist Byung Hoon Choi looks like a whale’s tooth. And over the fireplace, a wave of sculpted plaster recalls the smooth stucco interiors of modern Latin American architecture, though Mr. Montoya described it as being like a cashmere throw.

In the front hall, Martyn Lawrence Bullard, Elton John’s decorator and a star of “Million Dollar Decorators” on Bravo, expressed his brand by throwing up a dizzying array of his own wallpaper patterns (black-and-white faux-marble patterns, for Schumacher) and, on the ceiling, black-and-white tile (in zebra prints, for Ann Sacks). Mr. Bullard said he was referencing Renzo Mongiardino, the Italian designer and art director (of Franco Zeffirelli’s “Romeo and Juliet”) who died in 1998 and was known for his love of exuberant trompe l’oeil finishes and “marble” wallpapers. If you are not steeped in the canon of the decorative arts, though, you might think, guiltily, as this reporter did, of Cruella De Vil.

Upstairs, in Carrier and Company’s paneled sitting room, there were more marbled walls, handmade in gold like the endpapers of 19th-century books, by Calico, the artisanal wallpaper makers in Brooklyn. Jesse Carrier and Mara Miller, who are married, make urbane interiors for Manhattan

celebrities like the Bronfmans, the Seinfelds and Anna Wintour, whose new office in the Freedom Tower, Mr. Carrier said, might look something like this room. On the wall, a painting by ASVP, a pair of street artists, read, “We Can Give You What You Want,” in a gold font that resembled old-fashioned tattoo slogans.

Alexa Hampton, who was spending the morning of her 43rd birthday in the house, also practiced a bit of Mongiardino-like stagecraft on the walls of her room. She was thinking about the patterns in Mudejar tiles, which she had Chuck Fischer, a decorative painter, work up in panels. Then she asked Duggal, the digital and photo printers, to print a canvas wallpaper from them, which she affixed to the walls in slightly irregular repeats. The effect was dazzling.

Ms. Hampton talked about her obsession with Studio Peregalli, the Milan design firm; how she “cyberstalked” the Italian photographer Massimo Listri for an image of Castello di Sammezzano, a Moorish folly in Northern Italy; and why she owes Robin Sacks, who hand-painted the stairwell from the second to the third floors, a bottle of tequila. (M. Listri was happy to lend her his print, Ms. Hampton explained, but it is very large and that stairway is very narrow.)

Darryl Carter, the Washington-based designer whose work brings to mind John Saladino or maybe Axel Vervoordt, had flipped the Aubusson rug in his cool gray-and-white room to show off its rough weave. It’s more interesting that way, he said, “and you won’t worry so much about walking on it.”

Mr. Carter had also interfered with a pair of 19th-century portraits, ripping the canvases from their frames and muzzling each figure with a smear of white paint on its mouth. “I call them the Happy Couple,” he said. “They looked too placid, if not vacated. I felt obliged to help them out.”

He added with a grin: “My opportunity to have a client I could really help. In fact, these are the *ideal* clients.”

Clients may be the ultimate buzzkill, particularly in this country. You

have to pity the American designer: Here, there are no crumbling palazzos or chateaus or hôtel particuliers for them to stretch out in. Instead, it's off to the 70th floor of the Time Warner Center, or a swollen McMansion in Greenwich, Aspen or Atlanta. No wonder they were having such a good time in this McKim, Mead & White prototype.

Markham Roberts decided to make a library for himself, he said, channeling Henri Samuel, the Rothschilds' decorator, to do so. (See hôtel particuliers, above.) Among all the high European flourishes, some cunning D.I.Y.: a blowup of a photo that Mr. Roberts took of the Rubens Medusa (a particularly gory painting of a severed head that lives in a museum in Vienna) and an antique narwhal tusk that he had fitted with a 19th-century silver wedding cuff from Burma and a wooden base he had made himself.

"I have to sit here," Mr. Roberts said. "I might as well be happy."

Happy endings were also on the mind of the designers at Cullman & Kravis, who attempted to collect an abundance of sexual references in their pink, gold and white bedroom while keeping it as G-rated as possible, Ellie Cullman said. Note the obelisks, she added, "an upright element." (We counted 24.) There were also Japanese boxes, glass balls, a photograph from Laurie Simmons's "Love Doll" series and a number of cheesecake portraits plucked from the New York City Firefighters calendar that Ms. Cullman's associates had photocopied in black-and-white and placed in gold frames.

Not every room was perfectly formed, or so strictly focused on the Beaux-Arts. One richly paneled room came with a circle of blue neon in its ceiling. Orlando Diaz-Azcuy Design Associates did a nice job of handling it by painting the ceiling blue, strewing the floor with white cowhide and veiling the carved paneling with drywall scrims. Alberto Villalobos and Mercedes Desio took a windowless closet, painted it black and turned it into a cabinet of curiosities. On the second-floor landing, a contemporary elevator door and some emergency and exit signage has become part of a mural by Victor Fung, a graffiti artist, with lighting by Rich Brilliant

Willing, a group of three young furniture designers. They were just a few of the red-hot Brooklyn-based artists brought in by Will Meyer, of Meyer Davis, which designs hotels and restaurants like the Dutch in Miami.

And not everyone goes to pieces over a house. Consider the recollections of Helen Winslow, now in her 90s, whose family owned two Villard Houses, Nos. 457 (this one) and 451. The other day, she recalled the view of St. Patrick's Cathedral from her bedroom window at 451, and how she and her Chapin classmates liked to do their homework in the garden, which spread out on the eastern side, where the Palace now looms.

What was it like growing up in such a grand manner, and in such extraordinary architecture?

"I never thought about it," Mrs. Winslow said. "Better that way than being brought up to think you were better than your classmates. It was years before I realized the house was anything special. When you only know one thing, you have nothing to compare it to. To me, a house is a house, and that's it."

The Kips Bay Decorator Show House is open through May 29 at 457 Madison Avenue (51st Street); admission is \$35. Information: 718-893-8600, extension 245, or kipsbaydecoratorshowhouse.org.

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