



INSIDE

## F6

### PERSONAL SHOPPER

Stacking chairs have gone heels over head with style and color, but the budget won't take a spill. Here, our tower of choices.



## F5

### SOFT SELL

Joan Kron casts a hard eye on the pillowy perches that are popping up on new talk shows like "MTV Live."



## F6

### BREAKING GROUND

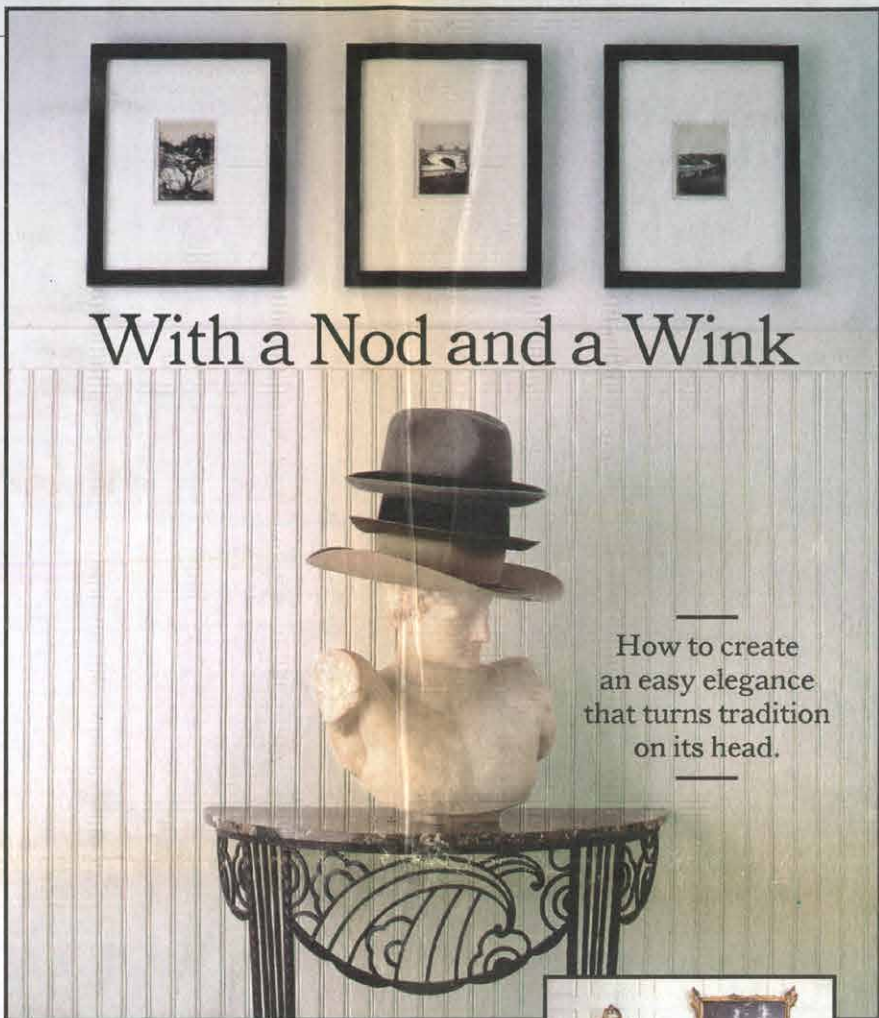
A new column by Michael Pollan. This week: the garden gets creepy.



## F19

### TURF

Mariene Dietrich slept here? Madonna? No big deal. There's no markup for the apartments of stars.



## With a Nod and a Wink

How to create an easy elegance that turns tradition on its head.

By JULIE V. IOVINE

**W**HEN Marcel Duchamp put a bicycle seat on the wall and called it art, the world of decorating changed forever.

It is reassuring to remember this every so often, amid the angst over what fabric will spill up that impossible 10-year-old sofa and the nagging suspicion that fine furniture is only for connoisseurs. Decorating was once a torturous match game. Now, it is just as tedious to hunt and gather the right pieces to achieve the ever-elusive personal style.

Minimalism may be nobody's idea of fun, but it sure made the job easier.

It's time to spread a wider net. Two Manhattan designers who have done so are Kevin Roberts and Timothy Haynes. They hold that a Louis XVI settee and a skateboarding teenager can coexist in the same living room, that one can demand ease even while yearning for elegance. Welcome to a style of decorating that one can live with and even love.

The rules of decorating have never been more relaxed, but that, too, can be a challenge:

If anything goes, where to begin?

Mr. Roberts and Mr. Haynes don't get their rules from a pattern book. They learn from the scale, proportions and lines of painting and architecture and the wisdom of other cultures (Mr. Roberts started as an anthropologist).

O.K., so they're professionals. It's their job to stockpile experience and have clever ideas. But what makes them stand out as leaders of a new interior design direction is the way they honor both the esthetic high ground and the reality of daily use. "I had very stiff grandparents who liked formal rooms that we were never allowed to enter," Mr. Roberts recalled. "I learned early that the only houses that make sense are houses that get used."

So the first thing he asks a client is, "Where are you going to flop?"

In three projects, Mr. Roberts and Mr. Haynes faced typical hurdles: giving a rented loft in Manhattan personality; making a hallway kitchen less of a drawback in a tiny Upper East Side town-house apartment, and lending



Photographs by FRED E. CONRAD/The New York Times

### THE ELEMENTS OF SURPRISE

Hats atop a Roman bust atop an Art Deco console — and all in a kitchen. Here, and in the dining room (inset), tall panels make an architectural backdrop.

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Michael Minor

Amoebic pools of color, fluid forms in a computer-designed home.

## The Shape of Things to Come Is Here

By JOSEPH GIOVANNINI

**T**HINGS have not looked good for the future business for some time now, ever since the Walt Disney Company dismantled the Monsanto "House of the Future" in Disneyland three decades ago. More recently, Disney started the company town of Celebration in Florida, a comfy enclave brimming with sweet blandishments of the architectural past — clapboard, gingerbread and picket fences. The future, so optimistically anticipated at Disneyland and in other fantasies before and after the war, never really roared into America's cities and suburbs, perhaps because visionaries and builders lacked the technical capacity to travel to the wilder shores of their imaginations.

Ever greater amounts of computer RAM, however, have arrived and are delivering the future to the present. The computer that outplayed Garry Kasparov can now — with a little help from an architect — design

A virtual apartment becomes a surreal (and real) one.

"Welcome to Cleopatra's submarine," said Beatrice Ost, artist, film maker and resident muse of a two-bedroom Upper West Side of Manhattan pied-à-terre with a definite bathospheric cast. She opens the door to a molten environment where fibreglass walls undulate from shower to bath to bed frame with hypnotic fluidity, as if a computer had morphed one fixture into another. The surfaces flow every which way, like a clown's elasticized smile. A three-dimensional space modeled by computer has been lifted off the screen and deposited into her apartment — virtual space made real.

As Ms. Ost steers guests through her liquid wonderland, she enumerates features that would make sense to any real estate agent, except that the shower stalls, closets and other parts don't look at all conventional.

An aluminum-sheathed closet separating the living room and bedroom has the profile of a flat, tropical fish whose mouth puckers into a tongue that passes through a glass wall and becomes the bathroom vanity, which then swells into a sink. The glass wall separates the master bedroom and bath and cuts through a long, sinuous tub, damming water on the bathroom side while creating a fish tank view from the bedroom (an arrangement suitable for highly evolved couples unfazed by dorsal nudity before breakfast).

Paint knows no boundaries, and doesn't stop at corners and edges, as color-impregnated epoxy swirls in free-form patterns on the walls and floors. Near the entry, the same pale yellow door closes two ways — in one position, it shuts off just the

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## DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Joseph Giovannini



## CREATE A KITCHEN

Open to the rest of the apartment, it has a traveling table that circles a fixed pole next to the kitchen counter and two columnar fiberglass shapes (one hides a shower) with shelves.



## BED, BATH AND BAYOND

The master bedroom, left, is separated from the master bath by a glass wall that cuts across the tub. Beatrix Ost, right, enfolded by the rippling wall of her home's shower.



Michael Mundy for The New York Times

## The Shape of Things to Come Is Here

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bedroom, and in the second, the bedroom and a guest bathroom. The bathroom can then belong to either the bedroom alone or to the whole apartment. Marcel Duchamp once famously hinged a single door to close either a bathroom or a kitchen; the architects designed this space with the same drollery.

For nearly two decades, architects have used computers to generate working drawings from designs conventionally conceived on the drafting table. But only recently have designers surfed the transcendental functions of the computer's brain to propose curves and forms of formidable complexity and nuance. As the prices of powerful computers have plummeted, architects, many from the realm of academia, have pushed the computer's provocative potential.

## A computer's inner child: lines as elastic as a clown's smile.

New graphics programs — including those intended for cartoon animation — have helped shape three-dimensional forms on screen. The process sometimes encourages the collisions of forms: nebulae and complex folds pass through space and reach other, producing shell-like shapes that usually escape architects who work by hand on the flatland of paper.

Long before the pixels danced, Ms. Ost and her husband, Ludwig Kuttner, chief executive of a textile conglomerate, are in their 50's, and the New York architects Sulan Kolatan and William Mac Donald, in their 30's, found each other, as though matched for client-architect compatibility by a computer dating service. It may not be surprising that young architects who teach (in this case, at the Columbia architecture school) are intellectually daring. But rare is the client who makes whimsical artworks — in Ms. Ost's case, bronze heart chambers — and scatters them around the apartment like astrays. Then there are Ms. Ost's other works — like "Mars" and "Venus," two futuristic human-size, carbon-graphite boxes that stand in attention in the living room like mute cello cases.

During the process of discovery, when client and architect get to know each other, Ms. Ost and Ms. Kolatan noticed they even shared a certain taste in clothes. "I would wear a rubberized cotton shirt to a meeting, or an outfit made from a plasticlike material, and Sulan would wear something made out of a parachute material," Ms. Ost said. "We are both interested in a sensuousness of modern dress."

Ms. Kolatan suggested to her clients, who are Germans, that there are equally sensuous building materials — similar to the carbon graphite that their son, a professional race car driver, fabricated into "Mars" and "Venus" in his sports-car shop.

The architects brought fiberglass, epoxy, light-sensitive glasses and stainless steel to subsequent meetings. "I closed my eyes," Ms. Ost said, "and touched the samples and realized a space was not only conceptual, for the brain, and not just functional. It should be free and kind to the body and soul, like slipping into a precious gown at night and getting away from the world."

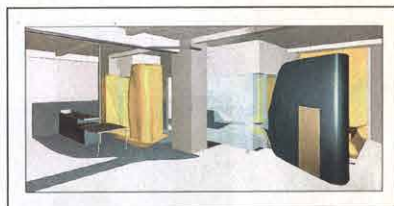
Some tactile materials Ms. Ost and Mr. Kuttner liked could accommodate the curvaceous forms the architects had been exploring on the computer — forms with complex, topological surfaces. To help the couple understand the layout, the architects offered away computer drawings.

"I couldn't read them," Ms. Ost admitted. "I didn't know what was front from left. But then Bill and Sulan brought a little mock-up, a miniature, and I fell totally in love with the forms. It was all fantasy, part of a slightly crazy dream. I love this kind of surprise."

"My husband turned to me and asked, 'Are you ready for this?' Ludwig let it be my choice and my



Photographs by Michael Mundy



## WONDER WALL

A living room

divider

conquers: it

glides to a

dining area.

The panel folds

down to create

a table.

BUTLERS

AT THE

READY

"Mars" and

"Venus" are

statues by Ms.

Ost.



project. It was the start of an adventure. For me, it was like a playground, and these were people we could play with."

The existing space actually consisted of two run-down, one-bedroom apartments (the great feature was the 11-foot ceilings) to be consolidated into a single ambidextrous 16,000-square-foot apartment that could accommodate what Mr. Mac Donald called "a range of domesticity" — to be used by Ms. Ost and Mr. Kuttner alone (their primary residence is a historic Jeffersonian house in Virginia), by any or all of three adult sons, friends from Europe and visiting business associates. Sometimes the apartment would be divided into two pied-à-terre, and sometimes opened up for dinner parties with everyone

around a single long table.

Visitors eventually end up sitting on the turn-of-the-century Hoffman chairs (upholstered in wild oranges and reds) that are grouped in a quieter end of the living room, but they inevitably turn toward the architectural delirium in the front half of the apartment, which offers a more engaging landscape view than the cramped brick cityscape outside.

In addition to the conventional Viennese seating — steeped in an aura strangely compatible with the submarine fantasy — a daybed with a back that wraps the corner like a strange cowl serves as an extra bed for overflow guests.

Flexibility and ambiguity were built into the design so spaces could be interpreted according to individ-



Michael Mundy for The New York Times

Mass, took the profiles of common household items as the starting points of their design. "We wanted to value and emphasize the domestic environment," Mr. Mac Donald said.

Design ingredients, maybe a pillow or a sink, were organized by their similar shapes; then the architects merged the forms to generate other domestic items like the shower, tub, closet and banquette. On screen, the process of transformation looked like time-lapse photography combined with a "Nude Descending a Staircase," with such results as the thighlike stainless steel bathroom sink and the warped reddish shower stall to the right of the kitchen shelves. Highly transformed traces of the pillow migrated across all the iterations, and can be found, for example, in the contours of a sinuous built-in bed.

"You cannot really recognize where any part went and where any other came from — they take on whole new characteristics," Ms. Kolatan said. "The computer is a third person, an independent mind with its

landscape in the bath, kitchen and bedroom areas, colors oozing off the forms and onto the floor in amoebic pools. Ms. Kolatan and Mr. Mac Donald did not try to conquer the apartment, creating a total look designed down to the doorknob, but instead left the window wall almost untouched.

"We created malleable structures that accommodated given like the windows, columns and entrance," Mr. Mac Donald said. Ms. Ost was delighted to discover that the fluid lines of shower and bathtub echoed a pewter Art Nouveau teacup and coffee set displayed in a vitrine in the open kitchen. A vastly different logic had created a familiar form of beauty.

The long, looped banquette by the bed could be a seat, a chaise, side table or shelf for clothes and shoes. "You don't use the bed frame only to support the bed — it serves as storage, a night table, eating tray and vanity," Mr. Mac Donald said. "You invent the functions because the piece is free from a single program or form, and suggestive."

Some pieces did not just have multiple personalities; they were designed for duplicity. Floor-to-ceiling panels that glide on a track can be folded back for a wide-open living room or closed to divide the apartment. One panel folds down into a table that butts into another table, which rotates around the kitchen counter; together the tables seat 10.

"It's a city apartment and space is limited, so the panels-to-ceiling are like a magic trick, with one thing transforming into something else," Ms. Ost said. "I like the Japanese way of living. They fold away their night things and have a day space in the same room."

Ms. Kolatan said, "There is a generally held notion that computers are demystifying, and that projects developed on the computer have some kind of abstract sanitized result — but everyone who comes into the apartment has a visceral reaction."

"People are always touching the walls, and everybody seems to be enchanted," Ms. Ost said. "There's nothing heavy or stern here. I like to be amused and amused."

The apartment may embody a thesis that a computer can be used to generate a buildable design predicated on combining disparate forms — but the results are flexible, beautifully crafted and washable with a wet sponge. Most remarkable are the design's high spirits and wit. Ms. Ost said, "You have to be a very serious architect to pull off a design that leaves you with the smile this apartment seems to regularly produce."

## A blend of flexibility, ambiguity and Duchampian wit.

own logic. In that sense it's unlike doing anything by hand, where you're always in control."

"Many people use the computer for representing what they have already designed," Mr. Mac Donald said. "We're trying to use it as a tool for making the design, and the programs put you more in a position of editor than author."

The designs evolved on screen were E-mailed to a computer owned by a factory that specializes in building exotic forms. "They regularly do gigantic sets for the opera and huge Mickey Mice for Disney World and fiberglass rhinos," Ms. Ost said. "We had a budget, and were surprised the prices were no more than they would have been for a conservative, well-executed renovation."

"My husband, who has built several houses, constantly asked Bill and Sulan the technical questions about materials and how things functioned. Was that slippery? Would this last? They worked together."

The architects created a surreal