

# BENJAMIN NORIEGA-ORTIZ

PAUL COLLITON



*Kira Wilson Gould: You were trained as an architect, how and why did you transition into interior design?*

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz: I studied architecture because I've loved it for as long as I can

remember. I have a master's degree in architecture from the University of Architecture in Puerto Rico, and a master's in urban design from Columbia University. Just before graduating from Columbia, I was in the dean's office applying for a fellowship to continue studying, when a call came in. An architect was looking for a graduate student to work for him over the summer. I happened to be sitting right there so I got the job. One morning I was at one of the clients' apartments receiving cabinetry, and the cabinet-maker complained that the senior designer at John Saladino had had an accident, and that she was going to be unavailable for two or three months. That afternoon I dropped off my resume. They called me for an interview and hired me—all within three days. And I was there for nine years.

*KWG: This leads into my next question, how did working with Saladino shape you?*

BNO: I think he changed the way I view interior design. In studying architecture, you don't study interiors. You don't learn about furniture or fabrics.

*KWG: Do you find that odd?*

BNO: It is very odd. I don't understand why architects have this aversion for furnishings. Saladino gave me a new perspective. He made me look at the space differently. He made me view decoration and color as something good. The funny thing is, Saladino didn't really study interiors—he studied fine art, and he viewed interiors as art.

*KWG: You're known for your clean approach to interior design. Can you elaborate on this philosophy?*

BNO: I hate clutter—it really drives me crazy. I think the best explanation is that I grew up in the tropics, where it is hot. Too much stuff really makes you hot. So you want to pare down, take your clothes off. My father never

allowed draperies in the house—it was forbidden. And no slipcovers, everything was just the essentials. So when I design interiors I like to make things very clean, open and clear. If there is a table, it's a table, not a table with a lot of junk on top of it.

*KWG: What are some of your favorite materials?*

BNO: I love metal and I like wood, but my favorite material is fabric. I like fabrics that shimmer, and I also like fabrics that are translucent. And to be honest with you, the cheaper they are the more fun they are. When I can buy things in abundance, it is really great—you don't have the money limitation. My least favorite material is marble. It is very cold, and it's been used so much to define luxury that I really don't care for it.

*KWG: I saw a picture where you draped leather on the walls.*

BNO: We made the wall become leather—we created architecture out of fabric. It's an easier and quicker way to create architecture without demolishing everything.

*KWG: Since 1992, you've grown a lot. How many people work here now?*

BNO: We're six. And it's like having a family to take care of, providing medical insurance, etc. I have a responsibility to come up with work. I even do my own PR.

*KWG: Speaking of PR, I see you everywhere, House Beautiful, Town & Country, Met Home and Elle Décor. Do you have advice for other interior designers who are working very hard but maybe not paying as much attention to promoting themselves?*

BNO: I think it is not only good for designers to see their work in print, but I think designers have a responsibility to show everybody else what they're doing. It's good for students, and it's excellent for people who cannot afford interior designers. Also, our own clients feel as if they made a good decision if they see us published. Most of the time being published doesn't bring new clients; it just validates your work.

I think it's important for a designer who wants to publish their work to treat it as if it is somebody else's work. Be very objective. Act as if you're representing this other person and then go to the editor with no fear, the worst they can do is say no.

It's a shame, I shouldn't be saying it, but almost anything can be published. Magazines need material. I would recommend just taking the first step. Eventually designers will learn which magazines are better for them, or are better for a particular type of project.

*KWG: How do you present your work to magazines?*

BNO: Normally, I have my work professionally photographed. I like to have my own images because if the magazine photographs the project I may get copies of the images, but I cannot use them for anything except my portfolio.

*KWG: How do you think technology, or the Internet, is affecting interior design?*

BNO: I don't think people are ready for high-tech interior design just yet. Interior design is a very personal thing, and the Internet is still impersonal. You don't get to touch things, and a lot of our work is feeling and juxtaposing materials. When I designed an apartment for an article in New York magazine, I had three hours and a DSL line. Using the Internet, I ended up selecting things that I was already familiar with. After reading the article, a lot of my clients told me how amazed and impressed they were with the whole thing, but nobody ever said "let's do my apartment that way."

*KWG: Where do you see your company going in the future? What are some of your design aspirations?*

BNO: I'd like to design more products, not necessarily furniture. I want to expand into other products for the home, such as lighting or dishes. It's easier to buy napkins than a whole interior.

And I don't want the office to grow anymore. I like this boutique office, where I can see my clients, talk to them and have dinner with them. I don't want to be greedy, or make more money than I really need. I just want to enjoy myself. I admire people like Barbara Barry, or Martha Stewart, their business is their life, but I don't think I'd like that. ♦

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