

# SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR



Classic and modern decor styles blend seamlessly into this grand dining room at 30 Crosby Street in New York.



**Puerto Rican interior designer Benjamin Noriega Ortiz turns celebrity culture on its head by setting new standards and breaking all the rules.**

INTERIOR DESIGNER BENJAMIN NORIEGA-ORTÍZ WAS ENJOYING A LAZY SATURDAY IN THE CANAL-LINED CITY OF VENICE ITALY WHEN THE PHONE RANG IN HIS HOTEL ROOM. IT WAS LENNY KRAVITZ'S "PEOPLE" WITH A QUESTION — COULD NORIEGA-ORTÍZ BE AVAILABLE TO MEET WITH THE ROCK STAR THE NEXT DAY IN NEW YORK CITY?

"I had no idea who he [Lenny Kravitz] was and I don't work on weekends," said Noriega-Ortiz, who not to mention was an ocean away from New York at the time. "I said Monday would be better."

After he hung up, his partner Steven Wine convinced him to reconsider.

"Steve said 'you really should meet with this guy—he's famous,'" said Noriega-Ortiz, a native Puerto Rican and an interior designer based in New York.

Reluctantly, Noriega-Ortiz headed to New York. He turned the long flight into a working trip by picking up a few of Kravitz's CDs at the airport.

When Noriega-Ortiz and Kravitz met

the next day they both knew, instantly, that the rushed meeting was well worth its inconveniences.

"I was immediately taken by this guy. He was extremely gracious, elegant and fun with design," said Noriega-Ortiz. "And the first thing he did was apologize for making me meet him on a Sunday. He explained he was leaving the next day on his European tour."

Kravitz, who had already familiarized himself with Noriega-Ortiz's work, hired the Latino designer on the spot to transform his pied-a-terre duplex in Soho into a sexy, elegant space. Two years later Noriega-Ortiz's signature style of combining modern furnishings with vintage pieces landed Kravitz's plush penthouse an eight-page spread in the New York Times Sunday Magazine. The magazine lauded the collaboration of Noriega-Ortiz office and Kravitz for their genius and innovative design.

Kravitz's New York City apartment is just one example of Noriega-Ortiz's knack for intermingling contemporary touches that take modernism to another

**By Claudia Rosenbaum**

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level. He adds soft, livable elements giving a sleek space an almost homey feel. Noriega-Ortiz accomplishes this through his unusual mix of modern and vintage pieces. In Kravitz's media room, a traditional Knole sofa covered in Italian Fortuny fabric sits invitingly below a wall of Andy Warhol silkscreens of Muhammad Ali. On the second floor landing, two giant globe lights covered in fluffy white ostrich feathers, created by Wine, hang over an art deco Donald Deskey 1930's billiard table. Other elements of the apartment are pure rock star — a curved fireplace that hugs the walls with flames that shoot out from green glass shards and an acrylic swing hanging beside to a see-thru acrylic grand piano.

Noriega-Ortiz went on to design other homes for Kravitz — a recording studio and house in the Bahamas as well as homes in Miami Beach and in New Orleans. Working closely with Kravitz, Noriega-Ortiz became accustomed to the necessity of always carrying his passport. Kravitz would often decide, on a moments notice, for them to jet off on some interior design excursion.

"Benjamin is a pleasure to work with," Kravitz said from his Miami house. "His repertoire has no limit and that enables me to express myself fully."

Besides Kravitz, Noriega-Ortiz has many other high profile clients including Mexican author Laura Esquivel, who wrote "Like Water for Chocolate." At 46, he has made a name for himself elevating traditional interiors into monochromatic works of art. His commercial resume includes the interiors of the popular Pikayo restaurant at the Museo de Arte in Puerto Rico and Cartier's hip New York City Store.

Things were not always rock stars, museums and Cartier for Noriega-Ortiz.

Growing up in Santurce and later Guaynabo, it became clear at a young age that he was different from his peers. From the age of five, he meticulously carried graph paper and color pencils with him to sketch house plans. While kids his age would be playing basketball and baseball, Noriega-Ortiz preferred to stroll through San Juan admiring buildings.

The pastel colored houses with their red tiled roofs, and their ornate balconies with their heavy wooden doors offered an unparalleled education for a budding architect.

"There is such beautiful architecture

there," he said. "You don't have to read about things like colonial architecture in a book — you just have to open your eyes."

Early on, Noriega-Ortiz became accustomed to the dust, scaffolding and smell of freshly made cement. His father, Benjamin Noriega-Maldonado worked as an accountant for a pre-mix concrete company and often indulged Noriega-Ortiz's desire to visit the firm's construction sites. At home, he constructed his own designs out of Legos, Tinker Toys and Lincoln Logs. In the fifth grade, his family moved to Guaynabo where Noriega-Ortiz attended Muñoz Marín Elementary and Middle School and later Margarita Janner High School. By his own admission, he was a "straight A" student in all but one class. He blames his dismal performance in physical edu-

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cation for faulting him the coveted class valedictorian title.

After high school, he enrolled at the University of Puerto Rico's Río Piedras campus. He applied to the School of Architecture but despite Noriega-Ortiz's earnestness, he wasn't accepted. Not to be deterred, he studied liberal arts for a year and reapplied. This time he got in. In 1979, he graduated from the School of Architecture with a Bachelors in Environmental Design. He went on to obtain his master's in architecture from UPR and graduated in 1982.

Taking a breather from his thesis, Noriega-Ortiz visited New York City and checked out Columbia University's School of Architecture Design. He was transfixed not just by the pulse of the city but also by the cacophony of architecture ideas emanating from Columbia University.

Believing he still had more to learn, he enrolled in a year-long master of science in architecture and urban design program at Columbia. When the end of the

year was upon him, Noriega-Ortiz attempted to extend his stay by applying for a continuing education scholarship. He was in Dean James Stewart Polshek office at Columbia filling out the necessary paperwork when a friend of the dean, Sandy McIlvaine, who was heading up the design firm of Delano & Aldrich, called in desperate need of an architect for the summer. The Dean cupped the phone, turned to Noriega-Ortiz and asked if he could stay in New York. Noriega-Ortiz eagerly agreed.

His luck did not end that afternoon. Hard at work at that internship for Delano & Aldrich, supervising construction on a loft in Chelsea, he overheard a cabinetmaker complain that a designer at the prestigious John F. Saladino design firm had been in a car accident and would be out for six months.

"I went that same day [to John Saladino] with my resume and got an interview for the next day and that's when I started working on interior design," said Noriega-Ortiz.

With his solid background in architecture, Saladino put Noriega-Ortiz to work in the firm's architecture division. Each day Noriega-Ortiz found himself drawn to the interior design department unable to stop offering his opinions. The territorial interior designers were not pleased with this bossy behavior from the new hire. Yet, Noriega-Ortiz persisted. He firmly believed good design must involve architecture. Saladino wisely moved Noriega-Ortiz to the interior design department and two years later, he became Saladino's head designer. He held this position for the next nine years.

"I admit it. I'm controlling," he said. "I like to give my opinion. I'm not a follower, but a natural leader."

After ten years of working for someone else, Noriega-Ortiz ultimately decided it was time to establish his own firm. With no projects or clients lined up, his expectations were low. He set aside a small space in his Westside apartment and pondered taking a vacation. Within a week, the up-and-coming knitwear designer Steve Fabrikant hired Noriega-Ortiz to design his Sutton Place apartment. A beach house in the Hamptons followed by a Fabrikant boutique at Bergdorf Goodman enabled Noriega-Ortiz to move into his own office space with a stream of projects lined up.

His business grew mostly by word-of-mouth. Soon, design editors began to photograph and write about Noriega-Ortiz's captivating interiors. Besides the New York Times, his work has been featured in House Beautiful, Town &

■ A flaming range of red, orange and yellow lollipops accentuate the colorful decor in this Cartier store in New York. The lighting and modern lines complete this chic space's sophisticated look.





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Country and Metropolitan Home. Luis Gutierrez, who along with fellow architect Otto Reyes was at the time creating the Museo de Arte in Puerto Rico, heard the buzz and commissioned Noriega-Ortiz to design his New York apartment.

Impressed with his workmanship and style, Gutierrez suggested Noriega-Ortiz collaborate with him on submitting a bid to design a restaurant on the Museum property for Pikayo. Having no experience with restaurant design, Noriega-Ortiz was reluctant. Gutierrez allayed any fears by promising to do all the architecture, freeing Noriega-Ortiz to concentrate on the interior design.

Their collaboration is reflected in Pikayo's contemporary design where a warm clustered dining environment is sheltered within the modern lines of the museum. The modern but friendly look, Noriega-Ortiz said, is achieved by keeping everything monochromatic, which in turn highlights the food.

The display of the food was given such a high priority that Pikayo's chef was

consulted on every aspect of the interior. Cream was chosen as the primary color for the dishes, the walls, the drapery, to the cozy u-shaped leather booths. Yet, a diner would be hard-pressed to find anything cream colored at night. The kinetic mood lighting alternates the color of the restaurant from red to green to blue.

Gutierrez said he admires Noriega-Ortiz's tendency not to venture like other designers into extreme minimalist modern. Instead, he finds Noriega-Ortiz uses modernism as point of departure and then infuses his own personality into the work. Noriega-Ortiz takes furniture and changes the fabric to what is fitting for its use and climate. He not only uses what's available in the market, but also designs elements specifically for the space, Gutierrez said.

"I could have easily just ordered chairs from a catalogue," said Gutierrez, expressing what he feels others might try to pass as interior design.

For all his celebrity clients and friends, Noriega-Ortiz has remained true to his boricua upbringing. From the moment the elevator in the old loft building on Spring Street opens to his Soho studio,

Noriega-Ortiz was there, affectionately, to greet me. His seven room studio is sectioned off by sheer white polyester drapes, instead of walls, which hang from aluminum tracking. The distressed wood floors contrast with the modern acrylic furnishings that are set off by the sea-foam green walls.

The monochromatic office is typical of Noriega-Ortiz's style. He believes that by limiting the pallet it draws the eye to focus on the shapes and, as such, elevates shapes to an art form. It is a technique that he has used many times over. You can tell how strongly he believes in this principle. On the day I met him, he was dressed in varying shades and textures of brown - a brown suede shirt, brown corduroys and a brown leather belt. The outfit was accented with a vintage tortoise-shell cuff bracelet that he picked up in Harlem.

We sat in the office conference room and Noriega-Ortiz took a seat at the head of a long rectangular oak table, covered in thick white acrylic. The room was stark and intriguing; two smaller acrylic tables next to the windows were topped off with Wine's signature white



■ Simplicity reigns supreme in this uncluttered lounge-style room at a Miami beach residence. ■ Pikayo's monochromatic scheme allows gourmet dishes to become the star attraction (top left).



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ostrich feathered lamps. Noriega-Ortiz sat on an antique wooden Queen Anne chair, strategically higher than the other seating options providing him with a vantage point to look over designs. I sat on a white bench made of Krypton, a fabric that closely resembles vinyl, that was originally designed for Pikayo. In fact, no two chairs around the table were the same. Besides the bench and the wooden chair, there was a chrome chair designed by Gio Ponti and a white fiberglass Eero Saarinen dining chair with its cushion recovered in original brown and white floral patterned Marimekko fabric. Noriega-Ortiz is a firm believer that dining room chairs should match the person and not just other chairs.

"Who decided that all the chairs around the dining room table had to be

the same?" Noriega-Ortiz said.

Later that day, I had a chance to see Noriega-Ortiz in action. His expertise was needed at an InStyle Magazine photo shoot on interior design "Do's and Don'ts." The shoot was being held in an elegant Grammercy Park brownstone owned by one of Noriega-Ortiz's clients. The photogenic townhouse had already been featured in House Beautiful along with a few episodes of the television show "Law & Order."

At the moment, InStyle Magazine design editor Jacqueline Goewey, wearing a New York uniform - black down vest, black pants, black shirt and black sling-back shoes (possibly Manolo Blahniks) - was holding court in the brownstone's entryway. Noriega-Ortiz busied himself looking for something to clean foot prints from the carpet so it had even coloring for the photograph. He also provided his advice on placement of

other items for the picture. The shoot was brought to a screeching halt when Goewey decided the shot of the cluttered entryway must have a pair of galoshes.

After a few phone calls on her mobile, an assistant was dispatched in search of galoshes. In the meantime, there was nothing to do but tour the brownstone and marvel at Noriega-Ortiz's innovative designs.

In the guest bathroom, Noriega-Ortiz has elevated hand washing into a surreal riverside experience. Water flowing from a black free standing sink drips into black river rocks. Noriega-Ortiz said he used the rocks to cover the drain, because he considers the metal grate unsightly. A full length green sea-foam glass panel slides back to revealing a bathroom door and at the same time, the toilet. In the kitchen, besides the stove, no appliances are visible. Opening a drawer reveals more than just dishes and silverware but the freezer, the fridge, the sub-freezer and the two dishwashers.

Highly coveted Noriega-Ortiz is able to pick and choose his clients. Last month, alone, his designs graced the pages of InStyle and Metropolitan Home magazines. He now has the luxury of insisting on working for people that he likes. But passing that litmus test is, in itself, no guarantee of securing Noriega-Ortiz's services. When the owners of this Grammercy brownstone bought a cramped house in the Hamptons, Noriega refused to design it.

"I told them the only way I would do the interiors is if they demolished the house," he said. "A year later, they came back and said okay we demolished the house and then I agreed."

As if to illustrate the point, Noriega-Ortiz's cell phone rings. On the line is the office of the king of hip hop pseudonymous P.Diddy, a.k.a. Puff Daddy, a.k.a. Sean Combs. It appears P. Diddy wants to see Noriega-Ortiz portfolio as soon as possible so "Could he send it over?" Diddy's people asked. Noriega strongly suggested Diddy's office to look at the website like everyone else.

An InStyle photo assistant is in disbelief "you said no to Puffy Combs?"

"Someone has to," said Wine, who designs the glamorous ostrich feather lights featured in many of Noriega-Ortiz's designs. Noriega-Ortiz clarifies, "I mean I didn't say no, but the Web site is state-of-the-art." However, being true to his Puerto Rican roots, Noriega added that if it had been Jennifer López or Ricky Martin calling, "Well, that's different." ■



■ Bold colors, upholstery and accessories give this Park Avenue dining room a touch of chic eccentricity.