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A visit to Doug Meyer's bungalow reveals that the Miami-based decorator knows a thing or two (or three) about color.

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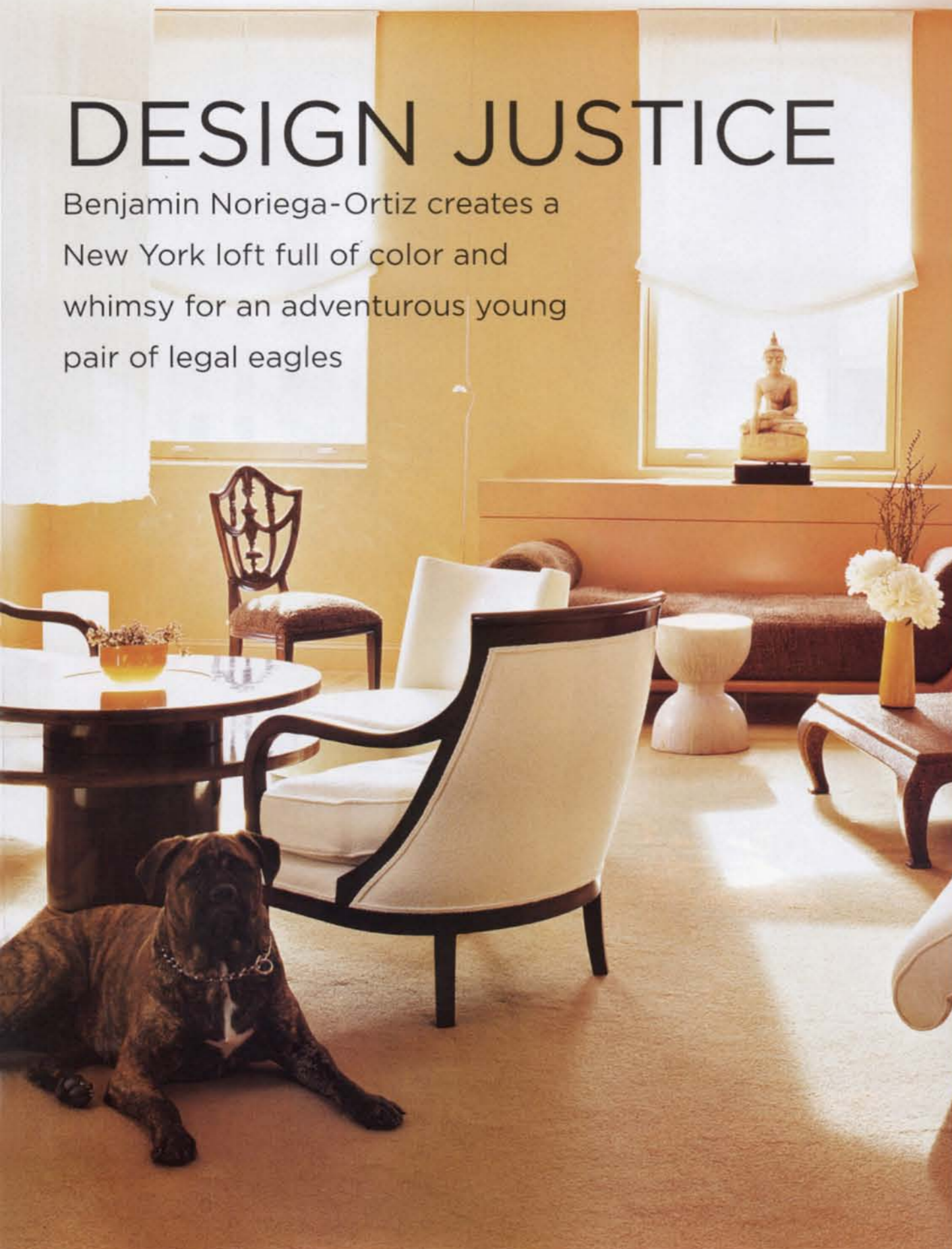
BY MARY-ELLEN WEINRIB



This page: Hanging fabric serves as closet doors in the rust-colored bedroom of a New York City loft designed by Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz.

DESIGN JUSTICE

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz creates a New York loft full of color and whimsy for an adventurous young pair of legal eagles



Writer: Ted Loos

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In the living room, color, light, and bold shapes are surprisingly in sync. Except for the walnut Art Deco table (which lights up) and the Thai Buddha, the furniture is new. Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz designed the chenille chaise in the background—and colored it to match the couple's bull mastiff, Sophie (in foreground).

WHEN JACKSON BROWNE wrote his 1980s satirical ode “Lawyers in Love,” he poked fun at a world where designer jeans were de rigueur. Luckily, he never mentioned interior designers.

It would be hard to blame Peter Bull and Jeanne Curtis—two married lawyers who live in New York’s TriBeCa neighborhood—for engaging Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz.

The hard-nosed negotiators (both litigators) admit that they could barely tell a club chair from a chaise when they bought their 2,500-square-foot loft, a major step up from their last apartment in the neighborhood.

But they *had* seen a magazine spread of Noriega-Ortiz’s super-cool (and decidedly un-lawyerish) interior for musician Lenny Kravitz. They liked it, then they met the man behind the look. “He’s a dreamer,” says Curtis of the designer’s beguiling flights of fancy. “But it’s not just that he understands design. He understands people. He was very quick to get a feel for us, and there’s no pretension with him.”

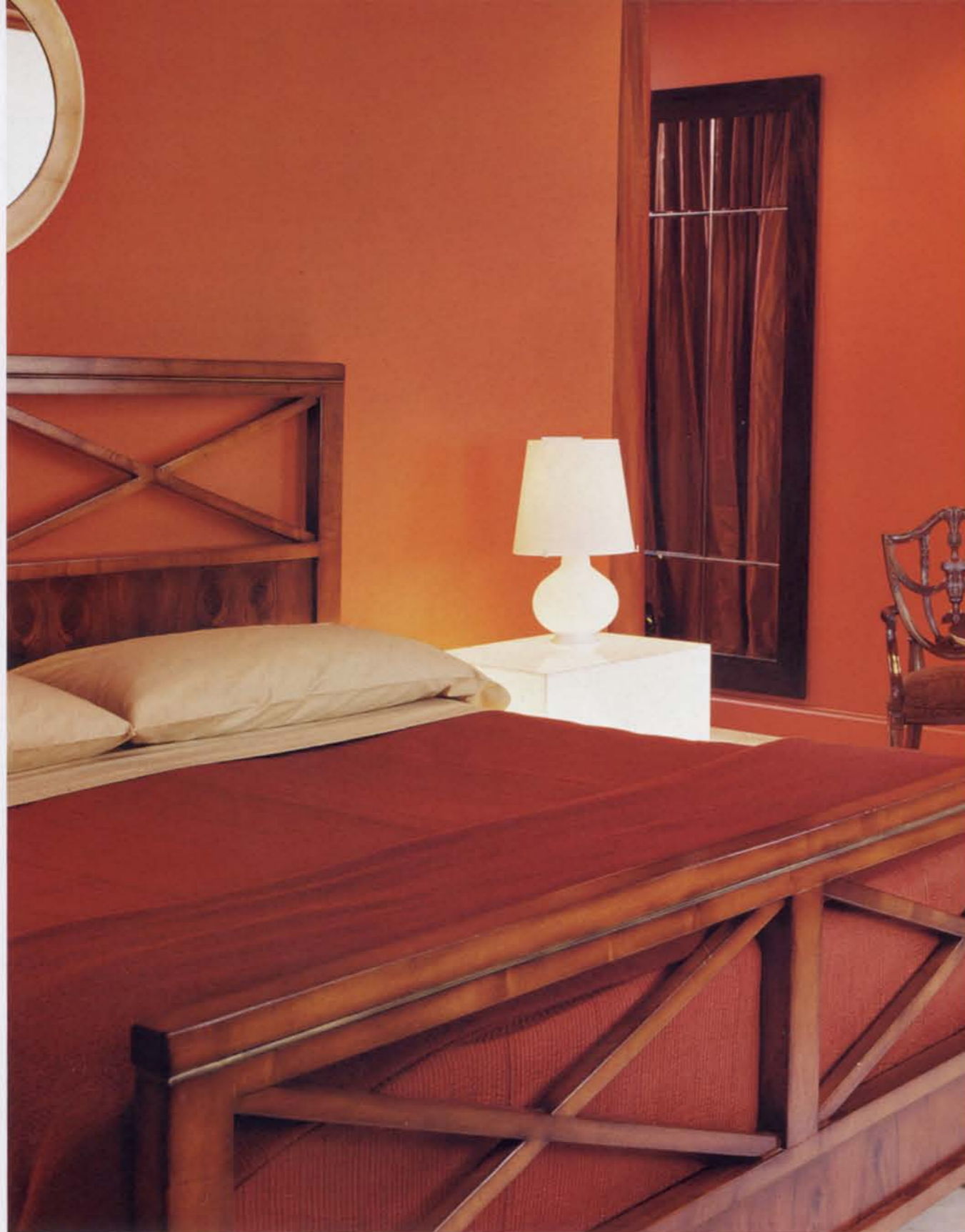
Noriega-Ortiz and his associate, Marla Pasareno, knew their new clients could be pushed a little toward a daring design strategy. “They’re not typical lawyers,” he says. “They’re more fun.” He identified one area of exploration above all: “They wanted color and whimsy.”

But what colors? For that, Noriega-Ortiz simply opened his eyes. “He said, ‘Every time we met with you, you were wearing browns and earthy colors,’” recalls Bull. “So even though he has pulled off more of a stark look, the rooms are still really warm.”

Not that they immediately jumped at the bold pumpkin shade Noriega-Ortiz suggested for their living room. “They had to think about it, because it was such an intense color for a room,” says Noriega-Ortiz. I said, “It’s all paint. If you don’t like it, you just repaint it.” (The clients drew the line, however, at a purple ceiling.)

They also embraced the decorator’s dramatic furniture choices. As always, he didn’t concern himself with pedigreed pieces. “I didn’t really care where the furniture came from,” he says. “It’s always a mix. The most important thing in our projects is what you feel when you walk into the room.”

For the living room he chose a 1920s Art Deco walnut table by Eric Bagge the cli-



ents had found—there's a lamp in the center—and that helped determine his choices for the surroundings. "I think it's easier to design when you start with things the client already owns," says Noriega-Ortiz.

Surrounding the table he placed Napoleon lounge chairs by designer Nancy Corzine, and nearby went another Corzine piece, this one a dramatically swooping chaise. A squared-off Christian Liaigre–designed sofa, covered in Ultraleather, a chic-looking form of vinyl, rounds out the center of the room.

But the emotional center is provided by a Thai Buddha, which Noriega-Ortiz felt gave the room some soul. Beneath it is a small chaise in a mottled brown chenille that he designed; the color references the couple's ever-present bull mastiff, Sophie, which also explains the choice of easy-care Ultraleather for the sofa.

Light comes from a group of striking sculptures that Noriega-Ortiz designed—it's artwork that acts as a lamp. A sheer fabric dotted with sequins hangs from the ceiling, illuminated by a powerful halogen light underneath, which stands on the floor. The sequins sparkle like stars and sway in the breeze, as if under their own power, giving Bull and Curtis an instant conversation piece for their frequent dinner parties and family gatherings.

The two bedrooms Noriega-Ortiz and Pas-



"He's a dreamer," says Jeanne Curtis of Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz's beguiling flights of fancy. "But it's not just that he understands design. He understands people"

Above: The rust color of the master bedroom's walls was dictated by the couple's linens. Noriega-Ortiz and his colleague Marla Pasareno used large mirrors to open up a dark room and to enhance the visual flow. The "light box" night table is a Noriega-Ortiz creation, and the chenille chaise is from Donghia. The table supported by steel rods is an Isamu Noguchi design from the 1950s. Right: A view past the couple's closets, which are fronted with fabric instead of doors, toward the master bathroom.

A blue bedroom doesn't pop without white accents. Few designers would think to retrofit a Crate & Barrel lamp with a feathered shade—and that's why Noriega-Ortiz stands out



areno designed is a good example of how strong color and eclecticism can look coherent, not random. For the master bedroom, the designers took a cue from the rust-colored linens the couple owned, putting the same tone on the walls. Then Noriega-Ortiz put up fabric, not doors, over their closets—when combined with many large mirrors, it gives the apartment a rich, seamless visual flow. “I really hate swinging doors,” he says. “And when you use fabric to cover closet space, the closet smells nicer because it ventilates. Fabric also helps with noise.”

The designer thought the couple's charming armchairs, reproductions of antiques, would look better scattered around the apartment than they would surrounding a table. So he put a couple of them in the bedroom, along with a new rust-colored chenille chaise and table—an Isamu Noguchi 1950s design.

Pumpkin and rust are one thing—but a guest bedroom of

deep blue? That's what Noriega-Ortiz gave his clients. “We painted it this French blue because it made the bed look good,” he says. “Then I thought, ‘Why don't we do everything, the entire room in blue?’”

For contrast, there are the theatrical white feathers attached to a Crate & Barrel lamp that Noriega-Ortiz retrofitted. “That's something I get from fashion,” he says. “I've been doing that for years. It just adds more whimsy to the project.” He also put a white acrylic top on an old table the couple owned, which stands under the parabolic arc of Achille Castiglioni's famous Arco floor lamp from 1962.

“That room is definitely bolder than anything in the apartment,” says Curtis. “But guests love it. Even my parents, who are 77, find it very relaxing in there.”

For lawyers in love, that's a very sweet verdict indeed. ●

Opposite: In addition to French blue walls and a wing chair that was reupholstered to match, Noriega-Ortiz added a new white acrylic top to an old table owned by the clients, and paired it with a classic Mies van der Rohe chair in white leather.





A CLOSER LOOK

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz's eclectic furniture selections for Peter Bull and Jeanne Curtis's New York apartment range from his own designs to a chair by the legendary Mies van der Rohe

TABLE MANNERS In the master bedroom, this 1950s Isamu Noguchi table from Knoll is complemented by a rust-colored chenille chaise and a reproduction antique armchair.



PLEASING PALETTE Rich colors from Benjamin Moore like (clockwise from left) Soft Pumpkin, Blue Lapis, Fire Dance, and Guilford Green bring warmth and energy to the loft.

CLEAN LINES The designer chose a Mies van der Rohe chair (shown here in black), which he upholstered in white leather to accent a guest bedroom with walls painted a vivid French blue.



BENJAMIN NORIEGA-ORTIZ

- Has been listed as one of *House Beautiful's* top American decorators for the past eight consecutive years.

- Holds two master's degrees in architecture, one from Columbia University and another from the University of Puerto Rico.

- Began his career with renowned New York-based interior designer John Saladino, where he worked for nine years.

- Opened his own design business in 1992.

- Has residential clients including author Laura Esquivel, media mogul Michael Fuchs, and recording artist Lenny Kravitz.

- Lists commercial clients including the restaurant at the Museum of Art in San Juan, showroom displays for Kohler in Wisconsin, and the lobby and wine cellar of 30 Crosby Street lofts, a New York condominium project.

- Has been published in leading national and international design magazines.

- Has made numerous television appearances.



REST EASY This swooping chaise by Nancy Corzine is covered in fabric by Knoll and takes center stage in a living room ensemble that includes a sleek, leather-covered couch by Christian Liaigre.

This view: Noriega-Ortiz complemented the clients' Keith Steel dining room table and farmhouse chairs with Mario Bellini's Cab chairs at each end. Above, left: Vintage glass from the 1960s in the home office. Above, right: A family heirloom rocking chair was reupholstered to match the room's green tones and a daybed was installed. A classic Constantin Brancusi-style ceramic stool rounds things out. For more details, see Resources.

