

ELLE DECOR

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LOS ANGELES**



ELLE DECOR

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"Diaphanous" is the word for Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz's Amagansett weekend house (page 108). The architect brings the sun deep into every project. Between every room, he's hung parachute cloth—not expen-

sive, but so luxurious as it's pulled to and fro to take advantage of every fleeting ray. Produced by Elizabeth Sverbeyeff Byron; photography by John Hall.



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Noriega-Ortiz allows only flowers in blue, lavender, or white in his living room—painted the palest *bruma* (sea-foam). David Landis's brushed-steel daybed adds cool contrast to the room's tropic rattan.



lighter THAN AIR

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz brings the luxury of tropical brilliance out to Amagansett

When designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz was growing up in Puerto Rico, curtains were *prohibido*. “I remember my father forbade them in our house—and still does—because they’re claustrophobic and block the light,” says Noriega-Ortiz. “I took the brilliant tropical light for granted. It wasn’t until I moved to New York in 1982 to finish my graduate studies in architecture at Columbia that I realized how important—and what a luxury—light really is.

“It’s the magic ingredient that makes or breaks a space; it’s one of the most important elements in all my interiors.” Light was the overriding concept when Noriega-Ortiz remodeled the house he bought on Long Island’s East End, near Amagansett. The lush greenery and the graceful maples that canopy the one-acre lot caught the designer’s eye, but what clinched the sale was the challenge of turning a “dark little shack on a wonderful site” into a sparkling, graceful house to share with foreign-film distributor Rene Fuentes-Chao.

Noriega-Ortiz went to work for John F. Saladino in 1983, and from 1986 on he was Sal-



Above: False perspective foreshortens the pool, making it seem far longer than it really is. “In the summer,” says Noriega-Ortiz, here lounging in a hammock, “the pool becomes the center of the house.”

PETER TROIANO; PRODUCED BY ELIZABETH SVERBEYEFF BYRON; PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN HALL



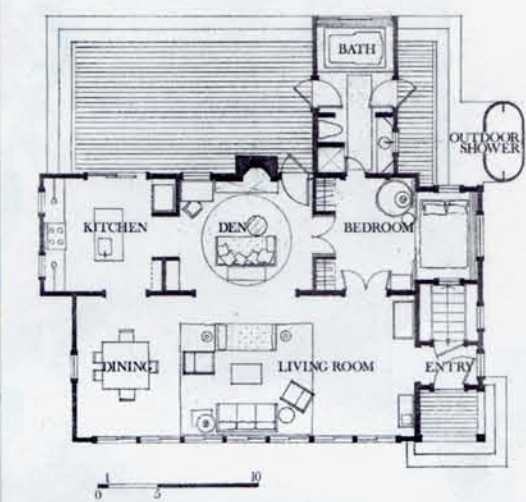
adino's head designer. A year or two before he left Saladino to open his own firm in the fall of 1992, he'd begun work on the Amansett house. He began by tripling the house's area from 400 to 1,200 square feet. He added a large room with a pitched ceiling that covers three distinct spaces—dining, living, and entry—at the front of the existing house, a whirlpool in the original bedroom, and a bed alcove in the original bedroom. Though he made alterations to the kitchen and den, he left them the same size. But to bring in the light he wanted, he added 50 linear feet of new windows, windows that line the front of the house, the bed alcove, and the whirlpool. The flat ceiling in the den was removed to reveal an underlying tray ceiling that added another three feet to the room's height.

Out back, he installed a 700-square-foot cedar deck and a Gunitite pool in false perspective, edged in brick. (The false perspective was designed to converge on a tree at the far end of the pool. Alas, hurricane winds took out the tree before remodeling was finished but after the pool was done.) "In the summer the pool becomes the center of the house," says Noriega-Ortiz. "The brilliance of water is another concept that governed the remodeling job."

The furnishings and room layouts flow as easily as light and water: Bauhaus meets *feng shui* meets the Caribbean meets the Hamptons. White ceiling fans whirl lazily over a mixture of rattan and stainless steel and a collection of old trunks. An Early American braided rug anchors a deep, contemporary sofa. Airy Indian gauze covers reproduction Shaker side chairs. Italian-inspired chrome chairs, second-hand, are rush-seated. And mirrors, bowls of potpourri, ginseng jars, candles, and picture frames float strategically through the rooms. "From wherever you stand and look," says the designer, "I want there to be a visual reward."

As a starting point, Noriega-Ortiz chose a color he calls *bruma* to be carried throughout. Translated into English, *bruma* means sea-foam. But something gets lost in the translation. "In Spanish," says Noriega-Ortiz, "*la bruma* is the foam on the crest of the wave as it breaks. It's an indefinite color—

Facing page: An antique barn vent hangs over the bedroom door. The lamp, from Lee's Studio, is silver leaf and chrome. Inexpensive furniture abounds, like IKEA's tea table, to which the designer added a sandblasted glass top. **Upper right:** Parachute-nylon curtains slide along a track to isolate den from living room. **Right:** When draperies are closed, the alcove feels like a train *couchette*. See Resources.



"From wherever you stand and look," says Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, "I want there to be a visual reward"





not blue, not green, not white. The unified *bruma* scheme creates an almost *ethereal* haze when it meets the sun."

The sole color of all upholstery in the house, *bruma* was also used for the lacquered reproduction Shaker dining table and the Roman shades that line the bed alcove windows. To further pull in the light, Noriega-Ortiz chose white as his other key



Upper left: Gauze slipcovers reproduction Shaker ladderbacks at a table lacquered a pale blue-green Noriega-Ortiz calls *bruma*. **Upper right:** The kitchen windows are original. Herb topiaries stand sentinel on the pickled-pine kitchen island. **Below:** A swing lamp by Nessen in satin nickel illuminates ginseng jars filled with Bakelite-handled cutlery. **Facing page:** Water, water everywhere—in bath, mirrors, pool. See Resources.

Room layouts
flow easily;
Bauhaus
meets *feng
shui* meets
the Caribbean
meets the
Hamptons



color. Everywhere he's hung white parachute cloth (an idea borrowed from John Saladino) to divide one room from the next, to close off closets, and for Roman shades that gently filter the Hamptons sun. He used white pickled pine for the kitchen and bathroom cabinets, the five-inch-plank flooring, and the porch siding that lines the wall of the living area. All the kitchen equipment is white, as are the bathroom plumbing fixtures, from the whirlpool to the sink and faucets. At night, state-of-the-art halogen bathes the rooms in white light.

Though he describes the overall scheme as highly controlled, almost rigid, in its implementation, he stresses that *acogedor*—coziness—is nonetheless a mark of Noriega-Ortiz style. "Warmth is something that should never be missing from a house," he says. He's added it with terry-covered deck chairs outdoors, and nickel-plated lamps and hardware indoors. "Nickel is the warmest of the cool metals," says the designer.

Besides warmth, what else is important to Noriega-Ortiz when he designs a house? "Elegance," he answers matter-of-factly. "Which has nothing to do with money," he quickly adds. But how does he know when clients are happy with the work he's done? "If they go quiet, breathe deep, and mutter 'Wow!' when they see the finished product, I know everything's O.K." *

