

DESIGN



Making Light of It

Benjamín Noriega-Ortiz draws on the light of his native Puerto Rico to create islands of quiet in the city. BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ

If the Puerto Rican-born interior designer Benjamín Noriega-Ortiz were to summarize the lessons that 15 years of professional practice and an unsinkably reliable instinct have fashioned into something of a creative *modus operandi*, he might offer this most practical advice: “Take down the curtains and don’t think twice about the sofa—it will tell you where it wants to go.” For the 38-year-old designer has long been inspired by both the limitless tropical sunshine of his youth and the strong “personalities,” as he calls them, of the furnishings, places and architectural spaces that are the raw materials of his art.

“When I’m designing, I always try to bring in more light,” Noriega-Ortiz explains. “I think that’s because when I was growing up, on an island, I didn’t realize just how much light we had. Later, after I’d earned my first master’s degree (in architecture from the University of Puerto Rico) and moved to New York to work on my second (in architecture and urban design at Columbia University), right away I saw—and felt—the drastic contrast. I love New York, but its winters are so gray. I yearned for the light I’d

grown up with. So when I can, I try to open up a space, which is something all of my clients appreciate, too.” But while Noriega-Ortiz never puts curtains on windows, he does use draperies instead of walls to separate certain living spaces. Both signature touches, he suggests, are rooted in his family’s own enduring, influential *cultura*, in a generations-old, homemade art of living.

“I had a great-aunt in Santa Isabel, Puerto Rico,” Noriega-Ortiz recalls. “In her house, all the closets were covered by draperies. It was the most wonderful thing about the place. I thought, ‘When I grow up, I’ll get rid of all the doors and replace them with draperies!’” His laid-back manner belies an inventive, killer design instinct. “Usually I figure out what I’m going to do with a space in the first five minutes,” he says. Noriega-Ortiz points out he first used draperies to replace walls in his own Long Island weekend house in Amagansett (outside New York City), simply because “it was too small for doors.” Form, he has learned, doesn’t always follow function as much as it is dictated by the proportions, volume and natural energy—call it



the innate architectural vibe—of a room.

“The architecture always tells you where the furniture should go,” says Noriega-Ortiz, who launched his own Manhattan-based firm in 1992 after nine years with the internationally renowned interior designer John F. Saladino, including six years as head designer. Noriega-Ortiz’s own corporate and private clients have included fashion designer Steve Fabrikant and Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel, author of the best-selling *Like Water for Chocolate*, as well as Baccarat and Kohler. Pressing a point, he adds: “When you walk into a space and feel uneasy, it’s probably because something is in the wrong place.”

If finding the right places for a sensible,

PHOTO OF BENJAMIN NORIEGA-ORTIZ BY ANITA CALERO

Benjamín Noriega-Ortiz in his New York studio. At left, the weekend home he designed for himself in Amagansett, Long Island. Both examples of his preference for minimal color, maximum natural light.





Laura Esquivel, author of *Like Water for Chocolate*, asked her friend Noriega-Ortiz to create an inviting environment for her apartment in New York's East Village (this page). He also helped select the furnishings for her home in Mexico City.

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uncluttered mix of classic modern furniture, fondly chosen antiques and the occasional treasured piece of junk seems to come naturally to Noriega-Ortiz. It's a knack for stylish order he refined, he acknowledges, during his tenure with Saladino, who is known for his purist approach. "John is an expert in color and shape; his layouts are very architectural," Noriega-Ortiz says. "He treats interior design as an art, which I like to do also. I like to create an environment for a client. I think a feeling is what people are asking for, something that makes them react positively."

As *Interior Design* magazine has observed with sober aplomb, "a simplicity of line and pureness of eye—i.e., no over-decorative vibrato of accessories" characterizes the way Noriega-Ortiz approaches his residential

interiors. His style is the result, he laughingly explains, of a talent he has recognized since childhood for being able to set up a room neatly and to create "calm and organized space." Now, in his professional work, he explains, "I often use one color to underline an entire space, no matter if it's a house, an apartment or merely one bedroom."

He favors pale, not-quite-white hues. "Furniture and accessories bring out these underlying colors." And although light and livability are key, he has as little use for minimalism's drained-color austerity as he has for stuffy formality. "I hate surfaces you can't put your feet on, rooms where you can't feel comfortable," he says.

Whether at home—which usually means at work—in New York, Long Island or Miami,



Noriega-Ortiz brings both warmth and light to the McCourt residence in Boston's historic Back Bay.

the widely-traveled Noriega-Ortiz can and does tap a rich storehouse of tradition and personal experience that provides an inexhaustible source of inspiration for his projects. He jots down his ideas in the notebook that is always at his side; its pages contain everything from the quick sketch of a chair he spotted on a rerun of *The Lucy Show* last summer to details about a fashion exhibition he visited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. "I'm adapting a few haute couture stitching techniques that I saw for some upholstery designs I'm working on right now," he confides.

Undoubtedly, though, as Noriega-Ortiz admits, his creative sensibility was first nurtured at home in Puerto Rico, where his father, a longtime accountant-businessman,

and his mother, a nutritionist, still live. He remembers growing up around friends and relatives who encouraged his interest in architecture and design. "People used to meet in a plaza in Old San Juan," he recalls. "It was like our big outdoor living room—and one of the biggest influences on me as a designer." From his family, he says, he learned that "you have to enjoy what you have, and if you buy something luxurious and expensive because you really enjoy it, you should use it. So I use all of my dishes, all my glasses, everything that I own. If something breaks, it breaks. If the fabric stains, it stains, and you turn the pillow the other way!" Like his interiors, that's a message both practical and inviting, a nugget of wisdom *con alma* from a knowing voice of experience. ■

