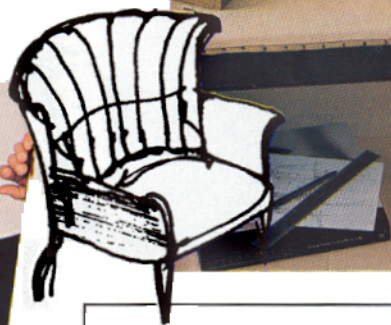


THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Sensuous rooms that seem lighter than air are Manhattan designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz's specialty



Modus Operandi

- You can brighten a room with your hardware. A faceted doorknob reflects the light, and glass knobs glint in a kitchen.
- To soften a room, arrange the light sources to create a triangle. If you put lamps in all four corners, a room becomes static. And use frosted bulbs to cut down the glare.
- A room looks more organized when doorknobs and light switches are at the same height, along with speaker volume controls and thermostats.
- Try not to put a lamp in front of a window. At night the glass will turn into a mirror and you won't see out.
- To get a designer look, use objects in ways they were never intended. Keep the paper towel roll in a low square glass vase. My soap sits in a wooden dish from a sushi bar.
- If you're tired of a rug, turn it upside down for a new look.
- Unconstructed window treatments mean less sewing. For a simple yet dramatic curtain, drape white organza over a pole, then tie the front panel into a loose knot to create some shape.
- Draping a round table always makes it look substantial, no matter how small. You don't even have to hem the material—tuck it under.

BY CHRISTINE PITTEL

No wonder he was drawn to his 44th-floor apartment with a sweeping view of the Hudson River shimmering like moiré. Born in the tropics, designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz gravitates toward light. His rooms start at the window, where he lets the sun shine in through diaphanous curtains, carries its rays across white walls and pale floors, and then captures its sparkle on an iridescent fabric.

"Put your sofa in the spot with the most natural light and you'll be happy," says the designer, whose interiors share his nonchalant ease and egalitarian spirit. "I don't care whether it's 18th century or Ikea. I look more at the shape and color of a piece than its pedigree." People walk into his serene, airy rooms and instinctively relax.

The pleasure principle applies equally to materials. Ethereal organza veils a weathered wrought-iron garden table. Anything that touches the skin is soft. "If you can't sit down in shorts, then it's not a comfortable chair." But practicality is not forgotten: The lustrous taffeta that reflects the light can be difficult to maintain, so Noriega-Ortiz uses it sparingly, to set a mood. He upholsters the

sofa in plain white canvas (\$3.25 a yard) and saves the expensive Gretchen Bellinger silk flecked with pearls for a pillow.

From John Saladino, his former employer, he learned the subtleties of color and how to organize furniture around a focal point in a classically structured room. "Yet I like space to feel open, which is a modern concept," says Noriega-Ortiz. In his country house near the sea, a central daybed instead of a sofa lets the study and living room communicate with each other, with guests facing either way. To isolate the study (which also functions as a guest room) he hangs translucent parachute nylon from the ceiling; walls and doors would block the light. "You can take this curtain down and wash it," says the designer. "And nothing is more beautiful than to see fabric moving in the breeze." The buoyant nylon creates a sense of coolness and reminds him of the water. "That's what I'm really after," says Noriega-Ortiz. "I want you to feel the infinite calm of the ocean when you're in one of my rooms." ■

Gauze slipcovers turn stark ladderback chairs into ghosts in the beach house (above left) belonging to Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz (center). Right and above right: Sketches for a lamp and a shell-shaped chair. Top right: Natural linens on an antique chaise.

