

The Graduates

Five young contenders in the world of interior design have a leg up on the competition: They've trained under the best.

By Sarah Medford. Photographs by William Waldron and Dominique Vorillon. Portraits by Troy House

This fall, a new generation of interior designers is unfurling its floor plans at dust-coated construction sites across the country. Among this group *Town & Country* has spotted a handful of gifted men and women, all in their thirties, who spent the overdriven Eighties working for some of the country's top designers—and are now setting themselves apart. Although they have little in common stylistically, these five newcomers do share a refreshing lack of ego. They also share a lack of affinity for the decade past. ("I remember hearing about a pair of \$116,000 curtains," says one. "And they were just *cotton*.") It's no surprise that these young designers now find themselves succeeding through a desire to collaborate with, not dictate to, their clients. Indeed, each excels at the art of listening, a boon to those of us who actually have a point of view about the size of our dining table—or the bottom line. And, as if that weren't enough, all five happen to be genuinely *nice*.

While jobs with some of the best in the profession were ideal perches from which to witness the excesses of a notoriously flamboyant trade, they also allowed these young designers to take part in some of the design world's biggest triumphs. No wonder they are proud to say they've been mentored. Picking up the solid business practices that kept their employers on top—even after the ceiling caved in on decorating commissions in the late Eighties—these well-trained, well-connected graduates are now reenergizing a business decimated by a stiff recession and AIDS.

Not every fledgling will rule the interior-design roost in fifteen or twenty years, but one of these five very well might. We'll be watching.





Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz



The McCourt apartment in Boston (left and below) is a cool, contemporary envelope for textured fabrics and painted furniture. The bathroom is clad in Portuguese blue marble; the bedroom's leather screen is a family heirloom. Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz first worked on the project under John Saladino, whose office handled the job. His later solo work on the space brought it to completion.

Now that his nine-year stint with John F. Saladino is finally behind him, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz may be the most relieved of all the young designers to say he's graduated. Working for a purist—and Saladino is one of the most renowned in the design field—eventually lost its kick. "I enjoy John's company very much now," says Noriega-Ortiz—although both men are so busy they're most likely to cross paths in an airport lounge.

Noriega-Ortiz was born and raised in Puerto Rico, and he attributes a keen sensitivity to light and color to his early years in a tropical climate. (When he first moved to New York, he painted his apartment celery green and refused to block out the light by hanging curtains.) After receiving a master's degree in architecture and urban design from Columbia University, Noriega-Ortiz joined Saladino's office in 1983. By the time he left to start his own New York practice in 1992, he'd spent six years as the firm's head designer.

Although architectural training gave Noriega-Ortiz a commanding sense of structure, he says it was Saladino who impressed upon him how a room should feel. "John really taught me about prioritizing spaces and creating a progression, a sense of ceremony," he says. "Saladino's background is in art, and he treats architecture as art."

You could say Noriega-Ortiz approaches interior design as he might a musical composition. Often starting a project by opening up rooms to admit natural light, he then builds spaces symphonically, layering modernist furniture forms with occasional antiques and an array of objects, from a revered heirloom to a prized piece of junk. By his own account, the composition occurs to him almost instantly. "The hard part is explaining to clients all that I see in the first five minutes," admits the 38-year-old architect/designer. Plenty of them are willing to put up with this communication blitz in exchange for the chance to work with the droll, almost absurdly laid-back Noriega-Ortiz. Among his clients are fashion designer Steven Fabrikant, writer Laura Esquivel, and Deborah and David McCourt, now working with him on their second home.

One of these days Noriega-Ortiz hopes to take on a bigger project. "I would have loved to have done the interiors for Biltmore, the Vanderbilt house in North Carolina," he says. "The interiors are just so spectacular—I'm jealous I didn't get to do that one."

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