

The New York Times



Solving Modern's Midlife Crisis

Four views of design's new horizons.

By JULIE V. IOVINE

FOR over 40 years, midcentury modern has been the look of youth, promise and progress. It's time to move on. Of course, Ray and Charles Eames's potato chip chair of 1949 will be fresh forever, alongside other classics of sleekness by Verner Panton, Eero Saarinen and Harry Bertola. This was furniture, designed largely in the United States and Scandinavia, that was inexpensive, lightweight and mass produced to meet the immediate needs of the post-World War II generation. Status and durability were

hardly on the minds of the designers.

By the waning years of the 20th century, those iconic spiny legs and Kool-Aid colors, thin pads in place of deep cushions and limbo-low coffee tables had succumbed to a sameness out of sync with their original innovative impulse. Homes began to look like Scandinavian airport lounges.

As a still life, midcentury modern is picture perfect, at its best in magazine spreads, not in living rooms. And by now interior designers complain that midcentury modern furnishings have become too expensive and too commonplace. Call it the Wallpaper phenomenon: that British life-style and design magazine reintroduced midcentury modern to a hipster generation raised more on Nike than on George Nelson. "In the beginning, Wallpaper looked so refreshing," said Piero Manara of Beautiful Modern Design, "but very quickly, I started to feel like 'Groundhog Day.'"

With midcentury modern's expiration date fast coming due, House & Home asked

Photographs by Antone Bantz for The New York Times; styling by Carlin Mota

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1 THE NEW ECLECTICISM

Above, against the gray waters of the Hudson River, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz chose a bit of everything unified by color, including a Robsjohn-Gibbings sofa and armchair (Reymer-Jourdan Antiques) and two plastic Steen Ostergaard chairs (bought on eBay for about \$100 each). In his eclecticism, he topped a Swedish Biedermeier dining pedestal (Greene Street Antiques) with milk-white acrylic and installed ostrich feather chandeliers with white tubing (made to order by And Bob's Your Uncle).



2 WHY TECH

Blake Moore of Girth Design takes a poke at modern with an amoeba-shaped pool table. Why shop for old icons, Girth Design asks, when it's more fun inventing new ones?



3 MAXIMINAL

Strong architecture, even if found in the curves of the furniture, like this Czech Cubist chair, make Diana Viholy's work spare but loaded with presence.



4 HYPERDECO

Layering it on is the approach of Beautiful Modern World, a team that uses hand-drawn wallpapers and fabrics adapted from the past. Left, a toile du reptile by Timorous Beasties.



BENJAMIN NORIEGA-ORTIZ 45, designed a restaurant in Puerto Rico and an apartment for Laura Esquivel, the author of "Like Water for Chocolate." He is now working on a loft for Lenny Kravitz.

The Well-Orchestrated Stage Setting

INSPIRATION



Dressmaker details in the window of Morgane Le Fay in SoHo.

Darius Anthony for The New York Times



DISTINCTIVE interiors are harder than ever to create, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz said, if only because "it's so easy for everyone to find good design in the stores and on the Internet." When clients come to him, he assumes they want something unavailable elsewhere. He gives them a highly orchestrated look, achieved by using only one or two strong colors throughout. The consistent color palette, which may vary in texture, intensity and shade, allows him to mix shapes and periods. This is his version of 1980's eclecticism — a flea market affair that petered out when prices soared — taken to extremes. It's meant to excite the eye without being expensive or overstylized. Color, not pedigree, holds the place together. He takes the mix further in a Biedermeier table resurfaced with milky acrylic, left, and an industrial T-tube light bulb from a hardware store screwed into a flamboyant 1940's plaster lamp.

The living room of his Miami home, far left, is mango yellow with white overscaled furnishings, open invitations to relax. At the center of the room is a large low Chinese reproduction table rubbed with white paint, from Far Eastern Antiques in Manhattan. Mr. Noriega-Ortiz designed some of the furniture himself, including a Shaker-inspired upright chair that he made less severe with an upholstered cotton seat. The designer added an unusual wainscot of triple-pleated sheer voile tacked down with a strip of chrome, his version of a traditional chair rail. "It softens the impact of the yellow where it appears closest to the furniture," Mr. Noriega-Ortiz said.