



In the living room, every piece makes a gesture—from the modernist classics to porch-invoking wicker and a wall unit from Interlübke that seems built in. See Resources.



the bright choice

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz turned his tiny Florida flat into a color-rich and sophisticated retreat.

The challenge may be common, but it's still daunting: making a claustrophobic apartment seem spacious. The imagination and practical solutions interior designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz brings to solving such problems have won him an impressive range of projects for such clients as novelist Laura Esquivel and fashion designer Steve Fabrikant. Now, trying to recreate the invigorating Caribbean brightness that filled his childhood home in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Noriega-Ortiz uses the simplest design elements—color and light—to visually enlarge his own space-stingy pied-à-terre on Bell Isle, off Miami's vibrant South Beach.

"I love New York, but the winter is so gray," he says. (A former head designer for decorating superstar John Saladino, the New York City-based Noriega-Ortiz has led his own firm since 1992.) In Miami, he emptied out a "dark and

gloomy" apartment distinguished only by a "shabby rug in a muted, *Barbarella* orange." He explains, "I always try to open up a space to let in light, then build up layers of furniture and accessories." He transformed the roughly 1,200-square-foot unit into an oasis of festive color that celebrates its tropical setting as it pays homage to the local Deco architecture.

Produced by Newell Turner.
Photos by Peter Margonelli.
Written by Edward M. Gomez.





Construction was kept to a minimum; Noriega-Ortiz removed only a flimsy wall added by a previous occupant, replacing it with a curtain to set off a study/guest-room alcove. "The rest," he confides, "was just paint." To romance natural light into a room, the designer normally paints walls a gentle, not-quite-white (tints of celadon and sea-foam are favorites), then selects his accessories in stronger colors.

In Miami, though, the apartment Noriega-Ortiz shares with his partner, René Fuentes-Chao, a foreign-film distributor, reverses his signature approach. Here, the light furniture and the jute floor are the neutrals. The "accents" are walls painted a carnival of tropical colors: mustard-yellow ocher, hot orange and red and buttermint blue, all shades borrowed from Fiestaware, that staple of postwar American dining tables.

With its Eero Saarinen sofa and glass-topped Isamu Noguchi coffee table, the two-bedroom flat also evokes "an architect-designed interior of the modern age." The modular units in the living room add both storage and architectural presence to the room, which manages to be simultaneously design-conscious and relaxing. Its wooden venetian blinds add a moody layer from a Deco-era film noir (think: *Key Largo*).

"This was an experiment," says Noriega-Ortiz of his Miami getaway, but one that will inevitably inspire future projects. After all, the sun-loving designer adds, "I always tell clients: 'If I can live with it, perhaps you can too.'" **MH**



Noriega-Ortiz uses draperies to delineate spaces, like those around a platform bed over built-in storage. Opposite: Fiestaware colors brighten the bedroom doorway (left, top) and a small seating area (left, bottom). See Resources.