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# MARCH/APRIL 1999 Metropolitan Home

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## the BRIGHTchoice



**MET HOME OF THE MONTH** Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz rose from the ranks of promising young talents to accomplished designer so quickly he hardly had time to design his own Miami home—until now.

**W**hen designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz and his partner, film producer Rene Fuentes-Chao, bought their house in Miami, they wanted respite from the subdued palette of New York, a city where, in some circles, brown is thought of as being a little garish. Says Noriega-Ortiz, “The light is brighter in Florida, you practically feel color there.”

After a brief search, the pair settled on a 1938 Mediterranean-style house that “was architecturally beautiful,” says the designer, “and in pristine condition.” Interior and exterior walls were still the original, roughly troweled stucco,

and the floors were still covered in the earthy Cuban ceramic tiles that were once ubiquitous here, but haven’t been made in decades.

The previous owner had lovingly cleaned up the house and painted all the rooms white, then decided not to keep it after all. As soon as they took possession, Noriega-Ortiz and Fuentes-Chao got straight to work on the hushed, rather icy interior. “We wanted something tropical,” the designer says.

The walls are painted intense tropical hues; everything else is white. In the small living room, a silk curtain used as wainscoting expands and softens the room.

**Produced by Linda O’Keeffe. Photos by Antoine Bootz. Written by Michael Cunningham.**





wanted to capture the feeling of being outdoors," says Noriega-Ortiz, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico. (He vacations in the house while Fuentes-Chao lives there.) So he did something subtle but revolutionary: He confined practically all of the pure, intense colors to the walls and kept the furnishings and window coverings almost unilaterally white.

In determining the color scheme, the designer chose a particularly compelling yellow tile from among the old floor tiles and matched it as closely as he could to a mango yellow Benjamin Moore stock color (#315). This he used throughout the public rooms on the first floor. Then, for the four bedrooms, he took a sample of the yellow and surrounded it with other stock color samples. "I needed warm and cool colors," he says, "but with the same intensity as the yellow. And I needed the right balance." He finally decided on vivid shades of aqua, blue and green.

The furnishings he kept sparse. "I wanted a lot of air around everything," he says. In the living room, two identical daybeds he designed himself are upholstered in white, while a more traditional sofa is covered in cotton dyed to match the walls. The pine ceiling beams are painted off-white. "Beams to me normally would be natural wood," he says, "but the room is a fantasy, and I felt like the beams needed to look whimsical, slightly fake."

For the dining room he commissioned a chandelier from designers Michael Landon and Steven Wine. Noriega-Ortiz compares the stretch-spandex and pleated-silk fixture they produced to a balloon. "We had it dyed the same yellow as the walls and ceiling," he says, "then airbrushed it down to white at its base, so it looks like a balloon opening."

In the dining room, Eero Saarinen chairs and a love seat surround a table by Noriega-Ortiz. A white-silk curtain at the entry to the dining room diffuses the light. The huge hanging light fixture is made of spandex and silk.







Paint, for Noriega-Ortiz, is a potent, almost sculptural medium. He painted the staircase yellow—the treads, the railings, everything—so it would look “like a Louise Nevelson sculpture.” And while the walls of each room are done in a single, vibrant color, each bleeds into the other in unexpectedly breathtaking ways. “The nice thing about painting rooms different colors,” he says, “is that when you open a door, you automatically mix the colors.” So a kelly green bedroom is host, suddenly, to a shock of yellow wall, or a yellow door opens abruptly into a field of deep, saturated blue. As Noriega-Ortiz says, you can almost *feel* the color.

The bedrooms, like the other rooms, are furnished minimally and in white. Noriega-Ortiz designed the headboards, which are the same in every room—a thin board with a bullnose edge, upholstered and then slipcovered (for easy cleaning) in the same white canvas. Sheets, pillowcases and bedspreads are, of course, white, as are the drapes. “It’s really a white house,” he laughs.

The spirit of monochromatic tranquility, which creates a dynamic balance with the interior walls, prevails almost entirely on the house’s exterior. The front door is reached via a walled courtyard and a walkway through *liriope muscari*, a delicate grass from southern China that, as Noriega-Ortiz puts it, “looks like water when the wind blows through.”

The house is surprising, vivid, tranquil and comforting, all at once. Like all good houses, it contains a slightly mysterious beauty and a sense of depth and generosity that are more than the sum of its well-thought-out parts. It’s radiant. “At night,” says Noriega-Ortiz, “the house looks like a huge lantern. Every color comes out.”

In one bedroom, a headboard is slipcovered in budget-loving cotton canvas, which also drapes the bedside table; curtains are simple bleached-canvas panels. Top: Japanese fern trees throw lacy shade onto a wooden entrance walkway.





Benjamin Moore  
No. 315



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### Details

**1** The white pottery arranged on the coffee table in the living room is by Jonathan Adler. Arrangements of white Murano glass in the living and dining rooms "help keep it all whimsical," explains Noriega-Ortiz. "Nothing too functional belongs here."

**2** The yellow chair-like object in the photo is actually a sculpture produced by Noriega-Ortiz as a prototype for six identical pieces once meant to line a long hallway. The sculptures were never made, but the designer has had the prototype for years.

**3** Noriega-Ortiz used paint with an eggshell finish throughout the house. "I normally would use flat," he says, "but the walls are rough stucco, and I found that without a little bit of sheen, they looked like Play-Doh."

**4** The living room fireplace, original to the house, is tinted plaster, which was fashionable in the '30s. Steven Wine designed the fireplace screen, a mesh curtain made of bicycle reflectors. "This is Florida," says Noriega-Ortiz. "The fireplace is never used."

**Opposite** The living room "wainscoting" consists of an aluminum rod at chair rail height and sheer white café curtains that touch the floor. None of the furniture is higher than the aluminum rod. **MI**

#### WHAT THE PROS KNOW ABOUT COLOR

Where color is concerned, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz has a simple but sweeping policy. "You have to be bold," he says. "Think of paint as just paint. It's not such a big commitment. So if you're going to use a color, use it in abundance, not only for accents. Do the whole room that color, even the furniture. If you do everything in the same color, it will look like sculpture." It's an especially useful strategy, he says, for those of us who have acquired our furniture piecemeal, over time. "Cover all the furniture in the same color, whatever the size or shape," he suggests. "Then do the walls in the same color, or a contrasting color. If the furniture is light, make the walls dark, or vice versa."



Benjamin Moore  
No. 818



Benjamin Moore  
No. 594

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