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HOME ENTERTAINMENT

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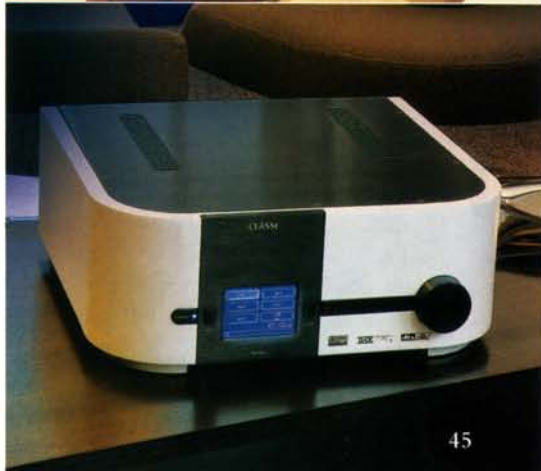
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the MANHATTAN PROJECT

For some designers, a client order for a big TV and big style turns into a big problem. But not for Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, who makes both husband and wife happy with a beautifully designed entertainment space that does not compromise technology.

The soon-to-be husband and wife—London-based owners of a two-bedroom Upper East Side pied-à-terre in Manhattan—tossed out a challenge to their designer: The gorgeous woman wanted a formal living room, while her fiancé wanted to include a big television in the 60-foot-by-40-foot space.

While these conflicting demands might have daunted some interior designers, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, known for his ethereal and refined style, did not flinch. “I love technology. I love TV. I have five,” he says. “From the beginning, I thought, ‘He wants a big TV. Let’s just get the biggest we can.’”

The result is a strikingly designed living room equipped with an unusual home theater that remains hidden until soft cotton draperies whisk apart electronically, revealing a 54-by-96-inch Stewart high-definition screen. “It’s very theatrical and dramatic,” Noriega-Ortiz says. “This was the perfect opportunity to use that theater to solve both problems: the problem of the big TV and the problem of having the elegant living room.” Dead center in the massive room, Noriega-Ortiz placed a king-size bed of his own design, which seems to float above its acrylic base. A faux fur throw, a Noriega-Ortiz design tossed over the custom tufted wool mattress, makes the room



even more sumptuous and alluring. This project marked the first time the interior designer installed a bed in a living room’s center. Noriega-Ortiz loved the approach so much that he is doing another bed in a Hamptons home.

“It makes a lot of sense the way people entertain these days because they hang out,” Noriega-Ortiz says. “In places where you watch television, you are not sitting with a skirt and your high heels on. People are friendlier. You are barefoot with pants. Everybody is on the bed on top of each other.” Entertaining aside, Noriega-Ortiz has heard the couple

loves the bed so much that they nap on it, as well.

Noriega-Ortiz grew up in Puerto Rico, so it’s no surprise that the island’s brilliant light and balmy air continue to influence his dreamlike aesthetic, which spans traditional and modern design. Through the years, he has attracted a list of creative clients, including rock star Lenny Kravitz, novelist Laura Esquivel (of *Like Water for Chocolate* fame), and photographer Mark Seliger. This project took less than one year from design to completion. “It was challenging, but it was fun. The client was so stylish,” says Noriega-Ortiz, who based the living room color scheme on the woman’s favorite soothing shades of pale green.

BY LOUISE FARR PHOTOGRAPHY BY QUENTIN BACON



New York designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz combined his own custom designs with Deco pieces, a Baker parchment-covered coffee table, and a Saarinen tulip side table to create an original and sumptuous feel in this living room that doubles as a home theater. When the draperies are pulled, no one would guess that a screen is waiting behind them. Noriega-Ortiz replaced the glass table tops with alabaster. Chair cushions are Mongolian lamb. At first, the floors were mahogany-stained wood, but following a ruinous flood, the designer installed white wall-to-wall carpeting. "Everything happens for a reason," he says. "It looks much better."

Noriega-Ortiz immediately noticed the soft hue in her scarf during their first meeting. "We try to make things that don't stand out too much. Just a little hint of glamour," he says.

Noriega-Ortiz did not want to tip off guests to the surprise of the hidden screen, nor position them directly facing the drapery, so he placed the reupholstered 1930s sofa—created by influential French designer Jean Royere—with its back to the movie screen. "Here it looks as if the drapery is the backdrop for the sofa. That's a very elegant sofa—I cannot tell you how much it cost." He hesitates. "It cost a fortune."

Originally, the sofa was upholstered in a signature Royere shade of reddish pink, but Noriega-Ortiz didn't hesitate to recover it in light green mohair. "[That] probably lowered the value, but who cares?" he says. Mahogany storage cabinets are attached to the sofa on either side. Two additional sofas flank the room's entry, facing the screen. In front of them, tiny Italian 1940s black-lacquered wood tables perch on dainty bronze feet.

The one-of-a-kind tables were purchased in a Chelsea shop owned by admired Italian furniture and lighting specialist Fred Silberman. "What I like about them is they look like they're on

high heels," Noriega-Ortiz says. Custom lamps, created unexpectedly out of turkey feathers by New York-based lighting company And Bob's Your Uncle, hang from the ceiling on nylon fishing line. "The shape is like a hat that Audrey Hepburn might have worn," Noriega-Ortiz says. "If you blow on them, they move. They're floating."

But behind all this quirky yet organic elegance, technology ticks silently away. Through a masking system, activated by a simple finger tap on the Crestron touchscreen, the Stewart projection screen can switch from normal to wide format. The Runco projector is hidden until the room switches gears to theater mode, at which time it descends from the ceiling. A remote-access audiovisual system integrated into the rest of the apartment tucks discreetly into a specially fitted 1940s dining cabinet, which is equipped with a convection system for cooling. "It's really very nondescript and does not call attention to itself," Noriega-Ortiz says about the oak piece, whose limed finish was created by applying a white pigment that settles into the wood grain.

Observes custom installer Neil Greenberg of Audio Inter-


"People are parking 42- and 50-inch sets in the bedroom, and sometimes larger. In entertainment rooms, it's common to do a screen that's 65 to 100 inches or larger."

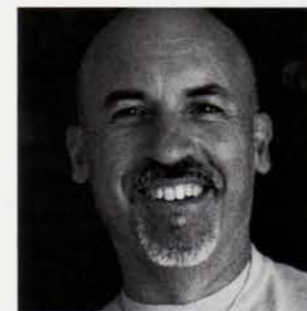
—Neil Greenberg, custom installer

iors Inc. in Hauppauge, New York: "You don't necessarily have to have every room filled with racks of video equipment." He and Noriega-Ortiz met 20 years ago when the designer was working with the famed design firm JFS Inc.—owned by John F. Saladino—and the pair has collaborated ever since. "Benjamin has a very fresh look. It's modern," says Greenberg, who has also worked with the late noted designers Angelo Donghia and Mark Hampton. "I believe he's on his way to superstardom."

Greenberg has also come to believe that success stems not merely from having design sense, but from being able to solve problems. "No job ever goes perfectly without a hitch," he says. "So when something comes in and throws you a curveball, it's 'How do you handle that?'"

Here, the snag was an existing dropped ceiling that was installed below the structural ceiling, which left only an 11-inch space—useful for adding lighting, but problematic for Greenberg when installing the 9-inch-tall drop-down projector. As a solution, he offset the motorized mechanism and installed an Electro-Kinetics cable and a track lift instead of the usual 14- to 16-inch rack and pinion. "The motor is turning a cable that lifts that track up and down," he says.

"We love working with Neil. He could not get a machine that fit, so he had to snake all the cables through," says Noriega-Ortiz, adding that 90 percent of the clients with whom he and Greenberg collaborate are great to work with. "Ten percent change things at the last minute and make modifications that don't go with the original concept and end up ruining the project. But it's their house and as long as they're happy," he says. "When the project is consistent, theatrical, and beautiful, it means the client was really wonderful to work with. This client was great. You can see it by the project." For a full interiors list and a full list of preferred architects and interior designers, please visit our website at hemagazine.com. 



"Everybody has a TV in the living room now. It's not only that you're going to watch TV. There's news, movies, cable, you can surf the web. It's really foolish not to have it."

—Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, interior designer

TECH TALK: A MANHATTAN PIED-À-TERRE

Given the owners' expressed interest in music, it's hard to argue with custom installer Neil Greenberg's decision to use Martin Logan SL3s as the main loudspeakers in this system. This hybrid-electrostatic speaker—which debuted close to eight years ago and has since been replaced by the Ascent line in MartinLogan's catalog—is still recognized for its lifelike midrange, revealing detail, and eye-catching design. Greenberg wasn't sure at the time if he would get away with using a speaker that stands more than 5 feet tall, but as he recalls, "I wasn't going to bring the sound quality down by using a small little in-soffit speaker, so I begged Benjamin ... and he said to me, 'Hey, if you feel that strongly about this particular product, let's go for it.'" Greenberg also used hybrid-electrostatics for the surrounds, in the form of MartinLogan Scripts, and augmented the bass with a Velodyne HGS-12 subwoofer. The combination makes for an impressive 4.1-channel surround-sound music system.

The only speaker that really stands out here is the center channel, a motorized KEF Ci 200QT that comes into play when the couple watches television or movies. Of the disparity between the MartinLogans and the smaller, single-driver KEF, Greenberg says, "I didn't have room for a big center speaker ... [there was no] space below or above the screen for the MartinLogan center, which is what I wanted to use. [But] when all is said and done, you'd be surprised at how good it sounds for a New York City apartment." For a full equipment list, please visit our website at hemagazine.com.—Dennis Burger

RESOURCES

Custom Installer: Audio Interiors Inc. of Hauppauge, NY (audiointeriors.com, 631.434.4770)
Interior Designer: Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz of New York, NY (bnodesign.com, 212.343.9709)
Amplifier: Adcom (480.607.2277, adcom.com)
CD changer, DVD player, and VCR: Sony (800.222.7669, sony.com)
In-ceiling and in-wall speakers: SpeakerCraft (800.448.0976, speakercraft.com)
Lighting control: Lutron (610.282.3800, lutron.com)
Multiroom audio receiver:

Nakamichi (310.392.1155, nakamichi.com)
Subwoofer: Velodyne (408.465.2800, velodyne.com)
Surround-sound processor: Marantz (marantz.com, 630.741.0300)
Screen: Stewart Filmscreen (stewartfilm.com, 310.784.5300)
Speakers: MartinLogan (785.749.0133, martinlogan.com), KEF (732.683.2356, kef.com)
Touchscreen remotes and control system: Crestron (800.237.2041, crestron.com)
Video projector: Runco (510.324.7777, runco.com)
Video projector lift: Electro-Kinetics (electrokinetics.com, 845.887.4930)