

Trade Talk

At the Movies With Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz

Last April, New York designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz jettisoned the modest midtown apartment he had used as an office and moved to sleek new digs in a commercial SoHo loft. Behind the move was a desire to stretch beyond residential work and aim at the more ambitious projects that elevate a reputation and define a career – boutiques, showrooms, and larger homes. “For some reason, people don’t take you that seriously if you don’t have an office,” he says with a shrug.

The serene white loft, which showcases Noriega-Ortiz’s love of open space, monochromatic hues, and unexpected materials like the creamy-latex curtain that shields the file cabinets, is comfortable but deliberately “down to earth,” the designer explains. Not unlike the type of client he tries to cultivate.

Since 1992, when he started his own firm after six years as head interior designer with John Saladino, Noriega-Ortiz has built a highly personalized business. Clients usually find him through referrals from other clients. “I really like to get along with other people, so I’m hesitant to take projects from people I don’t know,” he says. “If I don’t feel



comfortable having dinner, lunch, or maybe seeing a movie with my client, it’s not going to work.”

Noriega-Ortiz’s philosophy stems in part from his firm’s first job, the New York City residence of fashion designer Steve Fabrikant. “I had just left Saladino, had no projects and spent my first day making a three-minute video of my work,” he recalls. He never used it. A week later, his design associate Magali Bermudez told him Fabrikant wasn’t getting along with his current designer. Noriega-Ortiz invited the fashion designer for a tour of his tranquil weekend house in Amagansett

and got the job. “I think he hired me because we got along personality wise” he recalls.

Noriega-Ortiz’s personalized approach extends to his firm’s public relations, which he handles himself. “It takes a lot of my time, but I love it,” he says. “I learned from John Saladino that the way to get known is to publish. It doesn’t even matter so much what it is. Just be there in print.”

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Noriega-Ortiz has master’s degrees in architecture from the University of Puerto Rico and Columbia University. But as a source of ideas, “fashion is more interesting to me now than looking at big buildings,” he says.

A high-tech buff with a Web site, he is convinced the Internet is the future and plans to make use of it to help market the furniture line he is developing.

He also would like to start a design catalog. “I had a client who bought a fourth home and wanted to move in in three months. We furnished the entire house by catalog. It looks great. In fact, it’s so nice the client has postponed any refurbishing we had originally discussed,” Noriega-Ortiz sighs and grins. “My mistake.” ■