

SPECIAL ISSUE

# House Beautiful

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## FALL Color

### HOW TO

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CONFIDENCE

\* ADD COLOR TO  
A NEUTRAL ROOM

HOT NEW COLORS  
IN DOZENS OF SHADES



# Taking It **With You**

A designer says you *can* go home again...and again, and again

By Eric Cohler

Thomas Wolfe said, "You can't go home again." As a young man intent on my own vision of a life to be well traveled, I couldn't have agreed more. Now, as an interior designer approaching the midpoint of my career, these words decidedly ring untrue. I've learned that I can go home again, and frequently do. Taking one's sense of home with you is something that all of us can do every day in small ways.

My first memory of home was the small apartment my

family lived in on the North Side of Chicago. My parents were barely out of college, my sister not yet born, our Irish setter stood guard, and I was toddling amongst what today would be labeled "groovy chic." It was a warm, cozy world of lace-curtain respectability juxtaposed with the Danish modern furniture upholstered in vibrant reds and blues that my parents and their young friends collected—or was it all that they could afford? Marimekko and Design Research were the

IKEA of their day, and you'd see their brightly colored fabrics almost everywhere.

After Chicago, Dad's new life in medical school brought us east to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Home this time was an enormous Victorian white elephant of a house on Berkley Street. The clapboard, plantation shutters, quoins, and wrap-around porches impressed me with their strong architectural presence. I was beginning to see the world in terms of proportion, shadow, and light.

After my sister was born we packed up again, this time heading for Manhattan, where my father began his practice on the ground floor of an 1880s Italianate brownstone. We lived on the upper three floors and my mother traded in her Danish modern for English Georgian (most of the now-castoff teak somehow ending up in my room). These were the days when you could buy an antique Louis XV chandelier at Nesle for a song. Shops selling antiques (lots of brown wood) still lined Lexington and Third Avenues, where >



anything could be had if one bargained hard enough. And even though he spoke to us only through magazine layouts, our house was decorated in consultation with Billy Baldwin.

The living room was a sea of creams, beiges, and taupe with a zebra skin rug (this was the mid-1960s), linen velvet sofas, a Barcelona table, George III armchairs and side tables, and an incredibly beautiful chinoiserie corner cabinet. Lamps were Ming and Qing dynasty temple jars and the paintings were 1950s American and Italian abstracts. My parents' bedroom and the sitting room were completely upholstered in Baldwin's signature brown tree-patterned fabric with a mixture of French Directoire and English Regency antiques. Our library was decorated in shades of crimson and cream with brown cork walls and mahogany bookcases. The house deeply influenced my own design sensibility. My parents were growing up and so was I.

Believe it or not, another enormous influence came in watching *I Love Lucy*. My generation was practically weaned on reruns of the show and I call this stage in my development "Learning from Lucy." Lucy and Ricky, Ethel and Fred were all constantly redecorating their apartments, and the show was decades ahead of its time. The sophistication of the sets on *I Love Lucy* influenced many other television programs, including *Leave It To Beaver* and *The Donna Reed Show*. The sets on *I Love Lucy* were emblematic of their time, but also timeless. The show featured furniture designed by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, John Wildcomb, and Dunbar, as well as other midcentury modern manufacturers. There were sets designed in Japanese modern, Georgian traditional, and early American. The Ricardos' 1955 hotel suite in Hollywood was timeless, with striped wallpaper hung horizontally and molded woven plywood chairs and starburst-patterned latticework.

It was possibly on *I Love Lucy* that the first interior decorator was ever featured on a sitcom: Lucy's Westport neighbor, Betty Ramsey. She taught Lucy and America the difference between "net" and "list." I was fascinated, and immediately started moving the furniture around my bedroom. Not satisfied, I decided to move almost all of my parents' living room furniture around too. While my mother was none too pleased with her ten-year-old's work, she did leave the bergères where I had moved them. I felt my career launched.

We moved a few more times before my parents' marriage dissolved, and although these other houses and apartments were quite beautiful, none had the resonance of our first New York brownstone. It was truly an exciting

**"While my mother was none too pleased with her ten-year-old's work, she did leave the bergères where I had moved them"**

home for a vibrant young family in a city where for a brief moment all things still seemed possible. I think I've always carried a little of our New York City home with me. Now and then, I mentally check in on it. The scale and colors were all perfectly balanced.

My great-grandfather's house was like this, too. Constructed in 1937 in Lake Forest, Illinois, by architect George Keck, it was one of the first American residences to be built in the Bauhaus style. It replaced the dark, drafty, undistinguished timber pile that the family had once called home. Great-grandfather helped bring the Bauhaus school of art and architecture to this country, and assisted young architects and artists who fled Nazi Germany. His house was conceived as a floating curve of glass, aluminum, copper, and steel.

In Keck's design there was an almost complete dissolve between interior and exterior with the then-radical use of curtain wall residential construction. These glass walls were designed to retract into the rubber floor. The interiors of the cavernous, conjoined living and dining rooms were fused with the out of doors into seamless space. My aunt remembers with horror the muffled thud of birds flying into the glass when the windows were closed, and also flying through the house when they were retracted. This surreal feature notwithstanding, the house was a fluid beauty.

The ceiling in the principal living/dining room was painted a deep midnight blue and was pierced with a constellation of tiny pinhole lights. These recessed lights and the central air-conditioning were cutting-edge technology in the late 1930s. The staircase that led to my great-grandmother's library was a broad, curved spiral of poured concrete with aluminum railings and balusters. The library shelves were stainless steel and housed her collection of 18th- and 19th-century French literature. Her desk was sculpted from one piece of steel and was cantilevered from the shelves above.

I visited the house only once in my great-grandparents' lifetime, but I did spend a magical summer afternoon there many years later. It was in the late 1980s and I was visiting relatives in Chicago. On a whim, I decided to try and find the house. My father had warned me that it was now sheathed in a colonial facade, but that the interiors were almost completely intact. Somehow after many false starts, I managed to find the driveway, now overgrown with weeds. Driving through the gates I came upon a monstrosity. It was nothing like the photos that I had studied so many times over the years. Someone had clad the house in clapboard and had added dormers—it was bizarre, to say the least. The *(Continued on page 163)*

property had been subdivided, and brand-new houses of every shape and style surrounded the house.

The house was empty and awaiting demolition. I couldn't resist trying to see if I could get inside. Discovering an unlocked window, I climbed into my family's past. Father was right—the interiors were the same as in the photographs, minus most of the furniture. The huge curved glass walls facing the garden and the built-in beds in the guest wing mesmerized me. The best part of this day was seeing my great-grandmother's library. I imagined her climbing up and down the curved staircase, toting a book that would fulfill her ever-curious intellect. I was brought back to reality by the shrill sound of the burglar alarm, which must have been set on delay. I ran out of the house and sped off as fast as I could, the sound of a police siren growing closer.

In my design work, I take these houses of collective memory and integrate them with my own studies of architecture and interiors. Among my favorite sources from which I draw inspiration is the work of John Soane, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Jean-Charles Moreux, David Hicks, Billy Baldwin, David Adler, and Frances Elkins. All of these seminal figures had an iconoclastic vision of home that was, and remains, fresh, classic, and uncomplicated.

Taking a sense of home wherever you go is essential. A client of mine was working in Hong Kong for three months and

living alone in a rather bland hotel room. When he arrived it was an anonymous box. But in moving a few pieces of furniture around, putting out family photos, and adding an orchid and a few pillows, the room became his domestic haven, albeit temporary. It's the little things, the nuances of design that form part of our individual vision of home. Some of these nuances may be historical: the way we position a chair at a right angle to a sofa, just as our mothers had, or arrange desk top accessories in the manner of one's father.

While I may not be privy to the childhood decor details of my clients, I feel it important to use as many of their heirlooms as possible. When designing a new home or redecorating an existing one, these objects from the past are like comfort food. They convey a sense of continuity, of treasures you and your forebears value enormously. Favorite things provide a sense of security and family, the memory of home, of holidays, of celebrations, and even of everyday life. And so, I believe that home, the home to which Thomas Wolfe referred, is eminently portable; it fits on buses, in subways, airplanes, cars, even in elevators. We can be walking in the woods alone, or surrounded by hundreds of people in a theater or at a football game and our vision of home is right alongside us, safe and sound. ●

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