

Nest: A Quarterly of Interiors

WHAT AN UNCONVENTIONAL PUBLICATION TEACHES US ABOUT CONVENTIONS

By Salem Tsegaye

WHATEVER ONE WOULD ASSUME A MAGAZINE OF INTERIORS TO BE, NEST CERTAINLY ISN'T. Unlike Other Shelter Magazines, Nest's Luxury Interiors—That Is, Those Esteemed For Their Lush Décor And Expensive Furnishings—Are Few And Far Between, And Of Those That Are Featured, Luxury Is Often Mocked. Take, For instance, the Winter 2001-2002 issue of *Nest*. Art Director and Editor in Chief Joseph Holtzman opens his letter with an introduction to the issue's first story and an announcement of *Nest's* unofficial entry into the real estate business. Holtzman informs readers *Nest's* Chief Operating Officer Pat Stacom will present an inaugural "Jewel of the Week," the magazine's attempt to "flat-out promot[e]" luxury apartments, unlike the more quaint and subtle plugging done by other shelter magazines.¹ The blatant sarcasm in "Nest Real Estate: Properties Only *Real* Money Can Buy" (as is evident even in the editorial's partly italicized title) runs rampant throughout the piece. It opens with a photograph of

Stacom presenting—in a pose much like that of showgirls from old television game shows—a lavish crème and gold decorated sitting room, with the image itself surrounded by a ring-like border encrusted with jewels, superimposed on the page's aqua granite background. The caption underneath unabashedly reads, "Steal me for \$1,400,000,"² and further along, the humor continues as Stacom exaggerates, "You'll never see curtains anywhere pool more lavishly than in this bedroom. There's more material on the floor than off."³ For first-time readers, this humorous critique of luxury interiors is an alert that this magazine is, in some sense, about high class and culture, but despite the interspersed advertisements from designer labels, does not necessarily exist to support or promote the lifestyle. Rather, it is a deliberate attempt to deconstruct what Western society has deemed to constitute high culture in art and design and introduces us to an infinite range of interiors—not just

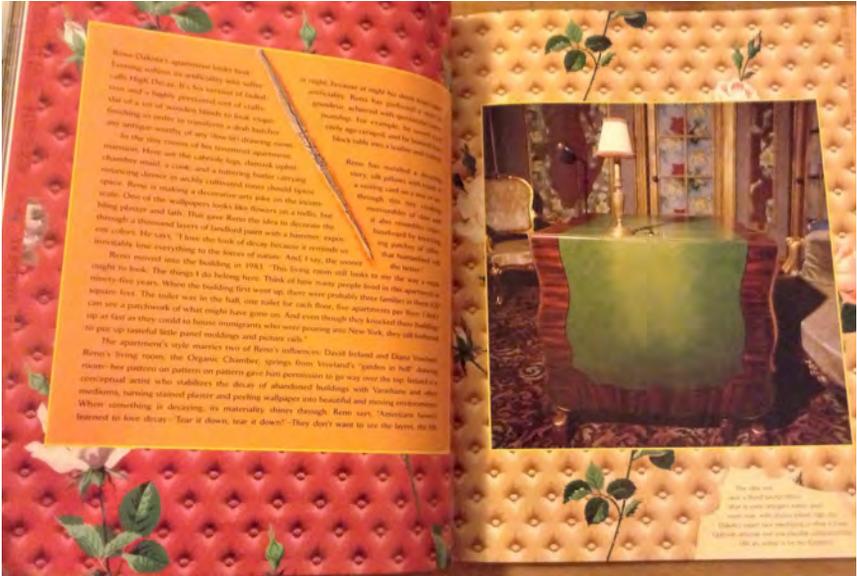


All images taken by Salem Tsegaye, of *Nest: A Quarterly of Interiors*, Winter 2001-2002

decked out rooms, but interiors simply as spaces people and/or things⁴ inhabit. *Nest* certainly does not undermine the value of art and design movements of the last few centuries, if anything, it embraces it through its carefully crafted ornamentation of each page, but it is *Nest*'s unconventional approach, its technique of experiential criticism, that tells the reader that conventions do not exist as fixed constructs, and they indeed can and should be broken.

This particular issue of *Nest* constantly challenges what we tend to think of as typical. Aside from its obvious theme of slits and slashes, where a graphically imposed slash or physical slit obtrudes texts and images on most of the magazine's pages, there is an underlying theme of surveillance. The slits and slashes serve as metaphorical mechanisms for *peering in*, enabling us to examine interiors we perhaps never would think twice to look at because social conventions have designated some

of these spaces as private, like the abortion clinics or execution chambers featured in this issue. In the photograph above, Lucinda Devlin depicts an electric chair from the viewpoint of an individual sitting in a witness room in a 1991 diagnostic and processing center in Georgia.⁵ In this image, the theme of *peering in* is made visible both through the content of the image and the presence of a physical slit in the page. Furthermore, the photograph is accompanied by text that outlines a step-by-step procedure for this method of execution, imposing a discomforting level of awareness of the practice of killing upon the reader. In similar fashion, *Nest* additionally features a gas chamber, lethal injection chamber, and gallows as part of this particular issue's column called "Final Nest." It is only fitting that *Nest* would mimic the finality of life itself by placing an editorial about death chambers at the very end of the magazine. It keeps in mind these interiors are (at least for those facing execution) spaces of final inhabitation.



It is important to acknowledge *Nest* not only makes these interiors public, giving us a glimpse into traditionally private spaces, but the magazine also urges us to challenge the conventions that tend to restrain how we think about spaces and behaviors as controlled phenomena and how we come to delineate proper from improper, good from bad, appropriate from inappropriate, and so on.⁶ The magazine goes one step further by challenging conventions in both content and context, that is, the stories being told as well as the visual layout of a page. Borders are constantly altered to complement the content within each editorial. In “Lindisfarne,” Irish novelist and literary critic John Banville writes about Edward Hudson’s transformation of a sixteenth-century fortress into a nineteenth-century castle getaway off the Northumbrian coast of England. Hudson was the founder of *Country Life Illustrated* and “flourished in the nineteenth-century publishing industry,”⁷ allowing him to purchase and redesign Lindisfarne, the name of his

island-based country retreat, with the help of architect Edwin Lutyens. The article highlights Hudson’s vision—executed by Lutyens—to merge the relatively simple elements of medieval living with Art Nouveau influences from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Adding its own complementary touch, *Nest* lines the text and photographs with Nouveau-patterned borders.

This technique of identifying a key element within the content of the editorial and graphically reproducing and representing that single element within the visual layout of the pages is also used in “Return to Turin,” where leaves imprinted on the floor reappear behind the accompanying text and captions. *Nest* contributing editor Fulvio Ferrari highlights (in the caption of the photograph depicting these leaves) that the terrazzo-like texture of the leaves is actually modern resin. Perhaps *Nest* is paying homage to the creative crafting ability of Toni Cordero, architect and



designer of the Turin apartment featured in the editorial, but *Nest*'s attempt to recreate and represent these elements in the layout speaks to the magazine's strength in offering commentary through both design and writing. One could also interpret this as self-demonstration of the individualized creativity *Nest* celebrates throughout its editorials. Most of them highlight individuals' ambitions to recreate spaces with the primary intent of integrating styles that would seem contradictory in a conventional sense but end up being unusually complementary.

This is superbly demonstrated in "Fee, Fi, Faux,...Fum," where author and academic Robert Gluck highlights set designer Reno Dakota's tiny East Village apartment decorated in layers and layers of seemingly worn-down patterns (like the layers of linoleum Dakota has scraped through), which are really deliberate attempts to resemble decay. Imagine that—challenging the very idea of decay as conventionally distasteful and reimagining it for high-quality aesthetic. *Nest* again mimics this element, as depicted in the picture on page 11,⁸ by bordering the texts and images within the editorial with wallpaper of floral imprints on an upholstery-like background. *Nest* also surrounds each caption with lining that resembles segments of scratched-off wallpaper. With Dakota's actual designs in the background, one can easily see how context complements content.

Dakota's ability to create a new aesthetic from the old is at the heart of another important message *Nest* communicates:

the creative and unrestricted agency of the dweller. *Nest* emphasizes that creativity itself, and not the cost of materials or the commissioning of professionals, produces design value. Although Edward Hudson and Toni Cordero had the financial means to redesign their interiors, Nothozamile Zamas, a woman with minimal means, used at-hand materials to design an equally celebrated interior. "Mrs. Zama's House" features a South African woman who has decorated and furnished her shanty home using materials her husband rescues from the scrap yard. The interior of their family home is lined with makeshift wallpaper, produced from collaged pages of advertisements from furniture retailers. Writer Miriam Tlali also highlights Mrs. Zamas' handiness and resourcefulness, constantly communicating her independence in devising and implementing plans for use of the materials her husband brings home, without his consultation or assistance. Defying gender norms, Mrs. Zamas serves as a strong, unconventional representation of the handywoman hard at work.

Moving away from the magazine's editorials, it is important to note the selection and placement of advertisements in *Nest*. Upon first glance, one would assume the magazine, initially featuring Louis Vuitton, Prada, Hermes, and Fendi ads, targets the elite of Western society. However, this assumption is quickly challenged by the sudden series of Target ads thrown into the mix. As mentioned in *Nest*'s "Philosophy of Advertising," advertising in *Nest* does not entail product promotion, it instead invites readers to

carefully inspect, consider, and judge these ads, featured by invitation only, with as much diligence as the editors.⁹

In *Nest*, value is redefined. In *Nest*, anything goes.

References can be found on page 73

Furthermore, advertisements in the magazine are strategically placed before or after the issue's entire series of editorials, allowing readers to uninterruptedly engage in whatever thematic continuity the editors have presented.

Nest's philosophy also makes evident that the magazine is not in the business of making money; otherwise, one could imagine it would sell itself to any high-profile advertiser. As Fred A. Bernstein indicated in an August 19, 2004 *New York Times* article, Art Director and Editor in Chief Joseph Holtzman "...would not sell the most valuable advertising space—the back cover—which he designed himself," and this is certainly demonstrated in the Winter 2001-2002 issue of *Nest*. The back cover displays a photograph (seen on page 12) that is part of an editorial written by and about curator Christopher Wilk's strategy for negotiating and implementing the five-year renovation of the British design galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The photograph depicts a centuries-old portrait with protective ties attached, cautioning the handler of its value and fragility, but the back cover reproduction has the graphically imposed slashes that are present in other parts of the magazine. The slashes, speaking to an earlier theme, directly contradict the supposed value and fragility of the protected portrait. Sure, the slashes are obtrusive, but they communicate a more important message.