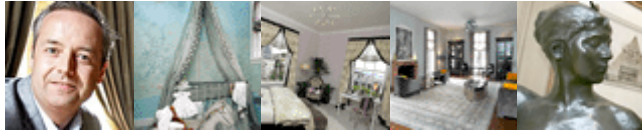


**REVIEW: San Francisco Decorator Showcase**  
**GETTING PERSONAL - Showcase marries style with the stuff of life - family needs, stacks of books, treasures**

Susan Fornoff, Chronicle Staff Writer  
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Minimalist design gives way to stuff, glorious stuff at this year's San Francisco Decorator Showcase, where visitors to the gracious Beaux Arts-style mansion atop Presidio Heights are bound to walk away with the feeling that they've been in someone's home.

That's saying something for what just three months earlier had been a bare-bones, four-story shell, now divided into 33 spaces taken on by 28 designers and teams intent on making a creative statement. But perhaps a step back off the limb of fanciful display means two steps toward a forceful statement about the impact of thoughtful design in everyday life, even a teenager's bedroom and a nursery.

"Unusual for a showcase, yes, but for my design, no," said Catherine Macfee, who turned a screening room into a dark, exotic retreat brimming with books, mementos and artifacts collected by fictional globe-trotting artists. "I like it, because I think every room should have a soul to it, and so you really need to feel the person that lives in it."

"We didn't want our room to feel showstopping, new-design, electric fantastic," said Douglas Durkin, who with Greg Elich beat back a slew of designers who put in bids to do the dining room. "We wanted it to feel grounded and like someone lived in this room."

"There's clutter and there's collecting. There's a lot of dismissal in our culture, a lot about throwing out stuff that feels stuffy or traditional. There's a dismissal of things of the past. This is our celebration of that, but still trying to do it in a fresher way."

And so their intimate "dining library" has books, many of them beautifully aged books, interspersed with artifacts and fine collectibles, on the shelves. Steven Volpe's dramatic "smoke and mirrors" drawing room leaves room for a hutch full of volumes, and upstairs in the cozy "traveler's hideaway" guest room, Cecilie Starin stacked books on shelves, tables, even -- like you and me -- on the floor, leaving a pair of glasses atop one such tower.

On a shelf in Caitlin Moran's floral and whimsical "Her Office," cigarettes sit in a sterling silver cup, next to an almost hidden bottle of Jim Beam and beneath an etiquette book open to the page "How to respond when someone insults you on purpose." Vintage stuffed animals cover the furniture in the sweetly sentimental nursery lavishly stitched by Susan Lind Chastain and painted by Willem Racke in a gentle animal-and-nature motif inspired by a 1926 book.

The shelves in Patrick Welch's glamorous linen closet -- and if you don't think a linen closet can have glamour, check out the glittering, petite basket French chandelier on loan from Garden Court antiques -- overflow with soaps, sheets and towels, as well as a sewing

machine and luggage. Of the latter, Welch said, "Well, that's more the kind of thing I keep in my linen closet."

And that's the kind of thing the turnaround owners, Atherton Heritage LLC, had in mind when they bought the house for renovation, staging and resale (yours for \$15.5 million). Even before they let several hundred designers storm in to case the joint and call dibs on a wintry Saturday, they put architect Dan Phipps to work updating the house, which had been built in 1902, renovated in the French style in 1928 and displayed as a showcase in 1988.

Phipps added an underground garage and turned the old garage (the original carriage house) into a guest suite that Melanie Coddington then turned into the "I could live there" space of the showcase, installing soothing hickory-pecan floors, papering the bathroom in a large-patterned but soft-colored wallpaper and minimizing the wall treatments to open the upstairs bedroom to the garden below.

The architect opened the grand staircase, which used to stop at the second floor, all the way to the third-floor rotunda -- making more sense of the house and increasing the drama of the foyer created by Chris Reed and Chris Johnson, with its showstopping chandelier of mica-and-garnet strands and a couch designed to fit precisely into the curving base of the staircase.

Phipps also created a master suite along the south wall of the second floor, and opened the cook's kitchen, butler's pantry and dining room into one large space designed by David Kensington as a modern kitchen and family room. (Modern in this kitchen required four ovens, one of which converts to a microwave.)

The family room, furnished with a party-size, L-shaped sectional, embodies one of the major trends of this showcase: Though it's updated, modern and sleek, the design shows a respect for history, chiefly with a gigantic bust (think 10-times-life-size head) from first century Rome presiding.

"You should have seen us trying to get that thing into the house," said Chantal Lambert of Kensington's firm.

What's-his-name did ultimately fit the eclectic scene at 3701 Washington St.; art throughout the house ranged from the ancient bust to a Chagall on loan in Macfee's room to a high-tech music-and-light show in the "Palladian room."

Yes, the Palladian room, which doesn't outwardly resemble the 16th century Venetian architecture of Palladio yet embodies one of his concepts -- multiple purposes. It's a family room with an area in one corner for some to be playing a game, in the center for others to be enjoying a drink or watching TV, in the other corner for some to cozy around the hearth and gaze from this large, contemporary space onto the bay.

"There are two strong principles at work in this room -- one, the idea of sustainability, and two, the idea of family cohesion and how it's lost," said Kevin Hackett, designer for kitchen don Johnny Grey Inc.

Hackett placed furniture from eco-design guru Jill Sanders on the room's wings, and anchored a curving island of configured cherry in the center, with trees painted on the front

by Fairfax artist Carl Durn. The wall behind it has a bar made of eucalyptus below what Hackett calls the "mood wall," panels of glass that project images from DVD.

Other than a chestnut floor made of reclaimed lumber, it's safe to say there's nothing old in the hip Palladian room. Conversely, except maybe in the "creative retreat" in the laundry room, where the Academy of Art University student team led by Nan Rosenblatt designed black and white cabinetry and commissioned red paper art to coordinate their "origami" theme, it's safe to say there's something old, or at least faux-old, in every other room. In Caitlin Stewart-Jones' showcase debut, the teen retreat -- and that, with lavender walls and fussy bed, would be the teen girl's bedroom -- feel-good fabrics cover mostly modern furniture set atop cutting-edge Quartz Carpet granules that come in bags of mix installed on site. Above it all: a vintage chrome chandelier.

In Will Wick's whimsical telephone room, a dial phone from the 1930s or '40s goes unused under a glass dome while chatterers can sit in the chair opposite and yak on the cell phone amid wood-veneer-tiled walls.

The best example of vintage-modern mix came with mints. That's the opening treat for visitors to Tish Key's "Fresh Elegance" master sitting room and bedroom, but more treats unfold with time in the space, which is open and light, yet cozy and intimate, and is furnished in a juxtaposition of antique reproductions and modern pieces best exemplified by the chandeliers: A Venetian chandelier copy from Niermann Weeks twinkles over the contemporary Ironies bed Key herself designed in the "tuxedo white" walled bedroom, while a contemporary Holly Hunt fixture presides in the comfy sitting room wallpapered in Maya Romanoff's deep blue "Lapis Wave."

Bright yellow accents Key's primary blue and white; an elegant dressing suite and master bath by Grant Gibson extend the pampering with whites and creams accessorized in blue.

"Maybe this is safe," said Gibson, who created an eye-popping black-and-white atelier's studio last year. "But I think it respects the beautiful architecture of the house, and I'm looking for clients who would appreciate all of this, instead of, I guess, trying to shock people."

Indeed, rubberneckers who like to ogle design shocks might find little to stop them on their way around this year's showcase. Owners restricted creative efforts in the small bathrooms by dictating fixtures and finishes -- though that didn't stop Mark Morris from lightening up a "good clean fun" bathroom with Sunbrella walls and funny pictures, or Katherine Jacobus from creating a memorable chinoiserie-walled powder room. And though Volpe's drawing room -- originally the living room -- had the coolest aura in the house, with smoky blue-gray walls in a quiet finish, an Adam Fuss painting of smoke over the fireplace, a custom-designed pair of mirrored chandeliers and mostly 20th century French collectible furnishings, it somehow still seemed like a room where somebody lived.

Maybe it was the books on the shelves?

Said Starin, designer of the traveler's refuge from jet lag, "What's weird is that there are so many decorating magazines, and you never see books in them. And we all have them."

This year, hooray, it's finally OK to show them.

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S.F. Decorator Showcase

When: Today through May 29

Where: 3701 Washington St.

Hours: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursday; 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sundays and Memorial Day

Admission: \$30, \$25 for seniors. Includes self-guided audio tour.

Information: Call (415) 447-5830 or visit [www.sanfranciscoshowcase.org](http://www.sanfranciscoshowcase.org)

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