


**IRENE
VIRAG**

Showhouse envy: Do try this at home

When I go to a showhouse, I get wrapped up in it as if I'm at a terrific art exhibition or a film documentary. I'm thrilled by furnishings big and small, by wood floors and fabric-covered ceilings and state-of-the-art stoves. By things I wish I had the space and the money to try out. But I'm also inspired by real possibilities. By ideas I can pull off in my own home.

At a showhouse in Bay Shore a few years ago, I spotted a small office built into an alcove. It spurred me to turn a long shallow closet into a built-in office, complete with computer desk and shelves. And an unattractive television room became a cozy haven we now call the study.

We laugh when we say "study" — it sounds like something out of an English novel — but it's appropriate.

Showhouses take us into realms of design we'll probably never reach. But at their best, they make us think about our personal spaces. Most of us have a practically primal need to renovate and refurbish, to tweak, to change, to improve. From igloos to ice palaces and log cabins to mansions, our homes evolve along with us.

I thought about this recently when I visited the Hampton Designer Showhouse in Southampton, which *House & Garden* magazine sponsors to benefit Southampton Hospital. To me, Southampton is the kind of place where high hedges hide fantasy estates — or to put it another way, when I was a kid and didn't know better, I figured that anybody who lived in houses like those had to be happy.

The statistics of the showhouse itself gave me pause — 7,300 square feet of living space on a two-acre plot, with spreading specimen trees and lots of lawn. I understand that it goes for about \$8.9 million. It has four levels and an elevator. The grounds are very English manor, but, for that kind of money, they could stand more flowers.

The showhouse itself, which features the work of 18 designers, was exciting. I was turned on by an absolutely fearless use of color. I loved Charlotte Moss' tangerine-colored sitting room and Bunny Williams' pink and brown living room, and there were the walls in a

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guest study by Geoffrey Blatt. Three of them caught my attention in Farrow & Ball's Blazer red paint; the fourth provided a lively contrast with a pale green wall covering made of split bamboo. Moving to the other side of the color palette, there was Jamie Drake's shimmering ice-blue and silver bedroom. He used silver linen fabric on the ceiling, diaphanous silk taffeta for window treatments and hand-made blue and silver wall-paper by Alpha Workshops.

And I came away with mental pictures of design elements such as the Ann Sacks glass tiles that architect Basil Walter used in a curved shower. Or the way Steven Gambrel answered the challenge of a multilevel wall above the fireplace in the foyer — he created a grid of nine antique mercury glass mirrors that reach to the ceiling.

For me, some of these things were just to look at. I admired the many well decorated second-floor decks, but I'd need a second floor. And I gushed over the huge island in the kitchen, as well as the computer desk, the six-burner Viking stove plus an electric cook top, the dining area and the butler's pantry. The only thing is, the island itself would take up half my kitchen.

But the kitchen by Kerry Delrose did include features I could legitimately lust for. Such as the double fan over the cook island, the pongee and linen shade over the chandelier and the four-slice red VillaWare toaster. And it was probably my Hungarian ancestry, but I went right to two Herend teacups on the counter.

I'm thinking very seriously about the long narrow hallway that photographer Lucille Khornak turned into a portrait gallery. Unlike the usual posed family shots, Lucille's photos capture feeling as well as faces. My own hallway may not be long but it is narrow — and it could use some perking up.

One of my favorite spaces — it spoke to my inner couch potato — was the basement media room, or "the great American television room," as designer Scott Sanders calls it. The room combines retro references with contemporary touches. I absolutely covet the Fujitsu plasma television that sits on a cherry-red table. I was smitten with a four-compartment magazine cabinet on casters, which just might be a solution to my growing piles of



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / KEN SPENCER



"The great American television room," above, by designer Scott Sanders, is an elegant place for couch potatoes. Left, Jackson Siegel Aaron's magical screened porch.

home and garden magazines. And I'm still talking about the vintage TV-show lunch boxes framed like works of art above a 12-foot-long table lined with giant glass jars of MaryJanes and Bit-O-Honey and other penny candy. Those were the days.

Throughout the show house, little details enhanced the grand design. A shell turned into a pencil holder, a starfish used as a paperweight. I was charmed by something as simple as feathers in a vase.

And I took heart to see that most of the diverse decors

shunned minimalist vistas of uncluttered space where no human being — at least not this human being — could ever live. "Clutter is in," I heard someone say. Of course, it was never "out" at my house.

I may never have a canopy over my bed like the one in designer Peter Dunham's upstairs guest room. But I liked the way he used the same St. Tropez pattern of soft red, emerald green and Pacific blue fish and shells for the canopy, the window treatments and walls. He even had a bathrobe of the same fabric casually tossed on the bed. I have matching wallpaper and window treatments in my study, but maybe I'll think about doing more with fabrics elsewhere.

That afternoon, when I got home, I looked around and thought, "I love my house." But perhaps we should save up for that plasma TV. Maybe I'll check the attic for old lunch boxes. And I've got lots of vases. Now, if I could just find the right feathers.

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Charlotte Moss' sitting room, with its tangerine accents (and tangerines), is a highlight.

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WHEN&WHERE The Hampton Designer Showhouse, 61 Down East Lane in Southampton, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily, through Aug. 14. Admission is \$30; children under 6, infants, strollers and pets are not allowed. Call 631-283-7140 or visit www.hamptondesignershowhouse.com.