

SAN FRANCISCO DECORATOR SHOWCASE

Staged by design

Annual benefit transforms 1914 Presidio Heights mansion on the market for \$12.5 million

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Sandy Miller wandered around 1 Cherry St. the other night with a confusing sense of déjà vu. He knew he'd been in the house before; heck, he'd shelled out \$5.2 million to buy the five-bedroom, 5 1/2-bathroom, 1914 Georgian seven years ago. But he'd never sweated in that exercise room, designed a gown in that atelier, cuddled a puppy in that dog walker's retreat, mixed a cocktail in that laundry room.

(Yes, seriously: cocktail mixing in the laundry room. More on that later.)

None of these ideas was his -- which was, he says, the fun of having the annual fund-raising San Francisco Decorator Showcase go to work on his mansion as it was about to go on the market (asking price: \$12.5 million).

"If you're smart, you don't say anything about what you want them to do because this is in the hands of real professionals," says Miller, a venture capitalist who guesses he's visited almost all of the 27 previous showcases. "I had complete faith. The committee picks the designers and lets them have their way. And what is most amazing to me is the way they find uses for rooms that we never really did anything with."

What's also amazing is that there's no place for kids in this year's 10, 000-square-foot showcase house; the only bedrooms are the master and three guest rooms. There are no teenagers here; the house has no phones or audio components, and the few television sets are well camouflaged. Nobody works here; there's no home office or computer. Nobody sits in the garden here; moss covers the furniture. Nobody even reads here; the library has virtually no books.

"You'll see a lot of rooms in the house that aren't realistic," says designer Jo Ann Hartley, whose kitchen has five sinks.

But what's not realistic also represents much of the fun of touring the house, both for the visitors who are shelling out \$30 to ogle it and for the designers, some of whom have shelled out several thousand of their own dollars and many, many hours of labor simply for publicity and the cachet of working alongside the likes of nationally known Geoffrey De Sousa, Charles de Lisle and Martha Angus.

"I made a point of following the progress of every room in the house," says Michael Siniscal, who in his

first showcase put a fresh and breezy spin on the dark and dank wine-cellar concept, with buttery parchment faux-finished walls, Wine Country watercolors, and a funky mannequin sculpture by Sofia Harrison. "When else would I ever have a chance to see someone like Geoffrey De Sousa work?"

De Sousa took on what was perhaps the most challenging room in a house full of challenges, the oak-paneled and -floored 22-by-50-foot living room. He went out on a limb almost literally by choosing David Nash's "Manzanilla" sculpture, a twig-stemmed lamp and a branch-backed desk chair that carried the tree metaphor from one bay-windowed end of the huge room to the other. He went out on a limb figuratively by leaving the herringbone floor completely bare and covering the windows only with silk-framed cotton mesh.

"When I walk into a space, I kind of see it in my head," De Sousa says. "Here, I saw that I didn't want to do a standard living room with draperies and gobs of flowers."

Some visitors deemed the room too stark, lacking in warmth. But that's the chance De Sousa took by choosing the limb over the standard. The design committee surely doesn't seek out cliches when it evaluates the 200 or so proposals it receives from designers who've set their sights on one space or another of the 27 that were designated this year.

"We choose the best design for each room, and then we try to lay the house out," says design coordinator Delanie Borden. "Sometimes for the sake of the flow, we'll ask a designer if they would mind doing a different room."

Which is how Angus' lawn-green-carpeted master sitting room, done up French style with scene-stealing hand-painted wallpaper of birds and peonies from de Gournay of London, works so well with the white-white etc. etc. master bedroom ("six or seven different shades," says designer Angela Free), with its faux-ostrich bed and 1850s Agra carpet.

And how Melanie Coddington's understated and serene guest bedroom on the second floor, done down in whites and sea foams, makes a coherent suite when combined with Christel Heinelt and Thad Warren of Lushart's labor-intensive bathroom of polished, marblelike Venetian plaster, hand-painted with a whimsical mural of light blue bubbles.

Every year, the showcase serves up reminder after reminder, like the De Sousa living room, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but there are some spaces, like the bubble bathroom, that seem beautiful to almost everyone. On the third floor, Tish Key's intimate and spa-evoking massage room practically begs visitors to try the table, surrounded by cafe au lait on the walls and a mother-of-pearl tile on the eaves. Her spacious and well-equipped workout room next door beats driving to the Y any day, or even being chauffeur- driven to the Y.

Grant Gibson's third-floor atelier, brightly painted white and decorated in black accents and designer gowns, thrilled the well-heeled crowd at the showcase's preopening gala. "Last year I did a very dark man's retreat, so I wanted to do something different and go feminine this time," Gibson says. "I thought a fashion designer's work space would work well here." He started with Benjamin Moore Super White on

floors, trim, walls and ceiling, and finished with a black daybed dressed in white linens, allowing for time spent lying down on the job.

And a space that spoke most invitingly to The Chronicle's Home&Garden staff was the combination of butler pantry (done as a baking nook), kitchen and family room. Here, designers Hartley and Jennifer Hershon were told not to mess with the cabinets or counters because the kitchen had been done in 1998. So they added custom knobs and pulls, warmed the white walls with glazed stripes in caramel and tan, added etched glass doors to cabinets at the wet bar, and found a copper shade in the gray-looking countertops that they could carry into the backsplash and wet-bar counter.

It was a space that invited lingering; other rooms invited discussion about color, purpose, functionality, style. For example, pumpkin-glazed walls lit up a basement space that used to be a ballroom but was converted into a three-area media room by Applegate Tran Interiors.

"I think the trend right now is that people don't want one style, a period room, they want a blend," co-designer Gioi Tran says. "It's: 'We like English Country, but could you do some exotic treatment from different parts of the world?' "

So the space has antique, modern and custom furniture and accents from Morocco, India and the Far East. It's not your father's BarcaLounger-and-TV room.

Your father might, however, appreciate the second-floor guest room designed by Michael Burg, who brought in French antiques and covered the walls with 90 yards of chinoiserie linen. Some of the women who eyed the fabric speculated on the horrors of cleaning it, but the overall effect was dramatic and, with the 1960s Taccia lamps on the bedside tables, whimsical, too.

"I wanted a traditional but tailored guest room," Burg says. "And I wanted to show that you can have antiques in a room but still have fun with it. Textures keep it interesting." And a sea-grass carpet lightens things up.

The dog walker's retreat represented Caroline Vesey's determination to have some fun with an awkward basement space most likely used as an au pair suite.

"I wanted to do the room in the colors of dogs," says Vesey, who used fake fur, an antelope-inspired pattern carpet and a low, brown leather "flight jacket sectional" from Roche DuBois, along with a \$1,600 Phillip Plein doggie bed. "But then I thought that would be too serious, so I decided to zap it up."

So the walls are, naturally, fuchsia. The adjacent bathroom is, naturally, bright green, and a fish lives in a bowl on the wall over the toilet. The eyes of visitors to Vesey's suite invariably either widen or blink.

The dining room, by de Lisle, Marion Philpots and Jonathan Staub, seems not so easy on the eyes. Painted a deep blue, furnished with a 70-year-old Monterey pine in every corner, and anchored with a custom-made, 400-piece raw brass chandelier hanging from the center, the room reaches for drama and magic. By day, at first look, the reach came up short.

But at the evening gala, the drama and magic were firmly in hand, and the room began to make sense of de Lisle's comments earlier: "The room is styled for a party, with inspiration from a 15th century Japanese ink drawing, with fog enveloping pine trees. I wanted it to be kind of moody, because the house is moody."

Austere replaced moody in Shelley Gordon's assessment of the house and its masculine, oak-paneled second-floor library, which overlooks Scott Colombo's rose-filled garden. "I wanted it to be really comfortable and fit a young family," Gordon says. So she fought off the paneling by padding the back panels of the bookcases in celadon green Ultrasuede, erecting light blue-green curtains and upholstering the furniture in like colors.

The result amounts to a more yin, less yang library that disarmed the owner of the house.

"That was my room," Sandy Miller says. "I have to say I preferred it the other way."

The room Miller found most transformed, he says, was "the smallest room in the house," the second-floor laundry room. It was, well, your typical, stark, utilitarian laundry room. Now it's an Art Deco palace, with the laundry chute camouflaged with a gray hemp wall treatment, walls covered in old-fashioned silver-leaf paper, floors covered in marble.

The focal points are a 1930s chandelier on the ceiling and a three-piece acrylic polymer-on-wood called "Wipeout," by James Lecce, over the counter unit covering the washer, dryer and refrigerator.

As promised: cocktail mixing in the laundry room, now the laundry room- slash-wet bar. Designers Kimberly Ayres and Lawanna Cathleen Endonino even rounded off the counter edges to save the late-night launderer-slash-imbiber from injury in the narrow space.

The 2005 San Francisco Decorator Showcase runs through Memorial Day at 1 Cherry St., just off Jackson near the Presidio's Arguello Gate. The house is on the market with TRI Coldwell Banker at \$12.5 million. Tour hours are 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday; 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursday; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday and Memorial Day; closed all other Mondays. \$30 (\$25 for seniors), includes self-guided audio tour. For more information and a complete list of designers, see www.decoratorshowcase.org and www.sfproperties.com.

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