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SCOUTING WITH: Joseph Holtzman; Guerrilla in the Midst

JOSEPH HOLTZMAN, the editor of Nest, the artsy new journal of decor and interiors, does have a few things in common with his editorial peers, the tough-as-nails sheltertrixes at House & Garden, Elle Decor and Architectural Digest.

He, too, knows what he likes and he goes after it ruthlessly. His criterion: "At the end of the day, it has to be beautiful."

But any similarity between him and them ends right about the point where Mr. Holtzman -- during an afternoon spent scouting projects for the magazine -- pauses outside a maisonette on the Upper East Side where, he said, the writer William F. Buckley Jr. and his wife, Pat, live. Mr. Holtzman, 41, has an outsider's view of decor -- in this case, literally.

Nose to the window, he contemplated how a Peeping Tom-style photo shoot would go chez Buckley. "The lights are on," he said, peering in at a leopard skin thrown over a sofa. "It would be interesting to see what kinds of endangered species he's got scattered around in there."

The leopard skins in the apartment "belonged to my grandfather," Mrs. Buckley said yesterday, "so I'm sure they died many, many years ago."

While Nest has been frequently compared to Wallpaper, an irreverent home-design magazine that arrived some months before it, Nest has more in common with Britain's nonchalantly odd World of Interiors, the British art journal Frieze and perhaps National Geographic. Nest's second issue, now on sale (for \$9.70), has some splendid homes, including one by Renzo Mongiardino, an Italian decor maestro. But it also has an article on igloos, a feature on how inmates of a women's prison decorate their cells and another on Mr. Holtzman's own one-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side, a virtual jackdaw's nest of design movements, motifs and ideas. The piece, written by Carl Skoggard, Mr. Holtzman's longtime partner, is titled "Yes, I Too Married a Decorator. . . ."

And then there's the matter of the ghost editor on the masthead. Robert Offit, Mr. Holtzman's best friend, who died of AIDS in 1988, is listed as a contributing editor.

"He had an unbridled belief in my talents and abilities," Mr. Holtzman said. "I feel that I continue to get advice from him."

David Colman, "SCOUTING WITH: Joseph Holtzman; Guerrilla in the Midst." *The New York Times* (September 10, 1998), accessed online.

If all this sounds atypical for a shelter magazine, even Mr. Holtzman and his colleagues find it hard to express exactly what is right for Nest. The magazine's first cover -- an apartment whose every surface is papered or otherwise bedecked with 1970's images of Farrah Fawcett-Majors -- seemed to suggest a love of kitsch.

Wrong, said Kiera Coffee, a writer whose work appeared in the first two issues. "After the first issue, people would say: 'Oh, I know this great guy who collects all this Garfield stuff. He's perfect for Nest,'" Ms. Coffee recalled. "That's not it at all."

What makes a space in synch with Mr. Holtzman's vision, she said, is an urgency, design that transcends the boundaries of taste, good or bad. "We're all attracted to people who do things with passion," she said. "And with Joe I'd go one step further and say compulsion."

Those compulsions can lead to what co-workers and friends call Mr. Holtzman's artistic temperament. Mr. Skoggard, his partner, refers to him in the article as "a volcano." If so, Mr. Holtzman is Mauna Loa crossed with Woody Allen.

After a childhood reading shelter magazines and esoteric design books in suburban northwest Baltimore, Mr. Holtzman, the son of a wealthy luggage manufacturer and his wife, put off going to college. His parents were avid art collectors; he, in turn, dabbled in painting and decorated the large Baltimore apartment they gave him. He also taught art and stage design at Villa Julie College, a Catholic school for women.

But at the same time, he was, as he put it, "a prisoner of my analyst."

"I was too hyper and too obsessive," he said, explaining that the constant decorating, de-decorating and redecorating of his own apartments were his primary creative outlet. (One reason he thrived indoors: he has agoraphobia.)

If not for Prozac, which helped him focus and function, he contends that Nest would never have hit the stands. "Really, this has all been made possible out of a bottle," he said.

Five or six years ago, he talked with Derry Moore, a photographer, about putting together a book on his decorating ups and downs. Instead, Mr. Moore urged him to start a magazine. Mr. Holtzman sold his Baltimore apartment, which had been published in *House & Garden* in 1989, and financed the start-up. And so Nest was hatched and began searching for *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an architectural ideal in which design and decor are fully integrated.

Whether by necessity, as with igloos, or by desire, as with Mr. Mongiardino's work, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is Mr. Holtzman's Grail. Last week, on his afternoon of scouting, he was equally enthusiastic about fringed lampshades spotted in a window above Mr. Buckley's apartment; about the multilevel apartment where the architect Paul Rudolph, who died last year, lived on Beekman Place, and about Aiden Mooney's East Village apartment, where every inch of the kitchen has been laid with tile.

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On his visit to Mr. Mooney, a retired Newsweek librarian, Mr. Holtzman pointed out how obsessively the refrigerator and dishwasher had been tiled and observed the inventive approaches to space and lighting constraints.

“It’s remarkably well conceived,” he said afterward. “I love the intelligence, the subtlety, the reverence for surface. It could be appropriate for Nest in that it was planned as a whole concept, and I applaud that.” And the baroquely modern Paul Rudolph penthouse on Beekman Place was about as close to Gesamtkunstwerk as Mr. Holtzman could want.

“This place is beyond taste,” he said, meandering up and down the apartment’s countless (and railingless) stairs and over the see-through floors. “This is a real vision.”

The fact that the Rudolph apartment, which occupies the top floors of a town house on the market for \$6.25 million, is in less than peak condition and faces an uncertain future makes it more compelling as a story for Nest, he said.

“There’s something about houses when they’ve mellowed that’s more palatable to visitors,” he said, “the way that varnish on an old master lends an evenness of tonality.”

Though his passions are legion, there are some things Mr. Holtzman does not like. “I’m tired of found objects, people just assembling things,” he said, adding snobbishly that the stylish eclecticism practiced by flea-market shoppers is nothing more interesting than “just good taste.”

This attitude, take note, is from a man whose own apartment is filled with every conceivable artifact, from a Rothko on the wall to a bowl of plastic babies on the Studio Alchimia coffee table (by a precursor of the Memphis design group in Milan) to colorfully stenciled lampshades. There is a Jean Prouve bookshelf from the 1930’s holding a collection of German Art Nouveau vases, a 19th-century Georgian armchair and a set of Hermes leather and cane dining chairs. Male and female mannequins stand watch in the bedroom. Some walls are lightly stippled, some are pattern-painted over wallpaper and some are papered with laminated photos, all the same blurry green.

“I’m somewhat ashamed of this apartment,” Mr. Holtzman said, his eyes darting around the room. “I don’t like to be judged as a designer on this house.”

The apartment, he maintains, is both a “cut-and-paste job” and his sanctum sanctorum to protect him from the outside world.

So why did he choose to publish it in Nest? “I’m a chintz slinger first and foremost,” he said. “So it’s important for me to put my own stuff out there.”

Or call it a bit of occupational therapy. Mr. Holtzman would.

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