

The New York Times

A Champion Of the Quirky Writes Finis

IT takes a lot to shock readers of *Nest*, the quarterly magazine of interiors. Joseph Holtzman wrote one of his editor's letters from what he called a "small, well-proportioned room" in a psychiatric hospital. Furniture coverage included close-ups of electric chairs. But Mr. Holtzman's latest issue could be the most surprising: It will be the last.

Mr. Holtzman, 47, said he felt that *Nest*, which he underwrote himself, starting in 1997, had run its course artistically. "I'm afraid I'm going to get bored and that it's going to show in my work," he said. In 26 issues, he said, he has designed more than 4,000 pages and examined countless images.

In its seven years, *Nest* won two National Magazine Awards and gained a loyal following in creative circles, less for the interiors it featured than for the risky ways it featured them. Mr. Holtzman, who said he typically sold 30,000 copies, believed that an igloo, a prison cell or a child's attic room (adorned with Farrah Fawcett posters) could be as compelling as a room by a famous designer.

The photographer Nan Goldin, the fashion designers Todd Oldham and Karl Lagerfeld, the novelists Michael Cunningham and Dennis Cooper and the artist Richard Tuttle helped Mr. Holtzman prove his point. Mr. Tuttle said that Mr. Holtzman, with his almost baroque approach to graphic design, "channeled the collective unconscious, to give us the pleasure of ornament before we even knew we wanted it."

Mr. Holtzman said he hopes now to try his hand at painting. Indeed, the cover of the final issue (which will reach subscribers in mid-September) is a painting by Mr. Holtzman -- signaling his interest in switching to a more solitary medium.

Mr. Holtzman, the son of a wealthy self-made Baltimore businessman, said he had sunk \$4 million to \$6 million into *Nest*. The final figure will be determined when sales are tallied and tax returns completed. He has already sold a Matisse bronze to support the magazine.

He once believed *Nest* could be profitable. "I thought I was supposed to be S. I. Newhouse," he said, referring to S. I. Newhouse Jr., the chairman of Condé Nast. This year, Mr. Holtzman met with James Truman, the editorial director of Condé Nast, to discuss *Nest*'s future.

"They came to me," Mr. Holtzman said. "I was surprised, and I talked to James, but I never offered the magazine for sale." Mr. Truman said it would have been uphill work for *Nest* to make a profit under Condé Nast, which has high overhead. (*Nest* has been produced by a skeleton staff out of an apartment on the Upper East Side down the hall from Mr. Holtzman's.)

Fred A. Bernstein, "A Champion Of the Quirky Writes Finis." *The New York Times* (August 19, 2004), accessed online.

Mr. Truman was also concerned about a magazine that so completely represented one man's vision. "What happens if that person becomes exhausted or leaves or loses interest?" he asked.

The difficulties of sustaining a magazine without corporate backing are well known. Shoshana Berger, the editor of ReadyMade, a California-based magazine for young design-savvy readers, said: "Nest was more of an art project than a sustainable business model. It's more about the pathologies of interior design than its perfect execution. It distinguished itself as a risk taker in a very whitewashed category."

It would have been difficult, she said, "for Nest to publish what amounted to a coffee table book every three months and not hemorrhage money."

The sale of Mr. Holtzman's Matisse bronze has barely made a dent in his art collection. His apartment is filled with paintings by Picasso, Miró and Rothko. Decorative objects -- including pieces by Christopher Dresser, recently shown at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum -- overflow the rooms.

Financially, he said, "It wouldn't have been a problem to do another 26 issues."

Carl Skoggard, Mr. Holtzman's partner of 23 years, said, "It's true he could afford to go on, but if he wasn't feeling challenged artistically, there was no reason to spend the money."

Matthew Stadler, a novelist who served as Nest's literary editor, said, "I think he could have made a profit if he'd been willing to compromise artistically."

Selling to another large corporation would have been one exit strategy for Mr. Holtzman. "Most people in his position have this burning desire to get their message out," said Reed Phillips, the managing partner at DeSilva & Phillips, media investment bankers in New York. "They kind of throw in the towel as very much a last resort."

But Mr. Stadler could not imagine Nest under corporate control. "It was a zine," he said, "in the sense that it represented the interests of a very small group of people."

Mr. Holtzman would not have been an easy fit either. "I have a problem with corporate America," he said. The Christmas 2003 issue (No. 23) contained a series of mysterious headlines -- like "Lo, ink-clad Nest" -- which turned out to be anagrams for "Kill Condé Nast," Mr. Holtzman said. He had planned to put "Kill Condé Nast" on the cover in glow-in-the-dark ink, he said, but could not get the ink to look right.

"Our lawyers told us not to do certain things, but we just did them," Mr. Holtzman said of his approach.

Mr. Truman does not regard the end of Nest as meaning the magazine was a failure. "Magazines like this shine," he said, "but they don't always stay around to become lucrative businesses. I'm not sure that's their purpose."

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He compared Nest to other great, short-lived magazines, including Fleur Cowles's Flair, published in 1950 and 1951, and Colors, Benetton's magazine, when it was edited by Tibor Kalman from 1991 to 1995.

As an editor, Mr. Holtzman was nothing if not bold. He was as likely to focus on a prison cell as a palazzo. A plaster cast of the teeth of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis at 10 was analyzed as a decorative object. And in the new issue, he devotes 22 pages to the "hotel" that Kenny Mroczek, a 23-year-old artist, created in his home on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Each issue closed with a humorous Decorator Horoscope: "Virgo: Spend all your savings on one rough salt-glazed and blackened totemlike vessel."

Sometimes, Mr. Holtzman offered his version of a Cracker Jack prize: an add-on like a fabric wrapper by Mr. Oldham or a CD by DJ Spooky. One issue had a metal patch that turned out to be sharper than Mr. Holtzman had intended. It cut several readers before he halted distribution. Luckily, the people who cut themselves were, he said, "all very nice about it."

"I took each call myself," Mr. Holtzman said, in his typically soft-spoken voice.

Production costs -- as much as \$6 a copy -- absorbed most of the magazine's newsstand and subscription income (rates were \$34 a year), leaving Mr. Holtzman to cover other expenses. A few national advertisers -- including Volkswagen and Target -- took space in the magazine. But the content was far from advertiser-friendly. Those sponsors who did sign on had to adapt to pages that might be parallelograms instead of rectangles, or might have slits cut through them. And he would not sell the most valuable advertising space -- the back cover -- which he designed himself.

Mr. Phillips, the investment banker, said, "It's a way of differentiating a magazine and a way of saying to readers, 'This back cover is for you, not the advertisers.'"

Mr. Holtzman said he was never very good at reaching out to advertisers. "If you want to sell ads," he said, "you're supposed to know who your reader is." But when he was asked to describe the Nest reader, he would answer, "Anyone who reads Nest."

"There was never any thought of a demographic," Mr. Stadler said.

While some magazines are accused of letting advertising intrude on editorial content, Mr. Holtzman went the other way. In the final issue, he ran an advertisement for the show "Design Art: Functional Objects From Donald Judd to Rachel Whiteread," which opens Sept. 10 at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, but superimposed his own editorial denouncing the show as contrary to the mission of a design museum.

(The show was about design objects by artists, and, he said, the Cooper-Hewitt should stick to design objects by designers.)

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Mr. Holtzman also hoped to make money from a line of Nest products, including a chaise and a chintz, \$95 a yard, based on marijuana leaves. But that business did not take off, he said. And now he has turned the Nest office into a library, its shelves waiting to be filled.

The one thing that remained consistent about Nest from issue to issue was the bright yellow spine. But the spine of the farewell issue is black. That, and the editor's letter, in which Mr. Holtzman tells readers, "I happen to believe in what we did," are the only signs that Nest is folding.

Mr. Holtzman said he decided to end the run only after the fall issue was under way. That way, he said, he avoided the forced sentimentality of a final issue.

But there is at least one inadvertently elegiac feature: a series of drawings by Henri Cartier-Bresson, the photographer who died this month. Even in his 90's, Cartier-Bresson wanted to be known for something other than his photographs. Mr. Holtzman hopes to be known for his paintings, in addition to Nest, although he cautions that he is far from having a body of work.

Mr. Holtzman grew up in Baltimore, attended Hampshire College for a year and then returned to Baltimore, where his main focus, he said, was decorating his apartment. When the apartment was completed, it was scheduled to be shown in HG, the early-1990's version of Condé Nast's House & Garden. But HG closed before the apartment could appear. Disappointed, Mr. Holtzman resolved to start his own magazine.

The catalyst, he said, was Prozac, which he said enabled him to overcome agoraphobia, an abnormal fear of open spaces. Otherwise, he said, "I'd still be in my apartment in Baltimore." (It was, he said, "Prozac poop-out" that briefly sent him to a psychiatric hospital last year.)

From the first issue, Mr. Holtzman selected every article and image and supervised the design of every page. He said he had planned a magazine with a clean design, but when Wallpaper -- a magazine known for showing lots of white space -- began publishing before Nest, he went to the other extreme: pattern on pattern on pattern.

Mr. Holtzman said he was obsessed with pattern -- evident in his apartment, where no surface, including window blinds, has escaped embellishment, and in his motley wardrobe. He rarely socializes. At a party, he said, he would remember the décor, but not the people.

Mr. Holtzman's partner, Mr. Skoggard, who is also a musicologist, spent nights and weekends writing the parts of the magazine not assigned to outside authors. "He was the voice of Nest," Mr. Holtzman said.

Mr. Skoggard said: "I'm shy, and I said things in Nest I never could have said on my own. Joe told us never to be afraid of anything." Including spending money.

Mr. Holtzman's last editor's letter contains a generous offer: Nest subscribers can choose between a cash refund or two back issues (normally priced at \$17.50) in place of each issue they would have received.

"If I didn't do it, I'd feel guilty," Mr. Holtzman said.

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