

A Glimpse Behind Closed Doors

Some of New York City's most sumptuous and meticulously designed homes are celebrated in a new book.



By Julie Lasky

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As leading shelter magazines shrink and fade away, we have fewer chances to wander vicariously into other peoples' homes. Which is why Wendy Moonan's new book, "New York Splendor: The City's Most Memorable Rooms," out this month from Rizzoli (\$85), is nothing less than a public service.

Here are 112 spaces flaunting immaculate details, luscious valuables and clever design tricks. Ms. Moonan seeded her collection with some legendary interiors, like Gloria Vanderbilt's Upper East Side bedroom where almost every surface was covered in patchwork, and the four-story penthouse that the architect Paul Rudolph built onto his Beekman Place townhouse and into which he inserted 27 largely transparent levels.

But many of the rooms will come as a revelation. Speaking at an Upper West Side cafe earlier this month, Ms. Moonan, a longtime design journalist, said her main interest was celebrating the professionals who have embedded sanctuaries, spas and palaces into New York apartments and townhouses.

"I'm letting these talents show their stuff," she said. "Some of these architects and designers I've been following for 25 years." (This interview was edited and condensed.)

New York is a big city with a lot of rooms. Where did you start with this project?

I worked at Town & Country for 12 years; I was the back-of-the book editor. I assigned all the stories on art and antiques, but I wrote the house stories myself. Then I went to House & Garden. I was there for a few years and also constantly scouting in New York. And then I went to Architectural Digest. I would say maybe about a third of the book was from my personal scouting and the rest of it was new scouting.

The book includes many waves of fashion and decorating, whether it's English country, French chateau or totally minimal. But it's not supposed to be comprehensive in any way. It's very eclectic. It's my personal taste.

To what extent were you conscious that you were producing a history book — documenting interiors that in many cases no longer exist?

Very much. It's basically a social history of design in New York from about 1970 to 2002. One of the things I learned at Town & Country that is widely ignored now is never change anything in the room you are publishing.

If I had to iron a tablecloth, I would, or I would go to the corner shop and get some flowers. But I never brought furniture or art — there was no styling. This is how society people lived. It could be shabby, it could be chic, but I thought it was a really important social record.

Several of your examples are what we think of as pass-through spaces: foyers and stair halls. Why did you select those particular rooms?

The way the publishers wanted me to organize the book at the beginning was by room type. So I had the foyer, I had the bedroom, I had the living room. Some of them are incredibly modest.

Alex Papachristidis lives in a white brick '60s building with very low ceilings, and the foyer is this tiny, tiny little room. He tented it and then he put this chinoiserie bookcase in the middle. In a way I wanted to show how clever some of these designers are when working against pretty horrible limitations. His clients can afford 12-foot ceilings, but he can't.

Libraries, like the one that Albert Hadley updated for Brooke Astor with red lacquer walls and brass accents, are some of the most compelling interiors you show. Why, in this digital age, do they still carry so much emotion? Or have I just answered my question?

If you look at most design magazines and books, there are no books in the rooms. As a person who loves books — I've got about 20,000 of them — I want people to see how wonderfully comforting it is to be surrounded by them.

Which rooms in these pages do you feel simply can't be done justice in photographs alone?

I'd say the cover; this is one of the most incredible apartments, and the designer, Joanne De Palma, who is not famous at all, is so talented. She went to England shopping for Aesthetic Movement antiques, and I think Paris and New York. And it took years to assemble.

But even though it looks very pretty in the picture, it's much more impressive in person. In the day it kind of glows, and at night it's just magical and romantic. And not everything is high end. The very kitschy picture over the sofa with birds on little branches is more like folk art.

Rooms can make a fantastic first impression, but is it possible that the aspects that create a sense of awe also make them hard to live in? I'm thinking about the 1880s brownstone on the Upper EastSide that David Scott Parker Architects jammed with pattern.

I think the genius of a good decorator or architect is to suss out the dreams of the client and bring them to reality. And if the client wants a very layered environment, that's what they get. I think most of the clients are quite happy.

Which element of interior design gives the most bang for one's buck?

I would say the architecture. When rooms have good bones and good proportions, people can do less. If you look carefully, almost all the projects in my book have high ceilings. And the other thing is color. I'm way more into color than a lot of my fellow design journalist colleagues. My grandmother was an industrial designer and did a famous color wheel in the '20s. My mother was a costume jewelry designer. My brother studied industrial design. We talked a lot about color in my house.

If you could live in any one of these rooms, which would it be?

The East 66th Street living room designed by Juan Pablo Molyneux. He was so upset with the architecture he inherited, he re-covered the ceiling with beams, because there was one beam and it was off-center, and it was driving him nuts.

So the beams are fake. The wall decoration that looks like coromandel screen panels is faux. The gold latticework frame on the mirror is faux, and the gold chair railing is faux. This is just clever.

You would live there because of its cleverness?

No, it's just the most wonderful place to have a conversation. You can sit on that couch for hours and be very happy.