For *T&C*'s showhouse apartment at the Setai Fifth Avenue in New York, Steven Gambrel (opposite) imagined a life revolving around art, playing off the film *Six Degrees of Separation*. These works on glass are from his own collection.

Photographs by MATTHEW HRANEK
Styled by HELEN CROWTHER

RESOURCES, PAGE 196.

SIX DEGREES OF STEVEN GAMBREL

T&C presents its Designer Visions showhouse, inspired by a favorite film, designed by the darling of young Wall Streeters.

By James Reginato

A conventional living room didn't suit Gambrel's imaginary couple. In lieu of sofas, he created two custom sawhorse tables, covered with Italian marbled papers and nailheads, where you could work, dine, play, study art. Absolutely modern, yet definitely not white-box living, with luxurious, richly colored striped curtains by Bergamo and carpet from Karastan.

Being the go-to decorator for a great many of today's young titans of finance and technology, it's not surprising that Steven Gambrel sees and speaks about design in terms they can relate to. "I believe in 'real-time lifestyle' and practice 'real-time decorating,'" says Gambrel in an authoritative tone.

Translation, please? "It's following what you really do, rather than what you aspire to," he says.

"You may aspire to a life of leisure, but if you are actually a hard-working guy, your apartment should facilitate the life of a hard-working guy," he elaborates. "If you eat out all the time, a coffee station is more important than a full kitchen. If you are a clothes-horse, turn the guest bedroom into a dressing room. If you walk the dogs all the time, install lovely hooks to display the leashes."

On a brilliant fall morning, as Gambrel inspects an apartment he has just completed fifty-eight stories above Midtown Manhattan in the glamorous new hotel-condominium the Setai Fifth Avenue, he explains the "real time" effect at hand.

"These people who live here are art connoisseurs who need places to lay out their collections, rather than to lounge. I didn't see them as the lounging type."

Easels create an art-studio feeling. Glass paintings soften all those glass walls.

RESOURCES, PAGE 196

But "these people," it should be explained, are fictional. Like the other "residents" of the three apartments that make up this year's Hearst Magazines Designer Visions showhouse—for which three magazines each asked a design firm to create a home—they are characters from classic movies set in New York.

For *Town & Country*'s home, Gambrel selected *Six Degrees of Separation*—the 1993 film adaptation of John Guare's wondrous play—on account of his affection for its lead characters, art dealer Flan Kittredge and his wife, Ouisa. (For *House Beautiful,* designers Phoebe and Jim Howard chose the movie *Something's Gotta Give,* while Richard Halberg took on *Wall Street* for *Veranda.*)

Gambrel took the liberty of imagining that the Kittredges have, since the time period depicted in the film, traded the sprawling prewar Upper East Side apartment where they raised their children for this 2,426-square-foot modern Midtown aerie. "So they have to edit their collections and rethink their lifestyle," he explains. "They want to keep certain elements but in a more rational way. As in all my projects, everything is developed with the idea of 'real time' in mind, in order to help your life move forward in an honest, better way."

Since founding his firm, S.R. Gambrel, in 1995, Gambrel's own life and career have steadily advanced. Now one of a handful of designers at the top of the heap, the Virginia native has carved out a niche catering to young families who have amassed sizable fortunes through hedge funds and financial services.

Impeccably groomed but with a slightly rakish edge, the forty-year-old is today sporting a gray ensemble of Brunello Cucinelli wool cargo pants and a Michael Bastian vest and tie, which he's set against a white Lord Willy's shirt. He's just flown back from a weekend in England at Blenheim Palace. Though Blenheim is one of the world's grandest private houses, Gambrel raves about its "warmth and comfort," qualities that emanate, he says, from its owners, the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, his hosts for the weekend. "They are so gracious, they give everything this easy-breezy feel," he says.

Gambrel uses the story to make the point that even the most talented designer can't fully succeed without a good client. "I have built houses where I feel like I have made the proper background for a happy lifestyle, but the people are not that happy or friendly, so the energy just gets sucked out of the rooms. You can do a lot to help people lead a lifestyle, but you can't make them comfortable in their own skins."

Fortunately, Gambrel says, most of his clients have successful personal lives along with their wealth. "The people who hire me have built their fortunes in finance or technology because they are attuned to what is happening today. But they don't want to build some sort of modernist rocket-ship house. They want a place that represents them and that is part of this culture."

"People understand that I am going to give them a house that is representational of who they are and reverential to its location," he continues. "My job is to bring their stories out, which I do by watching their routines, what they do repetitively." One client recounts a two-hour conversation Gambrel had with her solely about her kitchen faucets. "I figure out how to make those sorts of things more practical, exciting, sexy, or whatever," he explains. "I tell them, 'I promise this house is going to represent who you are.' But I also try to sense parts of them not fully developed. In the end, it might be you times ten. It might be more color than you thought you could live with, more spirit. But I tell them, 'It's not something I came up with—you did.' People surrender to who they are."

Given his success rate, Gambrel says, his clients tend to allow him to take aesthetic risks in their houses and apartments. At the moment, he is experimenting with mixtures of metal and glass, such as mercury glass and *verre églomisé,* to make large wall panels for a client. Hammered-metal lighting fixtures from the Vienna Secession movement complete the effect. "It creates a wonderfully murky, reflective room," he says.

But in his view, "absolute" design—in which everything in a room is of the same period or style—is out. "It feels hotel-like. I prefer rooms and furniture, colors and patterns, that are hard to place in any particular period or culture. This way one gets a unique, timeless, personal space."

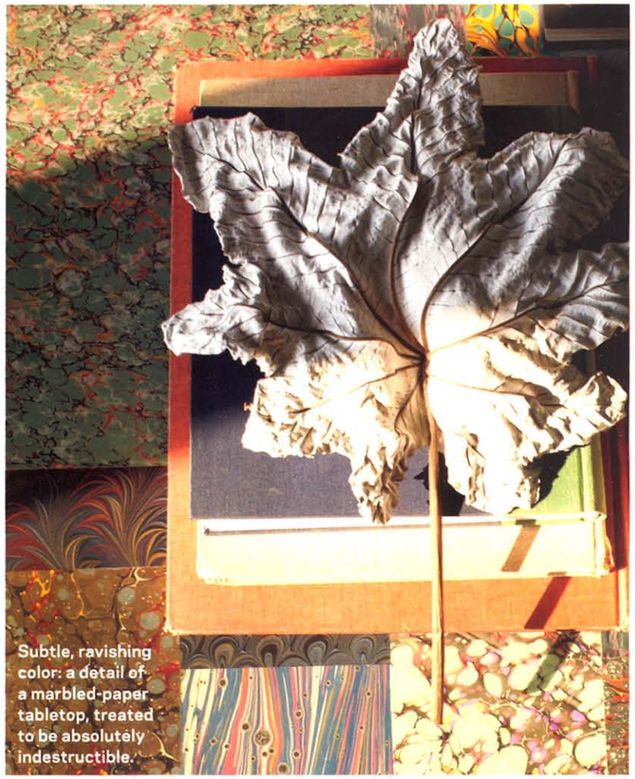
Of course, it's easier for clients to trust their decorator if they've seen what he's just done up the street. East Hampton might well be known as Gambrel Village soon, thanks to the preponderance of his work there. "Five of my friends had used him," says one hedge-fund manager's wife with a house in the town. "Finally I said, 'I have to call him.'" That was only a few years ago, but Gambrel has since completed four houses for the client and her family.

"The numbers are growing all the time," says another client of her pals on Gambrel's roster.

Both ladies, whose husbands prefer them to remain anonymous, cite Gambrel's grasp of details and ability to marry aesthetics with functionality as reasons for his success. "Everything is beautiful but has a purpose," says one. "He makes sure the sofas are deep enough that you can have the kids on your lap, and in the mudrooms there are places for everything. I feel like he gets inside my brain. He makes the process very inclusive; he makes me feel creative."

Another longtime client, Liz O'Brien business partner and former banker Michael Raynes, testifies, "We have a great collaborative relationship. He looks to the past, but it never looks vintage. Everything he does is high style but approachable."

Gambrel's clients are a somewhat tight circle, so Gambrel avoids giving them a signature—a pitfall for many designers. "I went to a girlfriend's apartment that Steven just finished, and it's completely different from mine," says one client, sounding rather relieved. "It's her."



Subtle, ravishing color: a detail of a marbled-paper tabletop, treated to be absolutely indestructible.

Gambrel's education in architecture at the University of Virginia no doubt has contributed to his success. "I have no idea how anyone who hasn't studied architecture designs a room," he says. "I design millwork details, knobs, elevations, hardware, door panels, electrical plans. The scale and proportion of the arm of a sofa to me is just as critical as the scale and proportion of the house."

In the end, Gambrel's obsession with functionality yields delightful dividends. "If you are organized, life can be spontaneous," he says. "I can go to a horse show on a Saturday afternoon, and if I see eight friends, I can invite them over to dinner that night, because I know where everything is when I get home and I can put it together so easily."

That said, Gambrel now must rush up to Harlem, where he's meeting with Arianna Huffington at a shelter to plan a program that would help homeless people transition into apartments. "Design," he says as he departs, "should make everyone's life better." *To see more of the* Town & Country *showhouse, visit designervisionsonline.com.*

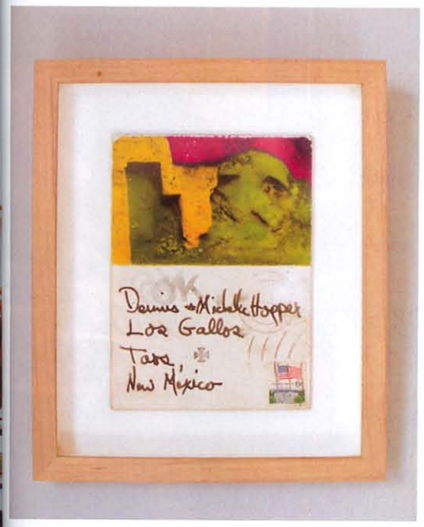
DESIGNER VISIONS SPONSORS

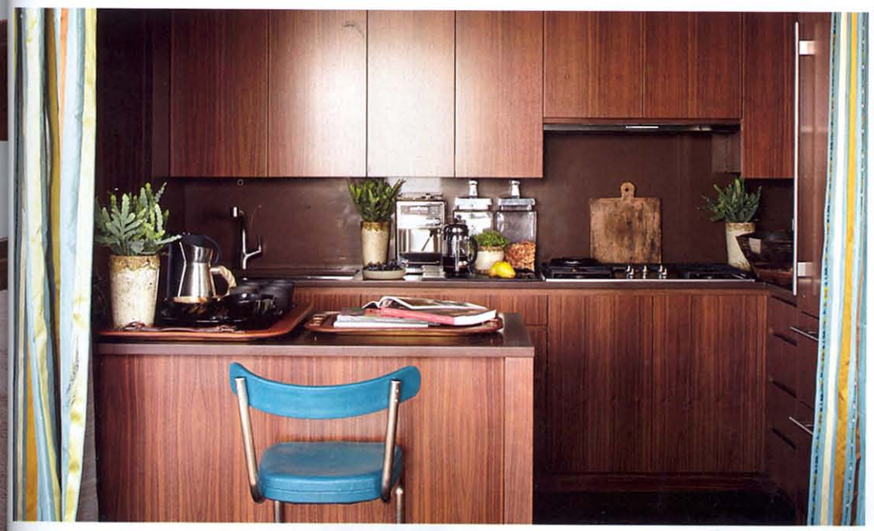
ANN SACKS
BERGAMO FABRICS
BERGDORF GOODMAN
BIZZI & PARTNERS
CHARLES P. ROGERS
CLAREO
COLLINS BROTHERS MOVING
DONGHIA
KARASTAN
KOHLER
LG
RALPH LAUREN PAINT
SILESTONE
WAMSUTTA

On the 58th floor, the natural place to begin is Blue Agave walls, in suede finish, from Ralph Lauren Paint. Banquettes—the main seating area for the living room—are covered in Donghia Ginger silk mohair, with pillows also by Donghia. Lamp, by Adnet, and game table from Bernd Goeckler Antiques. 1950s paintings.

RESOURCES, PAGE 196.

A small bedroom, now a library for the pleasure of one. Bulletin board upholstered in Donghia Ikat, with curtains in Pallas by Bergamo. Club chair and ottoman by Gambrel. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A Kohler Water Tile Rain showerhead, with mosaic wall tile from Ann Sacks; a French 1940s cabinet by Jean-Charles Moreaux; Kohler's super-deep new VibrAcoustic bathtub (filled from Kohler source in ceiling) and Sferra towels; in the foyer, lamp from Bernd Goeckler and reflective art; chocolaty kitchen with Silestone countertops and back-splash, framed in Bergamo curtains; a Hopper piece. Center: The view from the Setai, developed by Bizzi & Partners.





RESOURCES, PAGE 196.

RESOURCES, PAGE 196.

The bedroom is organized into sleeping, seating, and dressing areas. Equestrian bed by Gambrel, with cover and pillows in Bergamo fabrics. Tables are skirted in Bergamo's Simonetta. Bed linens, Wamsutta. Artwork from the Dennis Hopper collection, to be auctioned at Christie's next month. Opposite top: 1940s Italian mirror and dresser from Bernd Goeckler. Cashmere Velvet Stripe on chair and ottoman by Donghia. Opposite bottom: Dressing table, by Adnet, from Bernd Goeckler, with Oscar de la Renta jewelry and products from Bergdorf Goodman.

SPECIAL THANKS TO ALANA FRUMKES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DESIGNER VISIONS.