

All Show, and Almost No Go

A show house site is sold, and decorators scramble for a good cause.



DESIGN NOTEBOOK

HOUSEWARES

Katie Ridder covered the entrance to this year's Kips Bay Decorator Show House in her Pagoda wallpaper, left. Far left, Robert Verdi and Deirdre D'Elia's landing with sconces by Lindsey Adelman. Above, Vicente Wolf's wedge-shaped banquette. Below left, Bud-out of Yellow Pages by Long-Bin Chen, in a room by 2Michaels.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TREVOR TRENRO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By **PENELOPE GREEN**

IN New York City, real estate isn't personal, it's all business: in a face-off between a children's charity and a record-breaking deal in a down market, whom would you put your money on? Last March, the Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club took it on the chin, when the property where its organizers had planned to hold their annual decorator show house the next month was sold.

Owned by Adam Gordon, the boutique developer, the limestone town house was already an anomaly for Kips Bay because it was on West 76th Street, miles away from its natural ecosystem, the Upper East Side, and the all-important foot traffic. Still, the sale, for \$19.39 million, was a blow to the charity, which draws about \$1 million — 20 percent of its operating costs — from the proceeds of the show house, which for the last 38 years has been open for one week in April.

As its organizers scrambled to find a new house, the six-month delay caused by the sale, they say, forced them to take a bite out of their programs, and even their endorsement. "It put us in a very precarious situation as regards to supporting 13,000 children in the Bronx," said Daniel Quinteros, Kips Bay's executive director.

Although the charity had not signed a contract with Mr. Gordon, he



added "We thought we had a house. Unfortunately, he thought we didn't have a deal. We've had to delve into our endowment, and we are in litigation right now with the seller. We consider this new house a god-send."

Mr. Gordon's response? "It's very simple," he said. "The house was for sale. We never signed an agreement. We sold the house, and we told them immediately. And we did so in the most gracious way possible."

He added: "It was a very hard real estate climate. The most important thing when you have a house for sale is selling it."

The new house, at 106 East 71st Street, which opens to the public today, looks rather like the old house: a 25-foot-wide limestone confection built at the turn of the last century and rehabbed by a foreign investor, according to its broker, Carrie Chiang of the Corcoran Group, who is listing it for \$28.5 million (yearly taxes are \$100,000). Last week, 18 design outfits were finishing up 17 rooms on six floors, seemingly relieved to be on familiar turf.

"It's never, ever happened before — the house was locked; we couldn't get in," Noel Jeffrey, a decorator who practices a maximalism found on the 1940s-to-1970s continuum, said of last spring's real estate

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DESIGN NOTEBOOK



INVESTMENT DECORATING A pumped-up Syrie Maugham-style bed from Noel Jeffrey, left. Center, Darren Henault assembled a dressing room like a stock portfolio, with blue chip pieces, like a Laleu vanity (\$175,000), and bargains, like a photograph, seen in the vanity's mirror, by Alex Prager (\$6,500). Right, egg-inspired artwork in a room by Joan and Jayne Michaels.

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detache. (Mr. Jeffrey has participated in 12 Kips Bay show houses since his first, in 1978.)

"This is a much better location," he said, adding lustily. "Not that there's anything wrong with the Upper West Side."

Mr. Jeffrey's Hollywood-glamorous bedroom, brightened with a pumped-up Syrie Maugham-style bed, its enormous pairs tucked in a silvery faux-shagreen print, fit easily into the new space. At each end of the room, sheer white-striped silk curtains hung like gigantic negligees.

While Mr. Jeffrey highlighted old-school decorating tips, like adding a black suede ribbon to off-the-shelf white shades and reshaping the room from a rectangle to a giant lounge with those sheer curtains, his peers were largely engaged in a different type of decorating.

The Kips Bay show house has always been a certain kind of marketing opportunity for designers—a victory lap that comes with a community responsibility. This is because its promotional benefits accrue vaguely to the design profession as a whole, rather than its individual practitioners. That is, the show house reminds the world what it is that decorators actually do. It is rare for design firms to gain clients from the endeavor, which is time- and labor-consuming, and expensive as well. Or it used to be.

But now that most decorators have products to sell — furniture, rug and

A real estate deal versus a charity: guess which wins.

wallpaper collections, books — they can move these objects into a show house room and hope for a more direct response from their audience. Indeed, this year, three outfits — Jennifer Post, Vicente Wolf and 2MICHAEL, a firm of twin-sister decorators named Jayne and Joan Michaels — have an arrangement with Gilb Group, the invitational discount luxury site, to sell most of the things in their rooms in an online pop-up shop "open" from Nov. 4 to 8.

Some rooms were all product, like the house's front hall, which was filled with \$25,000 worth of Jean Paul Gaultier's pillow-furniture for Rache Babois — essentially, a high-end futon look with Mr. Gaultier's rock 'n' roll fabrics on the company's classic "79-era Mah Jong sofas. The net result seemed plucked whole from Lady Gaga's N.Y.U. dorm room, or perhaps from a fantasy of Pamela Des Barres's.

Mr. Wolf, whose last Kips Bay show house was in 1991, explained his decision to be in this year's house: "I think our times call for experience," he said. "It's a chance for the average person to walk into one of your rooms. It shows what decorators do, instead of the stupid TV shows that say you can do it for \$5."

Also, he has a book out this week. Mr. Wolf had accessioned a painted library — "no one else wanted it," he said, proudly, of the room — with oversize, swoopy, Philippe Starck-inflected white furniture from his signature line, VIV Home. There were the familiar high-backed wing chairs, like escapes from the Royaltan, when it was a "90s poster den, and his huge, white wedge-shaped banquet. Behind it stood a clutch of four-foot-high white porcelain statues of Mao, which looked like Pop Art pieces rather than souvenirs from the Cultural Revolution, though Mr. Wolf said a friend had warned him that they were too reactionary.

"Darren Henault, who designed two dressing rooms, one for "him" and one for "her," observed: "My job isn't to save people money. It's to spend people's money well."

Mr. Henault left a career in advertising 15 years ago to become a decorator, and he licensed decorating to the creation of a good stock portfolio. Between his two rooms, he said, he had assembled \$1 million worth of furniture and artwork.

"You can track these pieces for the last 300 years, in the same way that you can track a stock, and see how their value has increased," he said, pointing to a Jules Laleu vanity (\$175,000), a giltwood table (also \$175,000) and a bronze cabinet (\$344,000).

Here, he said helpfully, handing over a stack of crisp white index cards, each printed with the name of an object, in the style of an auction cat-

The Kips Bay Decorator Show House, to benefit the Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club, is open through Nov. 11. Gate: \$30; (718) 890-8800; ext. 345; kipsbay.org.



log. For new investors, he said, there was an entry-level work: a photograph of a young woman decked out in a 1940s-style fur while clutching a liter of Coca-Cola (\$6,500), by Alex Prager, a young California photographer whose images owe a lot to the works of Alfred Hitchcock and who, Mr. Henault noted, was in a photography show at MoMA right now.

"You want a hot stock (tip)?" he said. "Run to Yancey Richardson and buy an Alex Prager, and you'll double your money in the next year or so."

MANY decorators seemed to be showing off their eyes for contemporary art, or perhaps just their relationships with various galleries. Evi Robinson, who had drawn the white trophy kitchen — not what can you do in such a kitchen? — hung two amusing domestic still lifes by the photographer Laya Letinsky.

Jean and Jayne Michaels commissioned Stephen Antonino, a Brooklyn artist, to make an egg-shaped faux fireplace in wood and plaster (\$7,000), and it taken an eco-flame insert, they said for their tiny room, and brought in other egg- and bird-like objects that otherwise seemed to have no relationship to one another. The most intriguing piece was a tower of acrylic vases filled with what looked like ancient stone Buddhaheads but turned out to be sculptures by Long-Is Chen, a Taiwanese artist who makes pieces out of the Yellow Pages. Sotheby's catalogs and their paper products. The heads were as soft as velvet; you could see the spine of the Yellow Pages behind each one.

Across the hall, Elizabeth Pye, a granddaughter of Betty Sherrill, former president of McMillen Inc., had blanketed her little room in brushed gold and aqua linen. Her grandmother, she reported, had made away with the excess fabric and was planning an outfit with it. "She did me I always order too much," said Ms. Pye, who is 30 and in charge of McMillen Plus, a division of McMillen devoted to younger clients.

Ms. Pye had decorated with it, too: there was a mandala made from fake eyelashes by Meg Strecker and a little wire tree by Pablo Avilla that looked like a Lewis Carroll drawing. But the most compelling artwork was a pie made by Ms.



Pye's mother, Ann Pye, a principal of McMillen. On a television framed in gold linen played a film that Ann Pye had made of her own mother, Mrs. Sherrill, brushing clippers.

"It's my dream and my mother's nightmare," the younger Ms. Pye said, describing how Mrs. Sherrill would arrive at their house in Southampton, N.Y., and clip the privet and move the furniture around. The film was an exploration of that relationship, she explained.

Later, by e-mail, Ann Pye described it as a film-school effort, with obvious themes. "But I feel quite affectionate toward the footage," she wrote, "and I am so glad I have it, and my mother, still alive." She added: "By the way, don't think this whole scenario didn't repeat on Thursday. When I came out of flower arrangements that had magically appeared, Elizabeth thinks this is funny, but it drives me insane. How she got up those three flights of stairs with flowers and vases and her cane and all the congestion of objects and workers in the stairwell I don't know."

Ed Ku and Etienne Coffinier were inspired, they said, by a 1963 fashion photograph from Harper's Bazaar by Mohr Sokolsky, who placed a model in a glass bubble and set her in front of Paris scenes. Maybe the best part of their room — all bronze grass cloth and silvery cerused wood custom furniture that recalled Frank Lloyd Wright — was a

FANTASY DECORATING Far left, top and bottom, a whirl of smoke by Norman Mooney in a sitting room, and hand-blown glass bubbles in a bathroom, both by Ed Ku and Etienne Coffinier. Above, Elizabeth Pyne's bed-sitter; left, Jennifer Post's his-and-hers massage room.

whirl of black smoke on a white panel above a sectional sofa, a piece by Norman Mooney, an Irish artist living in Brooklyn. In the adjoining bathroom, Mr. Ku and Mr. Coffinier filled a tub with startling and lovely hand-blown glass bubbles made by Susan Etkin, a glass artist.

On the top floor, Jennifer Post was padding around in white sryclich slippers — installation slippers, she said, that she buys from the InterContinental Hotel in Los Angeles. They, toned and prone to aphorisms, Ms. Post looked more like a yoga instructor than a decorator as she pivoted between the his-and-hers massage room, the lounge and the outdoor terrace she had smoothed over in her own image.

"I will only work on a Bentley; it can't be a BMW," Ms. Post said, peering out furniture from her new collection — a massive slab of a sofa with Jean-Michel Frank lines, covered in charcoal cashmere, and hunky armchairs covered in Maharam chester.

Ms. Post is something of a brand herself, and all the elements of her franchise were on display: the black-and-white palette, the movie-mogul minimalism. Every one of her clients gets a black-cushioned, custom bronze bench, she said, sitting down on one. Also, they get pet rocks: glazed black river rocks she harvests in Los Angeles and New York. (You can have them, too, for \$20, \$30 and \$40, when Gilb Home puts Ms. Post's room online.)

On a landing on the fourth floor, Robert Verdi and Deirdre D'Elia had covered the walls in 800-grit grass cloth studded with nailheads. Scores by Lindsey Adelman — glass bubbles nodding from brass plates — added to the steampunk effect.

"It's like an old submarine," Mr. Verdi said, plopping down on his love seat. "But in grass cloth."

A white wool rag in an exaggerated basketweave by a German artist prompted a reverie: "I feel like Martha Stewart would want it and be jealous that we had it," he said. "I always wanted to make rubber bracelets stamped with WWF, you know, What Would Martha Want. Or What Would Oprah Want, because they are our deities. I figured that's how I'd make my money."

Be'd better hurry.