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FEATURES

**Hip-Hop
Springs
Style**

**Crafts on
the East End**

**DEEDS & DON'TS
How Much
Is Enough?**

**WINE & SPIRITS
Get with These
Super-Tuscans**

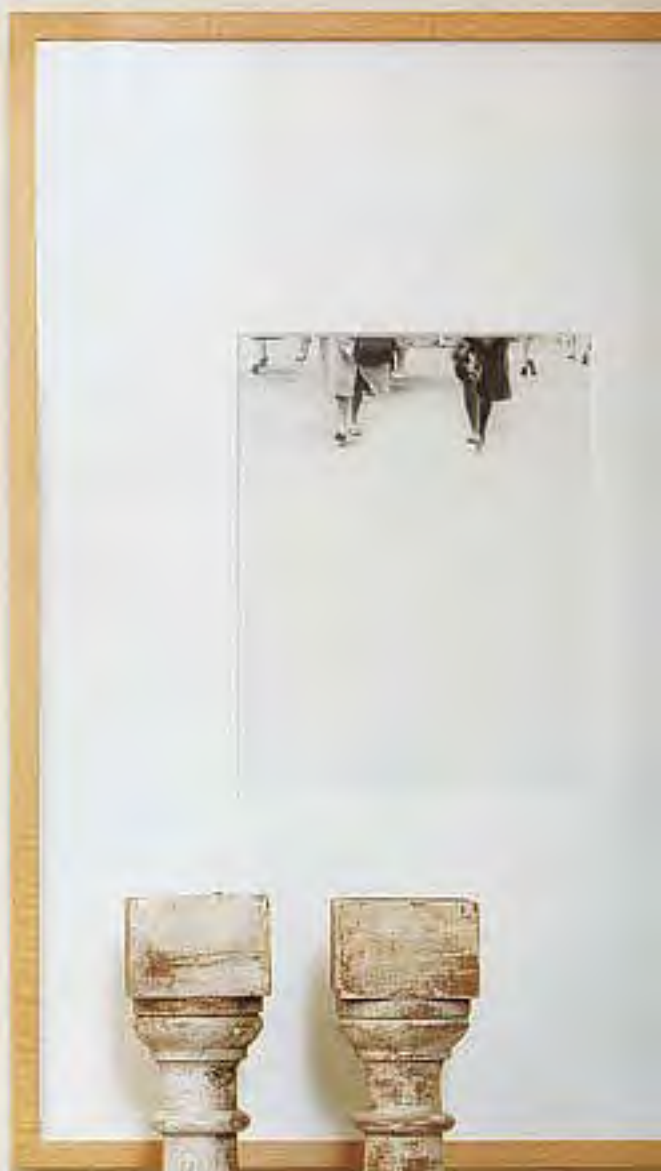
**Step Up
For Freedom!**

Fait Accompli

When a couple built a house in the Northwest Woods, they had no idea just how involved they'd become in the process

BY LOCKHART STEELE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BÄRBEL MIEBACH

FEAR OF THE BLANK SLATE—it's one reason more people don't roll the dice on decorating their own homes. Faced with so many empty rooms, the mind races: can we find enough to fill this vacant corner, that blank wall? (The trauma is particularly acute when it's a second home that won't reap the same benefits of decades-long-accumulation of art, objects and furnishings as a primary residence does.) And then there's the final exam: once everything's been gathered, where to put it all?



Stage Set | An old tray table (above) in the entry way sits beneath photographs prints by Donald Bannister, the owner's late father. *See Bannister*



Piece de Resistance | In the living room, a mantel from a French chateau (1871) was found at John Sabello, Bridgehampton. The sconces are 1940's French from R. E. Steele, East Hampton. **View** | A view of the living room looking out to the backyard (opposite). The large gray sofa is custom; the wooden coffee table was discovered by Hillman on a trip to Thailand. See Remover

112 | Good decorating, however, is frequently not the result of a too-studied plan. There's something to be said for letting the house and furnishings play a symbiotic part in the process; for listening for spontaneity's knock at the door. At a house in the Northwest Woods, Julie Hillman and her husband experienced exactly this sort of tabula rasa. The results serve as inspiration to anyone who has stared at a swatch of fabric or an empty room and wondered, "What if?"

When the couple decided to build on the forested lot, they were quite literally starting from scratch. Hillman, a fashion designer by training, had recently left the business and was busy raising her two young children. They knew they wanted a house that would serve as a getaway from Manhattan for their young family and also echo the feel of an old house. Little did they know just how involved they would become in the creative process.





Mix and Match | The bright dining room (LEFT) features a mix of pieces found locally and internationally, including an oversized Burgundy wine table.

Side Slight | A dining room island (BOTTOM) hosts an array of objects. At right, an Alexander Noll sculpture stands tall near a collection of garden balls that Hillman likes to use to decorate the living room table.

Great Outdoors | A summer living room opens off the kitchen in the rear of the house (OPPOSITE PAGE). See *Residence*.



Their first decision was to place a call to Farnaz Mansuri. The Manhattan-based architect laid out a classic residence in the shape of an H—a scheme that would ensure a strong centerpiece connecting the house's public rooms. Then, while construction got underway on the East End, Hillman and her husband left for France.

This wasn't out of the ordinary. "We've always traveled a lot," Hillman says. This time, though, they caught a new bug. "Suddenly, traveling through Provence, we realized we had this big house to fill with furniture," she explains. "We just started buying pieces we loved and slapping them back to the Hamptons."

One by one, the pieces arrived back on American shores: an island perhaps suited for use in a kitchen, an enormous wine table from Burgundy; a fireplace mantle. As the couple continued their travels, they continued collecting.

Once construction was completed, the real fun began. As the movers brought the newly procured pieces into the house, Hillman turned director. "As I was putting the furniture in the house, I was learning how to decorate a house," she explains. "I just buy what I love, walk it inside, and walk it around until it finds a home." Some rooms came together easily: the Burgundy wine table, for instance, made a perfect dining room table. But, other rooms called out for additional pieces, so Hillman shopped the South Fork with abandon.





Linens 'n Things | A dazzling linen closet (1777) near the master bedroom features a French door to show off its wares. **Bath Room** | The spacious master bathroom (1812, 1817) features more Donald Brundheim photos. **Year Round** | In the serene master bedroom (opposite), white slipcovered sofas flank a table made from an African drum. See Resources.



Now, more than half a decade later, the fruits of her efforts are apparent throughout the house, as is her evolving taste. Trips to Southeast Asia, for instance, resulted in a number of interesting discoveries, and a newfound love for French furniture from the 1940's and 50's is also apparent.

The double-height living room is an eclectic mix of finds foreign and local, high and low. The eye is drawn to the bold mantle—a French chateau piece Hillman turned up at John Salibello in Bridgehampton. (As it turned out, purchasing fireplace mantels during construction proved astute, because the house's fireplaces could be crafted to fit them.)

There are also more whimsical touches, like a bearskin rug Hillman found at a Manhattan pier show that lies underneath a table carved out of a single piece of wood that the couple found in Thailand. The dominant element of the room is an enormous, moody photographer's backdrop that Hillman found at R. E. Steele and converted into found artwork. "We hung it up to see if we liked it, and right away it drew us in," she says. "It made the room."

The dining room, which is situated on the bar of the H that unites the living room wing with the kitchen wing, is a similar mix. Besides the Burgundy wine table, the chairs are



Paris flea market finds, while the chandelier—a converted ship's lantern—was uncovered at Lars Bolander in East Hampton.

Upstairs, the master bedroom and bathroom run the length of the kitchen wing. "It's a huge bedroom, and how to set it up was a big decision," Hillman allows. Working with a palette primarily of white, Hillman placed a seating area near French doors that lead to a terrace. An ultrasuede wave chaise found at AreaID in Nolita offers repose near the fireplace, while a Jacques Adnet black leather desk sits against a far

wall. Lucite lamps from eBay flank the bed, which has a bright Joan Snyder painting above it.

Like every room in this house, the master bedroom is a reminder that decorating can come from the heart, not just the head. In the end, Hillman found the process so pleasurable that she decided to start her own decorating business. "The way I worked on this house is the way I work with clients well. Every single piece I buy for a client, I want them to absolutely adore," Hillman explains. "Don't be afraid to buy what you love." 🍷