

# 'A' FOR EFFORT

WELCOME TO  
THE ACADEMY,  
THE FORMER  
LONG ISLAND  
SCHOOL-  
HOUSE WHERE  
DESIGNER  
THOMAS  
O'BRIEN HAS  
ESTABLISHED  
HIS OWN  
CURRICULUM  
FOR STYLISH  
LIVING.

Once part of the Bellport Classical Academy, O'Brien's living room earns its own winning marks for grace and poise. The sofas, coffee table and slat-back chairs are all O'Brien's designs; for Hickory Chair; the Saarinen tulip table at left is a choice "junking find." For shopping information, see page 20.

BY MARISA BARTOLUCCI  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA RESEN





**When Thomas O'Brien opened** the glamorous, mercury-mirrored doors of Aero Studios in Manhattan's SoHo eleven years ago, the design firm and furniture gallery became a style maker overnight. Aero's artful assemblage of classic, vintage modern, and exotic furnishings, everyday found objects and casual accessories conjured an atmosphere of spare sophistication and easy luxury. It seemed a revelation. An A-list roster of clients swiftly followed, among them Ralph Lauren (O'Brien's former employer) and Giorgio Armani. O'Brien quickly moved into product and hotel design as well, collaborating with Waterworks, Hickory Chair, Marshall Field's and the Manhattan boutique hotel 60 Thompson.

How does one acquire such winning and original style? It's likely O'Brien was born with it. (Boyish good looks also happen to be part of his genetic equation.) But it helps to know that since he was very young, O'Brien has been an inveterate, indefatigable antiquer. Which may well explain the obsession with detail in his work. He loves to carry a project through right down to the homey accessories, for instance, shopping for a holiday dinner service composed of rare Vic-

torian soup plates, Edwardian blue-and-gold Wedgwood and antique etched crystal.

"He won't settle," says Barbara Janulis, whose Colonial-Revival house in Connecticut was recently restored and furnished by O'Brien. "When Thomas decorated my place for the Christmas season, he spent an hour just arranging the mantel. He found the perfect Victorian sleigh ornament for the centerpiece—it looked straight out of a Currier & Ives Christmas card."

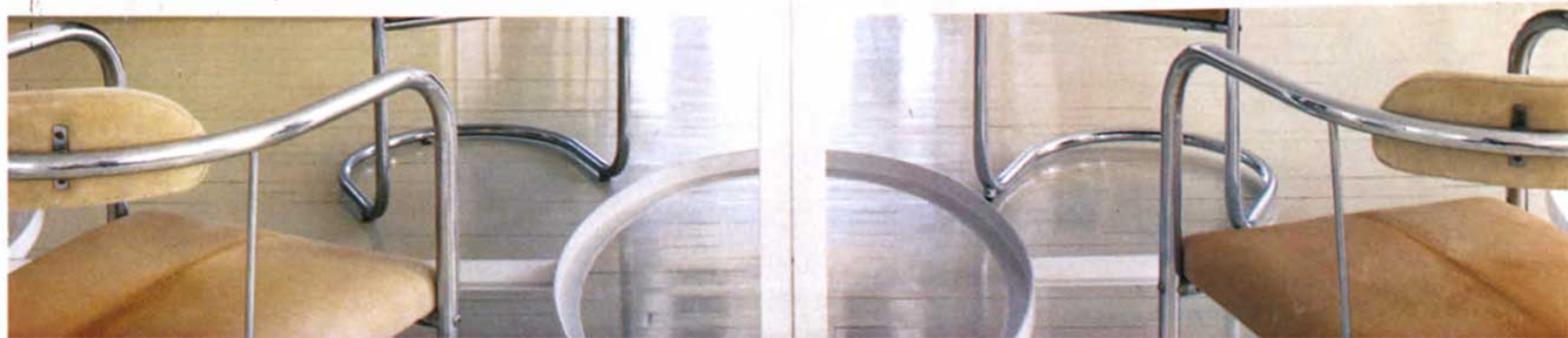
O'Brien began "going junking" as a boy with his father and grandmother in his native upstate New York. From the start, he thrilled to the hunt for objects with distinctive features—an early desk lamp with a graceful neck, a deerskin-covered ottoman—and displayed a knack for transforming derelict pieces into things freshly elegant by using unexpected upholstery or a dab of paint. But what he delighted in more than most were the narratives behind things: the table passed down through a family, or the delicately painted porcelain plates that had come out of the grandest house in town. Whether these items were precious or humble never concerned him. O'Brien's eye for beauty and his taste for a good story were all-encompassing. ("When I work with clients, I may equally recommend an object worth \$40 or \$40,000," he says.) Of course, like all great

antiquers, he possesses serendipity in abundance.

His discovery of the Academy, his five-bedroom house in Bellport, on Long Island's South Shore, was nothing if not serendipitous. For more than ten years, the Manhattan-based O'Brien would bicycle from his weekend cottage in neighboring Brookhaven through that charming, hedge-rimmed hamlet of Colonial-Revival homes on his way to the beach. (As befits O'Brien's low-key character, Bellport is the discreet summer retreat of such privacy-loving New Yorkers as Isabella Rossellini and Charlie Rose.) One day in the spring of 2001 he took a different route and came upon a nobly proportioned neoclassical-revival building—a library? a

**Inspired by the crisp neoclassicism of his 1833 house (opposite, top left), not to mention its storied past, Thomas O'Brien (above) painted much of the interior high-gloss black and white, using Benjamin Moore's industrial enamels. He added Dutch doors in the mudroom (opposite, top right) to keep his pets in without forfeiting fresh air, and designed twin wood-and-steel dining tables for the great room (opposite, bottom).**











Bub (left) and Daisy settle into a 19th-century French child's bed. Opposite, clockwise from top: O'Brien combined several upstairs rooms to create a master suite comprising a bedroom, bath, dressing room and study. The bed is made with blankets and linens from the designer's new Essex line for Marshall Field's. Walls are painted in Donald Kaufman Color Collection DKC-29.







school? a private house?—in the early stages of decay. Closer inspection revealed exceptional details: an Adam-style fan-light, dentil moldings, arched doorways, a bell tower and, best of all, empty rooms. The house was for sale.

O'Brien has been in love with clean-lined neoclassicism since childhood, and almost instinctively he found himself heading for the realtor's office. During the next two years, he reconceived, renovated and furnished the house with his signature celerity and skill. (The fact that one of his old friends, Randy Polumbo, happened to be a builder with New York's 3-D Laboratory also proved serendipitous.) In short order, the Academy has become a showcase for O'Brien's lifetime of stylish scavenging. But more than simply a gracious home, it is also—this restless arranger can't help himself—a design lab, a place to try out new ideas and to tutor clients in his relaxed but ever-so-refined approach to living.

As its name suggests, the Academy began life in 1833 as a schoolhouse, Bellport's first. It played that role until 1902, when it became briefly a cabinetmaker's shop and then a private residence. The couple who bought it from the cabinetmaker moved it down the lane onto a two-acre lot, adding a wing with a kitchen below and bedrooms above, along with an entry portico and an enchanting enclosed porch with its own hearth. The wife, a poet, was so pleased with her new house that she versified its charms; O'Brien has made it his

mission to preserve and update them. Along the way, he's clearly grown infatuated. What started out as a weekend house has become O'Brien's domestic anchor, a cherished retreat and a favored place for entertaining friends.

The designer is known for the convivial logic of his interiors, and his skill is apparent as soon as you walk into the great room, the Academy's former classroom. The high-ceilinged space has been divided into four seating areas that serve different functions and afford varying degrees of intimacy. The great room is painted a brilliant, glossy cool white from floor to ceiling, with many of its furnishings white or neutral, so that it glistens invitingly in daylight and glows, lanternlike, by night. The doors and stair rails are painted a glossy black, for a look O'Brien has archly termed "institutional romantic." (He was inspired, he says, by the lacquered walls of English public schools and the below-stairs rooms of the country house in the film *Gosford Park*. He's even furnished the Academy's bedroom ▶200

**While renovating, O'Brien somewhat ruefully ripped apart the house's decrepit kitchen in order to enlarge it. But the new space (opposite) successfully evokes the old, thanks to the designer's ingenious use of vintage-looking hardware and lighting, a bleached-cork floor and classic *bianco miele* marble for counters, backsplash and shelving. The finishing touch: a 1940s George Sakier nickel-plated brass bar sink (above).**



