

JULY-AUGUST 2005

# VERANDA





# COMFORT ZONE

HAVEN IN THE HAMPTONS



INTERIOR DESIGN BY THOMAS O'BRIEN PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURA RESEN

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OPENING PAGES: The northern veranda of this Southampton house offers a lake view. LEFT: Living room sofas covered in Clarence House chenille. Armchairs upholstered in Cowtan & Tout fabric. Ottoman wears calfskin and 20th-c. Bengal sari. Early 19th-c. Italian mirror above mantel. Custom leather-covered drapery rods support sheers in Bergamo cotton-silk. BELOW: Bronze table made by Soane, London. Aero poplar lamp beside Wedgwood vase designed by Keith Murray.







Antique Swedish chairs upholstered in Edelman leather. Contemporary dining table finished in Benjamin Moore high-gloss enamel paint. Pair of 19th-c. candlesticks. Noguchi's Akari lamp hangs from ceiling. Stephen McKay sconces flank vintage mirror. White crackle-glaze pottery is French, c. 1930s. Antique mercury glass lamp on demilune.



WITHIN THE RARIFIED WORLD OF INTERIORS, THOMAS O'BRIEN RANKS AS A BREED UNTO HIMSELF—RARA AVIS STATUS BELIED BY A DISARMING MODESTY, EVERYDAY CORDUROYS AND TORTOISESHELL

horn-rims of the quasi-chic but slightly nerdy school. Yes, O'Brien's taste is exceptional, his sensibilities refined and his knowledge of antiques and vintage goods seemingly encyclopedic. All leading designers, however, meet these basic criteria. What distinguishes the mastermind of Aero, the Broome Street boutique that decor cognoscenti list among New York's more seductive shopping destinations, and Aero Studios, O'Brien's interiors atelier behind the store, is that he loves being a merchant as much as he loves being a designer. For years he has trademarked his name for a swelling portfolio of licensed products.

O'Brien's love of the merchant life plays a principal role in the interiors he conceives, as it did in the case of the antiques-filled spaces of this late nineteenth-century, shingle-style house in the Hamptons, on which he worked with Michael Aiduss, director of Aero Studios. The client, no design neophyte, happened into Aero as one might on a stroll through SoHo and, taken with its vintage pieces, antiques and contemporary designs, engaged O'Brien. A commission to redesign the beach house soon followed.

"The store becomes a good place to talk about the size of things, the color of things, the shape of things"—the elements of style, in other words, and taste and desire, he says. It provides a testing ground for O'Brien's eye as well as material for the kind of client-designer discussions that result in the most satisfying personal spaces. Besides, the designer adds, "When I was a kid, I played store. It's in my blood, and I love the challenge of it."

When the client purchased the eight-bedroom lakefront house, it was furnished attractively with wicker pieces and Swedish cabinets. The client's taste, however, runs to fine antiques and luxe textiles. O'Brien and Aiduss replaced the upholstery and almost all the furnishings, moving much of the wicker out to the porch after painting and reupholstering. They renovated the kitchen and master bath, adding a sauna.

"My job is looking, showing things and helping clients build a collection," says O'Brien. "I plead for beautiful and often mismatched things, but I don't always win." That's when the professor—remember the horn-rims—emerges. "When a component of a project is maybe more expensive, I explain what I know, what I've learned, because we all want good things with great value." Besides furniture and antiques, much of O'Brien's work involves improving function—hardware, for example, and lighting—things he both designs and collects for himself and his store.

For this residence, O'Brien mixed high-caliber American and Swedish pieces with others from many countries and many periods, as well as some of his own designs, to complement the existing Swedish cabinetry. The light-filled interiors exemplify O'Brien's well-honed standard of easy everyday elegance. They are punctuated by the unexpected choice—nineteenth-century American fluted columns once used as artist's posing stools; the unusual provenance—nineteenth-century adjustable silver candlesticks; and the wonderful value—Isamu Noguchi paper chandelier—that characterize the O'Brien/Aero aesthetic.

As for fabrics, they range from mohair and silk to leather and suede to block prints. "They're not the normal things you would see at the beach," says O'Brien. "One sofa is upholstered in silk velvet. I love it myself, and I love the way it perishes. A lot of people are not sensitive to that, but this client was." The palette mimics the many glories of the Hamptons light, from palomino to honey through most of the infinite shades of beige, cream, white and gray. Different textures and materials catch, absorb and reflect the light as it shifts at different times of day and changes with the seasons.

The designer's efforts achieve a subtle beauty that should age well. Serenity, light and comfort are made manifest, thanks to Aero Studios and its inspired *rara avis*. □

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Circular 18th- and 19th-c. mirrors. Drapery fabric from Old World Weavers. Aero custom ceramic urn lamp on table. In kitchen, Aero craft aluminum and wood chairs surround custom-finished trestle table, part of Thomas O'Brien Collection for Hickory Chair. O'Brien designed tableware for Salton At Home. Against wall is 19th-c. French two-tiered iron and white ceramic table. Holophane light fixture, c. 1940. Aero Studios handpainted floor pattern inspired by British Colonial floor tiles. Dining room chair is one of four upholstered in reverse side of Lee Jofa handblock fabric. Says O'Brien, "I love the rich ink bleeding through."









"We collected all the antiques for the master bedroom and then designed the bed," says O'Brien. Mahogany bed has headboard in Kravet sueded fabric. Bed linens from O'Brien's collection for Marshall Field's. Custom chair and ottoman wear raised stripe from Clarence House. Carpet is late-20th-c. Sultanabad. Italian four-drawer commode, c. 1850. Empire mahogany mirror. OPPOSITE: Hand-embroidered drapery fabric in master bedroom from Holland & Sherry. George Nakashima black walnut table, c. 1956. Custom chaise wears Kravet sueded fabric. English 18th-c. fire tools. FOLLOWING PAGES: In sunroom, sectional in Covington fabric. Adolf Loos stools, c. 1910; join oak stools, c. 1940. Brass table lamp is English.

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