

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

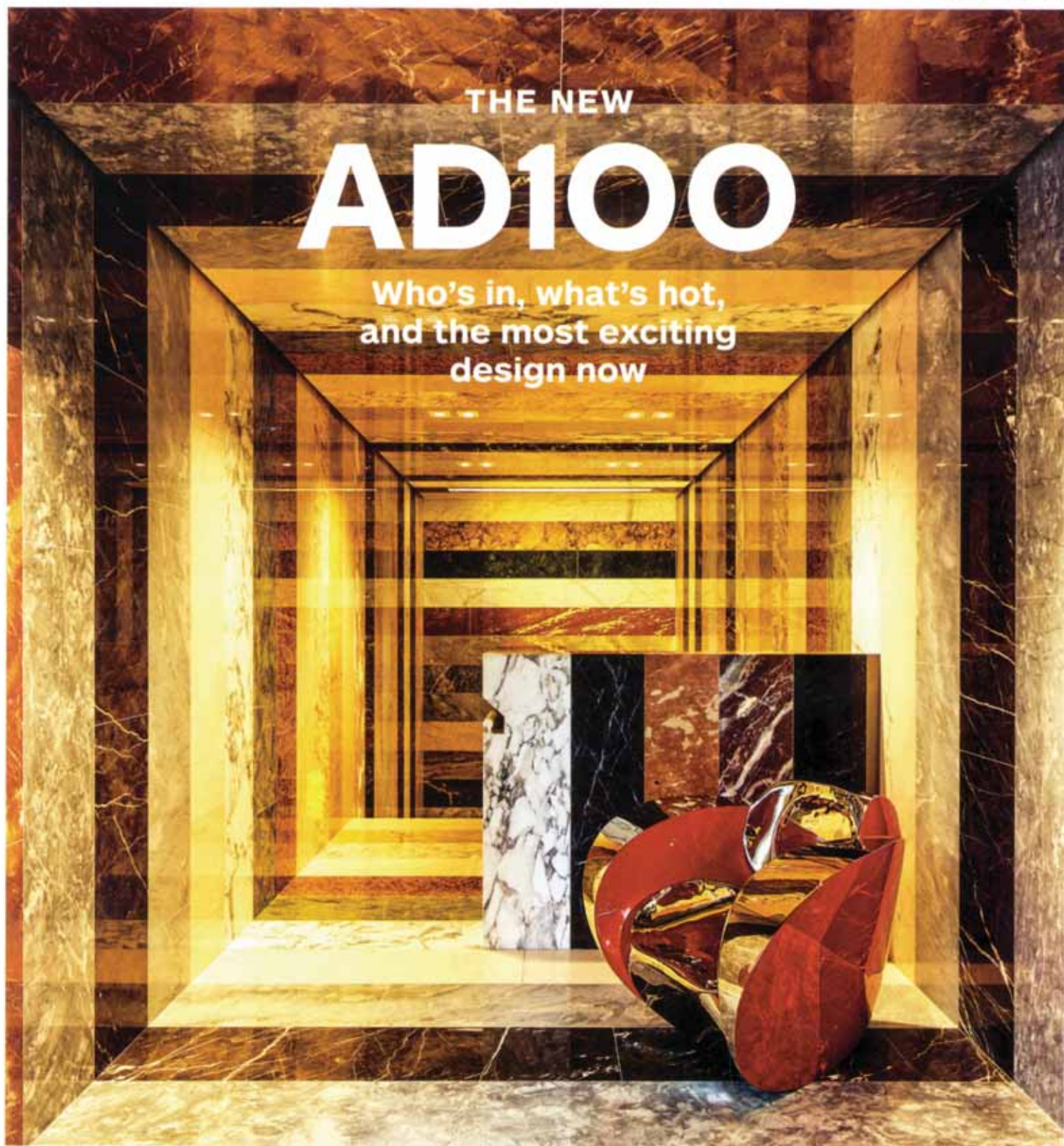
THE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN AUTHORITY

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THE NEW

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FULL HOUSE

In the Library, a new house next door to the Academy—his home base on Long Island—designer *Thomas O'Brien* presents his vision of the good life

TEXT BY LISA LIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS DISCHINGER STYLED BY MICHAEL REYNOLDS



A COLLECTION OF AMERICAN IMPRESSIONIST LANDSCAPES HANGS IN THE MAIN STAIR HALL OF THOMAS O'BRIEN'S NEW LONG ISLAND HOUSE. WALLPAPER BY GP & J BAKER FOR LEE JOFA. OPPOSITE O'BRIEN (LEFT) AND HUSBAND DAN FINK IN FRONT OF THE PROPERTY'S GARDEN HOUSE. FOR DETAILS SEE SOURCES.



ABOVE AN ENORMOUS ANTIQUE MAHOGANY BREAKFRONT DOMINATES ONE END OF THE VAST LIBRARY. OPPOSITE IN THE MAIN ENTRY HALL, A PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING PENN HANGS OVER A VINTAGE IRISH SETTEE DRESSED IN A PIERRE FREY VELVET. BRASS SWING-ARM CANDLESTICK LAMP BY THOMAS O'BRIEN FOR VISUAL COMFORT.

“Collecting is part of how I work,” says O’Brien. “I’m always finding intriguing and wonderful things.”



THOMAS



ABOVE EARLY AMERICAN ANTIQUES SET THE TONE IN THE FRONT ENTRANCE HALL. WALLS PAINTED IN FARROW & BALL'S MAHOGANY; MARBLE FLOORING FROM DALTELE. **OPPOSITE** THE MASSIVE (SEVEN-BY-11.5-FOOT) FIREPLACE IS FRAMED IN HAND-CARVED WOOD AND CALACATTA PAONAZZO MARBLE. EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN MIRROR.

O'Brien has the eagle eye of a lifelong collector, but he will tell you that the best finds happen when you're not really looking for them. And so, when the 1950s ranch next door to his 19th-century schoolhouse in Bellport, New York, became available, O'Brien could sense the workings of fate. The designer knew that the adjacent piece of land had once been part of the parcel on which the old school, his main residence (known by all in town as the Academy), now stands and that this was a rare opportunity to reunite long-separated sections of the vintage property. At first he focused on the landscape, protecting its beautiful old-growth trees and planting more gardens. But fortune favors the bold, and as he worked on the project, a bigger dream began to unfold.

A more historically authentic building within the gardens took shape in O'Brien's mind. Following the footprint of the ranch house, he conceived an impeccably detailed conservatory-cum-residence that would serve as a practical repository for his myriad collections—decades of gathered art, antiquities, furniture, books, tableware, textiles, lighting, favorite antiques from Aero (his long-time shop in Manhattan), plus his own prototypes and out-of-production designs, all saved as a design resource. "Collecting is part of how I work," he explains. "I'm always finding intriguing and wonderful things that I want to make into something for today. It's just that for the longest time I didn't have a place to put it all. A lot was in storage, like an entire history that was hidden away."

Then O'Brien met his now-husband, fellow designer Dan Fink, by chance, at a benefit in New York City. And as the two traveled together—through Northern California, Europe, Japan—they began collecting more ideas and unique furnishings to make the evolving house into something new yet again: their true home together.

The result is a remarkable hybrid of residence, garden, and studio, affectionately called the Library. It's a departure from the quietly modern, thoughtfully luxe interiors that have long been an O'Brien hallmark. And it just may be the closest the designer has ever come to fully realizing the creative vision he's been nurturing for years.

At turns glamorous and intimate, the Library is a from-the-ground-up revival of the kind of historic, cultured, formal house and garden O'Brien has always admired—yet one that is elegantly curated for every dimension of fine living in the modern world.

"The house and its contents and the rhythms of how we live all inform each other," Fink says appreciatively. "Thomas designed this space anticipating just the right spot or use for every single piece, even when no one else could see where it was all going to go. We both believe that beautiful things will always find a home, and this is a place where we've been fortunate to give that vision full expression."

In a complete sleight of hand, the structure looks as though it's generations old, added onto in rambling fashion over time (an "1840s" classic white-shingled New England-style house in the front, a deceptively grand "1920s" white-painted brick neoclassical annex in the rear) and immaculately renovated for today. No one who visits can grasp at first that every element of the architecture is new—historically accurate, visually noble, but in a combination that was entirely sprung from O'Brien's imagination. →





OPPOSITE A VINTAGE T. H. ROBSJOHN-GIBBINGS KLISMOS CHAIR AND FOOTSTOOL SIT IN THE CALACATTA-MARBLE-CLAD MASTER BATH. LIGHTING BY THOMAS O'BRIEN FOR VISUAL COMFORT; TUB AND FITTINGS BY WATERWORKS. BELOW IN A GUEST ROOM, CY TWOMBLY LITHOGRAPHS HANG ABOVE A PAIR OF ANTIQUE CARVED-WOOD BEDS.





"We both believe that beautiful things will always find a home," says *Fink*.

And then there's the inside. Each space is filled with its own maximalist poetry of furniture, objects, and extensive period and modern art, orchestrated in rich, uninhibited layers; the luxuriant finishes, fabrics, and imagery all connect intuitively to the gardens. The main event is the vast 52-by-32-foot library, with its astonishing circa-1770 Georgian mahogany cabinet standing nearly 14 feet tall and 15 feet wide. O'Brien found the cabinet at Christie's, then composed the room around it. "The wood alone today would cost more than this piece did," he says, laughing. "Nobody knew what to do with it because it was so huge. So in its own way it was this special orphan that I was able to give a home to." O'Brien carefully removed two of the central back panels and replaced them with glass so that the collections within—Picasso ceramics and Steuben and Italian glass among them—are backlit by a window that looks out on the gardens. The effect recalls the illuminated cabinets of colored glass at the Beauport estate in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

THE library follows O'Brien's original notion of a gallery-like repository, with ceiling-high bookcases, a cherished

1920s Steinway piano that was his gift to Fink (a classically trained singer), and a wide atrium stairwell leading down to the airy studio and product archive. A handsome, cleverly arranged open kitchen presides over the other side of the space and serves as a bridge to the "older" front part of the house. "I really just love a big room," O'Brien says, and it's obvious that the artist's loft has been a career-long touchstone from his student days at New York's Cooper Union and through many of the homes he has designed. "Big rooms are magical to be in. This version happens to have more classical architecture. But that open way of living is what's modern to me."

The house has become a destination for clients and brand partners who, for a day, get to step into a living design laboratory while being indulged by the couple's hospitality. During meetings and at weekend gatherings with friends, Fink and O'Brien—who both love to cook—will happily pause to prepare a rustic meal, often with ingredients just picked or preserved from the gardens. No flourish is missed, yet the way of life here isn't precious. "We use every room, and we put our feet on the furniture," notes Fink. Saturday night cocktails in O'Brien's dreamlike office, with the couple's two dogs, Elcy Jones and Totie, are a tradition. "It's the dogs' favorite hour of the week," says Fink with a laugh. "The light in that room is so peaceful in both winter and summer," O'Brien adds.

Indeed, for all its treasures and tributes, the house is not a shrine. O'Brien sees it as a place that looks forward, presenting a vision of the classic home that people long for—romantic yet real, traditional but somehow modern, both refined and intensely personal. "I believe that things are worth saving, knowledge as much as physical objects," O'Brien says. "Memory is a really valuable design tool. To me, tradition is just the virtue of learning about, and loving, things that have come before, that are tried and true. And I'm interested in carrying those ideas forward for the time of now." ■

ABOVE IN A SEATING AREA, THE CUSTOM-MADE SOFA BY DE ANGELIS IS UPHOLSTERED IN A HINES & CO. VELVET AND THE OTTOMAN IS AN AERO STUDIOS DESIGN. GEORGE II SLAT-FRONT BUREAU PAIRED WITH DANISH JUGENDSTIL ARMCHAIR; VINTAGE CELESTIAL GLOBE PURCHASED AT CHRISTIE'S.

DESIGN NOTES

In fashioning his new house, designer Thomas O'Brien created a home with plenty of room for all his favorite things



SET OF THREE NESTING BASKETS; \$325. AEROSTUDIOS.COM



ODEON DECANTER BY THOMAS O'BRIEN FOR REED & BARTON; \$150, AVAILABLE IN FEBRUARY. BLOOMINGDALES.COM



FRED CHAIR BY THOMAS O'BRIEN FOR CENTURY FURNITURE; \$6,435. CENTURYFURNITURE.COM



VINTAGE CHINESE CELADON VASE; \$750. AEROSTUDIOS.COM



ENRICO TABLE LAMP BY THOMAS O'BRIEN FOR VISUAL COMFORT; \$483. CIRCALIGHTING.COM



O'BRIEN'S OFFICE WALLS ARE DRESSED IN LEE JOFA'S NYMPHEUS FABRIC, HUNG ON THE REVERSE FOR A SOFTER LOOK. THE CIRCA-1940 ITALIAN DESK, BOUGHT AT COLEFAX AND FOWLER IN LONDON, WAS A GIFT FROM HIS HUSBAND, DAN FINK.



NYMPHEUS PRINT IN INDIGO/MARINE/LINEN BY GP & J BAKER; TO THE TRADE. LEEJOFA.COM

"I often start a project with doors and windows," says O'Brien. "They're like the furniture of the architecture."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF AERO; JOHN MAHND; COURTESY OF CENTURY FURNITURE; STUART TYSON; COURTESY OF CIRCALIGHTING; FRANÇOIS DISCHINGER; COURTESY OF CIRCALIGHTING; PAUL AMBRUSTER; COURTESY OF FOOD52; STUART TYSON (3); COURTESY OF AERO; COURTESY OF GP & J BAKER; FRANÇOIS DISCHINGER



RUSTIC GREEN GLAZE GARDEN STOOL; \$425. AEROSTUDIOS.COM



LUXE FAUX-FUR THROWS IN LYNX AND MINK; \$109 EACH. RH.COM



ELIZABETH CHANDELIER BY THOMAS O'BRIEN FOR VISUAL COMFORT; \$5,250. CIRCALIGHTING.COM

THE COUPLE'S COLLECTION OF VINTAGE AND NEW COPPER COOKWARE HANGS IN THE PANTRY.



VINTAGE COPPER SAUCEPAN FROM COPPERMILL KITCHEN; \$425. FOOD52.COM

"I believe in beautiful things in a very big way. You're only as good as the materials you have to work with."



VINTAGE HORSE-HEAD SCULPTURE; \$550. AEROSTUDIOS.COM

VINTAGE ANATOLIAN KARS RUG; \$5,500 FOR 6'1" X 10'5". AEROSTUDIOS.COM