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House Beautiful

the **BIG Advice** ISSUE

what nobody ever tells you about decorating

GREEN KITCHEN IDEAS!







The **BIG**
ADVICE
Issue

WHAT
NOBODY
EVER
TELLS YOU

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A HOUSE MUST FLOW

*Why is it that when
Vicente Wolf is the designer,
you just seem to
float from room to room?*

BIG ADVICE

**You'll never get tired
of a white room.**

Interior design by
VICENTE WOLF

Interview by **LISA CREGAN**

Photographs by
ERIC PIASECKI

White walls, ceilings, and floor give the living room of this Southampton, New York, cottage a fresh, light spirit. "I wanted the house to feel young and fun," says designer Vicente Wolf. He hung antique Indonesian window transoms over the fireplace: "They're so airy—they don't close up the room." Cowhide rugs from Edelman and a Saarinen chair from Knoll soften the straight lines of 1940s French armchairs. Paint is Benjamin Moore Super White.

LISA CREGAN: Let's be candid. You're a pretty high-octane personality. How do you channel all that energy into such tranquil design?

VICENTE WOLF: First I make sure there's always a flow. Like water flowing down a river. There might be a little rock here and a little bit of rapids there, but the river never stops flowing.

I'm afraid you've lost me.

Okay, take this house. See how the color white flows through these spaces? Walls, floors, ceilings, all white—the whole downstairs is painted Benjamin Moore Super White. And the same linens and cottons turn up everywhere, lots of mercurial grays that are very pale in the day, darker at night. That's the flow. But then come the rapids—the black ottoman in the dining area, the dark Chinese tables in the bedroom, and those lacy wood pieces over the living room fireplace. They're the shots of energy that break up the spiritual 'Ommm' here.

So you're just dabbing your brush here and there on a pure white canvas.

Exactly. White makes a strong foundation. It creates stability. Too much color and pattern feels nervous to me. I think nothing ruins a beautiful space faster than applying some little molding or wallpaper pattern to the background. I like my backgrounds clean—the space becomes about the shapes of the furniture, the light, and the pop of the objects. This dark mahogany dining table, for instance, against white walls creates very graphic, very stark contrast.

I'm guessing you get more from using white than contrast. What else?

White expands the space, it creates the sense of having no boundaries. See how the living room fireplace is all white? It doesn't stop your eye. I'm all about destroying the things that stop your eye at the perimeter of rooms. I want my spaces to feel like they have no beginning and no end.

And white makes it feel so wonderfully modern.

You know, white isn't modern. That's a common misconception. In 16th-century Europe everything was whitewashed, limed, because there weren't a lot of pigments.

Okay, so you've got your Elizabethan white shell—what came next?

There is no 'next.' Let me ask you, you're a writer. Do you start your stories with just the verbs or the nouns? Do you think up the adjectives first?

Ouch.

No, right? Because it all has to come together at the same time. Look, I'm a Cuban refugee—I came to this country when I was 15—and I have no formal education in design. If you have no formal education, your only guide is your point of view.

So what is your point of view?

I like yin and yang: dark against light, curvy against straight. I don't like pattern—never have.

Why would you want to take away from the beautiful shapes of the furniture?

Do you have any hard-and-fast rules?

I hate rules. For example, I'd never, ever put eight matching chairs around a dining table. You wouldn't have eight chairs all exactly the same in your living room, so why in your dining room?

Do the neutrals hold it all together?

Forget it, that banquette could have been pink. The color isn't what makes it work. It's all about sureness of hand, knowing how to mix disparate elements.

Well, how do you mix furniture without it feeling jittery and contrived?

I keep everything to a minimum. People get into trouble when they do too much of one thing—too much primitive, too many antiques. I think of mid-century pieces like the Saarinen chair in the living room and the Bertoa chair in the den as the olives in the martini, a nice touch. But if I'd done the living room all midcentury or the bedroom all Chinese, I'd be turning this place into something it's not. It would feel propped and fake.

But what about your trick with mirrors?

They're not a trick! I'm not fooling people. It goes back to the notion of having no boundaries. My mirrors are about kicking the walls out, bringing the outside in, expanding the space. It's not a traditional way of using mirrors, not decorative at all. Those large mirrors in the den are about contrast. The dark frames against the white paneling give weight to that end of the room, but they're not overwhelming because they're mirrors, transparent, unseen. Just like the bed curtains I like to use. They're sheer, transparent, see-through. Here I used them to add a little soft texture against the edges of the steel frame. And they make the bed its own space—enveloped, like a tent.

So mirrors, bed curtains—things you're known for—are really just problem-solvers?

It's what I do with the bad things, the negatives, that makes the best statement. The positives work themselves out without me. The fireplace niche in the bedroom was a big negative—it's tiny, and the ceilings are high. How do you make it an intimate space? I used the little tieback curtain to create the feeling of a separate seating area.

Why such simple window treatments?

The more the light floods a room, the happier I am. I hate heavy window treatments. To me they look like an overdressed woman.

For a guy with 'no formal education,' it's all pretty brilliant.

Oh, please. I'm not discovering a cure for cancer. I can alter people's lifestyles for the better, I can educate them, give them order, give them peace. But it's still meringue—you put it in your mouth and it dissolves.

PRODUCED BY DORETTA SPERDUTO



The dining room is small, so Wolf used a banquette and ottoman to seat as many people as possible. The table's dark walnut top looks less serious with its two white tulip bases from West Coast Industries. Bone-inlaid Indian armchairs take on a casualness with tie-on seat cushions covered in Giotto Linen from Classic Cloth. The Blelecky Brothers' ottoman is covered in vinylized linen from VW Home.



BIG ADVICE

Mix up the seating at your dining table. You wouldn't have eight identical chairs in your living room.



BIG ADVICE

Two large mirrors will completely change any room.



“People might call my rooms stark, but I think they’re like when you have a mint in your mouth and you breathe in deeply—there’s a freshness, a crispness.”

VICENTE WOLF

Large mirrors are a signature Wolf touch. The two that meet in a corner of the family room “open up the space and bring more of the outdoors in,” he says. “They also add depth and substance.” The open metal frame of the Bertola Diamond Lounge Chair echoes the mesh of the wicker armchairs from Bielecky Brothers.

"I went to Papua New Guinea, and I saw this bird. It was a slate-y blue. I kept it in my mind for five weeks. When I designed this bedroom, I thought, 'Boom! Let's use that color.'"

VICENTE WOLF

In the master bedroom, Wolf painted walls Benjamin Moore's Patriotic White, a color that "reads white in the day, then as it gets darker takes on a blue-y green tone." A tie-back silk curtain delineates a small seating area, and a Tom Baril photo "draws more attention because it's hung off-center." The comforter is made of Donghia's Glace, a wool sateen. Linens are from Anichini.





BIG ADVICE

A four-poster bed will take the chill out of a modern bedroom.



BIG ADVICE

The most versatile coffee table you'll ever own is an ottoman topped with a tray.

Furniture from Usona Home carries Wolf's river of white to the outdoor room. The filmy white curtain in Spinnaker from Janus et Cie is more practical than decorative, filtering the sun's strong ultraviolet rays. OPPOSITE: The family room's sectional sofa doubles as a guest bed. Wolf played off its sleek modern lines with a 19th-century Indonesian teak table. "The minimal with the primitive—that's the look." FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

