

The New York Times

You Show Me Your Décor, I'll Show You Mine

Peeping at the flaws and flourishes in others' living spaces is one of the sustaining pleasures of 21st-century self-isolation.



By Penelope Green

Published March 31, 2020 Updated April 1, 2020



Barrie Benson showed off swatches of wallpaper she has been working on in collaboration with an artist, Jackie Gendel. Katherine Benson

As Americans dutifully sequestered themselves into their homes last week, enacting their own versions of Emma Donoghue's novel "Room" (flopping down on Rug, Sofa and Bed, perhaps fighting over Vacuum and Dishes, united in dreams of Outside), they took their pleasures where they could.

One popular distraction has been the window into other people's rooms: the glimpses of the domestic habitats of colleagues, celebrities and newscasters that video meetings, Twitter P.S.A.s and home

Philip Martin Gallery

broadcasts are affording us. The blurry visuals and weird angles have been a tonic for the overwrought environments of Instagram (corgis quarantining in Quogue) — more Loud, as in the seminal 1973 PBS documentary, “An American Family,” than Kardashian.

The real thrill is the décor peeping. The code switching signaled by the elegant millwork and beautifully bound classics behind the shoulder of your hoodie-wearing boss; the glossy leaves of a philodendron that derailed an entire staff meeting; the animal hide in a new manager’s bedroom. A colleague’s baby. Anderson Cooper’s bookshelves (the gilded bindings, and was that a faux-malachite wall finish?). Every newscaster’s bookshelves. Dan Rather’s swoopy white laminate kitchen and accordion blinds. The bark wallpaper in Jimmy Fallon’s house. Who can concentrate on the endless news?

“Nice friggin’ kitchen!” Sara Sheehan, a producer and documentary filmmaker in Westchester County, N.Y., blurted out in the middle of a strategy meeting with a male colleague. “Before the call I thought, Oh, young guy. Just starting out. Starter house. And then I saw the kitchen. The marble backsplash. The window treatments. I probably should have controlled my response. But your inner voice becomes your outer voice by accident and change of venue.”

It was the grommet curtains in William Brangham’s living room that set off Elaine Griffin, an interior designer in Brunswick, Ga. It’s a beautiful room, and Ms. Griffin was not the first to get bogged down by its details and tune out the reporting delivered by the very sober Mr. Brangham, a correspondent for PBS, who on the night in question was interviewing a hospital C.E.O. on the shortage of medical supplies and the terrible challenges her workers were facing.

Ms. Griffin, briefly, allowed herself an escape. She was clocking the white sofa, and was that a John Robshaw pillow? Was the painting above actually fiber art? It seemed to have a texture to it.

She noted the fireplace and the bookshelves, more elegant than most. So why, Ms. Griffin wondered, “does he have the \$19.99 panels from Bed Bath & Beyond? Grommet curtains are the drapery equivalent of a No. 1 with fries. He has a fireplace! Why did he cheap out on the curtains?”

With some vehemence, Ms. Griffin then delivered a stern tutorial on how to hang curtains: just below the ceiling and at least four inches on either side of the window trim, a lesson apparently not followed by Mr. Brangham. She then pivoted to the pair of bookshelves flanking the French doors behind Mr. Brangham’s head. “You know his ceilings are higher than eight feet. He’s in a million-dollar townhouse in Georgetown. Like, why don’t they go floor to ceiling?”

Rampant Pundit Clutter

When citizens were urged into self-isolation or quarantine 100 years ago, they had but books and letters to comfort them. Now, we peer through the tiny eyes of our smartphones and laptops, and the world peers back. We have all become voyeurs, and critical ones at that.

“We can’t help it,” Ms. Griffin said. “We are visual creatures. It’s in our DNA to observe and judge. Everyone from the intern to the guy in the C-suite is having meetings from home. People decorate their homes to please themselves, and now it’s open judging season for folks they would previously have never invited over.”

The other night on MSNBC, Kasie Hunt was analyzing the \$2 trillion aid package, but Ondine Karady, a Manhattan interior and set designer, for “Sex & the City,” among other shows, was fixated on the books to the left of Ms. Hunt’s head, which had been grouped by color: one shelf in red, and one in blue. Really? Was she telegraphing political objectivity? And if she had taken the time to style those shelves, why hadn’t she done so on the shelves below?

Philip Martin Gallery

“It’s not that hard to straighten your shelves up if you know you’re going to be on TV every night,” said Ms. Karady, who is particularly irritated by what she sees as rampant pundit clutter. “Even Biden’s bookshelves are messy.”

She was charmed, however, by the potted ferns in Walter Isaacson’s elegant New Orleans living room. “Is he watering them himself?” she wondered of Mr. Isaacson, a journalist turned historian and biographer.

As the playwright Paul Rudnick scans the news, he too has been keeping an eye out for décor tips and “also hints of newscasters’ families, pets and sex dungeons,” he wrote in an email.

Mr. Rudnick added: “I’ve appreciated Dr. Max Gomez, a medical expert on CBS News, both for his helpful and sane answers to questions about the virus, and for the fact that he keeps changing locations in what looks like his very nice, immaculate apartment (a clean home gives me confidence in any doctor). Some nights he stands near various impressive pieces of furniture, and on other broadcasts we’ll catch a glimpse of tasteful, framed artwork. I’m always hoping that after he answers a question about social distancing he’ll say, ‘And now let’s talk about this lighting fixture’, but so far no luck.”

That is what happened, however, one evening recently, when a group of interior designers, all women, gathered in a Zoom meeting to discuss their work, severely curtailed like so many professions by the shutdowns, and strategize about the future.

But mostly they shopped each other’s rooms, a respite from talk about the calamitous economy: Bella Zakarian Mancini’s Matouk linens (she was “meeting” from bed); Sheila Bridges’s star-shaped ceiling sconces; Young Huh’s artwork (a Bernhard Edmaier photograph of the Alligator River in Australia that looks like a Venusian landscape, as imagined by C.S. Lewis); and Barrie Benson’s wallpaper.

Ms. Benson had prepared for the meeting by hanging samples of wallpaper she has been working on in collaboration with an artist, Jackie Gendel, from a couple of trouser hangers she affixed to a pair of closet doors. She sat in front of them, because, as she said, “the rest of my house was being turned into a home school and temporary architecture and design office.”

Speaking of wallpaper, Ms. Bridges was tickled to see her yellow Harlem Toile print in the dining room of Gayle King, a host of “CBS This Morning,” when Ms. King announced an interview with Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan about their plan to combat the virus. (And so was design Twitter.)