

A Conversation with Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz

BECAUSE HE'S AN INTERIOR DESIGNER WHO TRAINED first as an architect, you might expect Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz to favor monochromatic color schemes in the rooms he creates for an international roster of clients. Monochromatic, yes, but forget taupes, whites, and other subtle earth tones: think crimson red. Or total green, aqua, blue. Think walls, carpet, draperies, furniture, even the ceiling wrapped in one extroverted color.

What provides the visual interest for such monochromatic scheming? Textures, Noriega-Ortiz says, as many as 10 different textures worked into a single room.

Still, with two master of architecture degrees (from the University of Puerto Rico in his homeland, and Columbia University in New York), Noriega-Ortiz is shattering clichés when he declares: "The main ingredient in a room is color!"

"We were doing subtle colors," he explains ("we" meaning the namesake New York design firm he established in 1992 after nine years—six as head designer—with John F. Saladino, Inc.)

"We'd start with white and add tints to make them different. Yes, we'll still use white or taupe when a client really wants it, but then the shapes in the room have to be strong and dramatic enough to provide the contrast," explains the designer, whose work includes homes for fashion designer Steve Fabrikant, writer Laura Esquivel, and the Alfred Engelbergs. His design ideas have also been featured in *Metropolitan Home*, in Madison Avenue windows for Baccarat crystal, and in a showhome in Orlando for Germany's giant Messe Frankfurt, Inc.

Here's how one-color-scheming works: "First we decide on which color, just one color per room, and then we use it in many different textures."

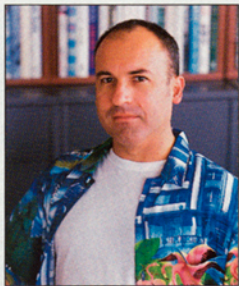
A case in point: the New York apartment overlooking Central Park that Noriega-Ortiz has done for a Wall Street client, a single man "with a taste for adventure." The sitting room is all in the same crimson red, but visualize the textural varieties in carpeting: velvet cut pile; walls: upholstered in mohair; draperies: gleaming taffeta; sofa: velvet; chairs: cotton or linen with red silk tassels; ceiling: red lacquer. Even the wood of the cocktail table is a reddish mahogany, the designer says. The lamps are lanterns with red and white shades, and even the recessed lighting has red bulbs.

"It's definitely a night room," Noriega-Ortiz confirms. But he's also using the one-color approach for a home in the sun—his own Miami Beach residence. Here, though, there's a different solid color in every room: "You walk through all-red. . . all-blue. . . all-green. . . then aqua."

Monochromatic rooms are not hard to put together, he assures. "People wear colors all the time. Decorating is like putting together an outfit. Imagine you're choosing a room's clothes, earrings, shoes...I think that's harder...I dress in black and that's the end of that! But most people already know how to dress well."

The key to one-color success: courage.

"Only intense colors work. No wishy-washy pastels," Noriega-Ortiz cautions. "Pastels are too noncommittal. Pick a great color and go for it!"



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