

reggie nadelson. consuming passions



Level with me: do you look inside the medicine cabinet in your friends' bathrooms? Do you check what kind of lotions, potions and meds they are currently using? A nod of approval for Jo Malone? A tiny frisson of horror over the remains of a bottle of Brut? Do you appraise the décor, the shower tiles, for example? Would you feel the friendship had to end if you discovered a friend keeps her tissues in a faux marble tissue holder or has one of those plastic shower curtains with the gold playing cards?

And what about that neighbour whose windows you can see in? What if you discovered he had something really cheesy on the wall, a Jack Vettriano picture, say? And if you met him in the street the next day? Well, call me peeping Thomasina. Call me a snoop. But you know as well as I do that we all judge people by what they put in their houses.

I'm currently riveted by the fact that where once there was a parking lot, there is now an entire building across the street from my place in New York. Whoopee! Who cares about the loss of light and air? I can see into the windows. And they are big, big windows, probably 7ft or 8ft high. I live in SoHo, in what was once known as the Cast Iron District because some of the earliest and best examples of 19th century cast iron urban architecture are here. Now it is known as (kill me) cool. In every nook, cranny and parking lot, new buildings have gone up – loft buildings, as it were, because this is what sells. But these are

faux lofts (and so my appellation Loft Las Vegas) which, if they have high ceilings and open-floor plans and big windows (the better to see in) are not really lofts at all, just a kind of loft in the mind of some realtor, as we call estate agents.

So up goes the not-really-cast-iron building, and like hot dogs the "lofts" sell for \$2m, \$3m, even \$4m. And I sit at my window and watch, fascinated, as the new owners furnish them. Where do these people get their taste? When did they cast off any sign of history, family, or connection with the world around them? I rarely see books, except for untouched coffee-table tomes, or art or anything funky or awkward or even ugly, rarely a

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bad souvenir from some wonderful trip abroad. It's not that they have bad taste. They have no style. Perhaps it is that their hearts are made of Goldman Sachs.

Across the way, as I look out now at night, I can see streamlined leather sofas, fluffy shag rugs, long modern dining tables and appropriate chairs. Enormous flat-screen TVs dominate everything. Polite art in nice frames hangs here and there. Much of the furniture seems to have been purchased in bulk, as you might buy books by the yard, probably from Design Within Reach. This is a sort of Conran Shop of the US, except without the wit, style, brain or personality of Terence Conran. Design Within Reach sells perfectly nice

good things, but it's an upmarket chain for people who want design spoon-fed.

You can get all the classics, the egg chair, the bar stool, the interesting lighting fixture. Jacobsen, Hoffmann, Noguchi, Eames, these are all great designers who made beautiful things. And all are on sale at Design Within Reach. But design through the frames of the windows opposite looks tired, trite, as hackneyed as a three-piece suite in the 1950s.

Once life in a SoHo loft was lived with ceiling pipes visible, with good and bad art everywhere, ongoing work strewn about, loads of books and crockery on steel restaurant shelves. People put a stuffed chair covered in torn silk which belonged to their parents beside steel stools they'd bought in a medical supply house. Those who owned a real Barcelona chair put it beside some school desks they'd picked up off the sidewalk. Anything went. But these new places are to loft living as the Bellagio in Las Vegas is to the Italian lakeside town.

The weird thing is, as often as not, my new neighbours leave the blinds up. It feels like an invitation to peep. But maybe I have the genes of a true snoop. I grew up in Greenwich Village. From my parents' bedroom I could see the Albert Hotel, as it then was. In *Rear Window*, one of my favourite movies, Jimmy Stewart, laid up in his Village apartment with a broken leg, solves a murder by looking out of his window into those of his neighbours. Stewart phones the murderer and asks to meet him at the Albert Hotel, so to clear the coast for some real evidence-digging. A new career awaits me. ♦

DETAILS

lucia van der post

These days, among sophisticated consumers, provenance counts. Where the fish were caught, how the product is made, whether the makers are properly paid and whether the materials are ethically sourced are no longer just polite questions but real considerations. So when it comes to these extraordinarily decorative felt rugs it's nice to know that they're handmade by nomadic peoples from the remote Tien Shan mountains in Kyrgyzstan. It's good to know, too, that quite apart from being paid for their labour, five per cent of the UK selling price of each rug goes back to help the makers in Kyrgyzstan.

Every rug tells a story. Each shape and pattern has a meaning: some bestow good fortune, others bless a marriage and yet others celebrate a friendship. The rugs are all made from felted wool from sheep bred in the area. To cut down on waste the discarded felt from one layer is used to provide the basis for the pattern of its opposite number, creating a pair. Colours vary from chic neutrals through to eye-poppingly bright oranges, pinks and reds. They can be seen by appointment at Felt's London showroom in Balham, or the website shows a small selection (prices range from £400 to about £5,000). Bespoke colours and sizes can be ordered.

Felt, by appointment, 020-8772 0358 or see www.feltrugs.co.uk.



PLEASURE ZONE

david collins

I'm more attached to emotional memories than physical objects but some years ago I came across a small bronze dish covered with squiggles, made in the 1940s by the French designer Line Vautrin. It started my love affair with the little bronze boxes she made from the 1940s to the 1960s, which I keep in different rooms around my house.

As an architect and interior designer, I try to think laterally as far as possible in my designs because I believe lateral thoughts are more emotional. Vautrin's boxes reflect this approach and also my personality – I love crosswords, anagrams and Scrabble. Vautrin's boxes are inscribed with cryptic messages and secret codes cast into the bronze and I love solving the puzzles. The boxes are gilded so they gleam and are decorated with figures, animals, plants, playing cards and other motifs. They're hard to read because they're a mixture of French words, images, symbols and wordplay. One says in French: "Hurry up – fall in love – let Eros be your god." Another says: "My soul has a secret." The boxes are lidded, lined with cork and beautifully made. Although they are tiny, they're quite heavy with a good texture. They have practical uses as key trays or powder compacts, or boxes for jewellery or cigarettes, but it's their emotional, personal resonance that appeals to me. Vautrin was a talented dreamer and these boxes are romantic and nostalgic – like enigmatic lovers' secrets.

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