

Personal Style, Unleashed by Divorce

By JILL BROOKE

LAURIN SYDNEY, a New York interior designer, tells the story of a recently divorced client who fell victim to a syndrome she's been observing more and more lately. The client's husband "hated floral prints," Ms. Sydney said, "so she made me turn the bedroom into a mini Versailles. They had lived in all neutral colors before the divorce. I told her he would never see it and she should do what she really liked," but the client was adamant.



HIS CASTLE Robert Futterman painted his pool room bachelor black.

Ms. Sydney calls this approach "revenge décor," and speculated that it "may be the first part of the healing process. It's another way of getting rid of the memory of the ex-husband." Nonetheless, she added, "I'm now waiting for the call where she says, 'bring me back some of my beiges.'"

As design consciousness has spread in the United States, so has the idea of interior design as a form of self expression. As a result, newly separated or divorced people — at least those who can afford it — have a heightened desire to radically remake their environments to suit their new lives, spite their new exes, or both. According to the Census Bureau, most Americans marry for the first time in their 20's when many people have barely established a sense of self, let alone developed a clear sense of style.

But by the time many of those marriages end 10 or 20 years later, the newly divorced people are eager to emerge from their former spouses' shadows and assert their own identities in paint, tile and fabric. "When you divorce, you are creating your own individuality all over again," said Dr. Bonnie Eaker Weil, a New York-based couples' therapist. Décor is emerging as a popular way to do it.

Throwing off the vestiges of the past is a cru-

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cial first step, even if it sometimes leads to costly mistakes. Raoul Felder, a prominent divorce attorney in New York, said a client of his gave away a delicate antique desk that his wife had chosen for his home office because it symbolized the client's sense that his needs had been ignored for years. "The guy was 6'2" and couldn't get his legs under it," Mr. Felder said. Unfortunately, the desk turned out to have been worth \$22,000.

More often, though, post-divorce decorating seems to result in a sense of liberation. June Gumbel, a painter, says she has managed to erase many of the traces left by her ex-husband, the television host Bryant Gumbel, in the Westchester house they once shared. For years, she saw golf motifs everywhere she turned — on "chests, cabinets, figurines and lamps," she said. Now, almost five years after her divorce, "there is no more sports stuff anywhere," and her ex-husband's hunter-green office has become a TV room bathed in soft lavender. The color is coming to dominate the house, which she has been redecorating with John Barman, a New York interior designer.

"Finally the masculine part is fading away," said Ms. Gumbel, 56. "It makes a bold statement about who I am the moment you come in. Doing it on your own can give you the ultimate big grin."

When Robert Futterman, the chairman and chief executive of Robert K. Futterman & Associates, a New York real estate firm, was married, his role in decorating his family's "Holly Hunt-meets-classic country" home was simply to "write the checks," he said. Although he made decisions all day at work, he said, he "ceded control" when it came to décor. Now, two years after his divorce, Mr. Futterman, 47, said he has discovered a love for modern design and contemporary art in the course of decorating his new Greenwich, Conn., home. He's especially pleased with a purple living room appointed with gray Cappellini chairs, a Paul Smith rug in a rainbow of colors, a black pool table and a photograph by Wang Qing-song, of a Chinese man in a tub surrounded by women. The picture, he said, "screams independence and bachelorhood."

When members of an embattled couple are design professionals themselves, their sensitivity to their surroundings and desire to assert their own tastes after years of compromise is all the stronger.

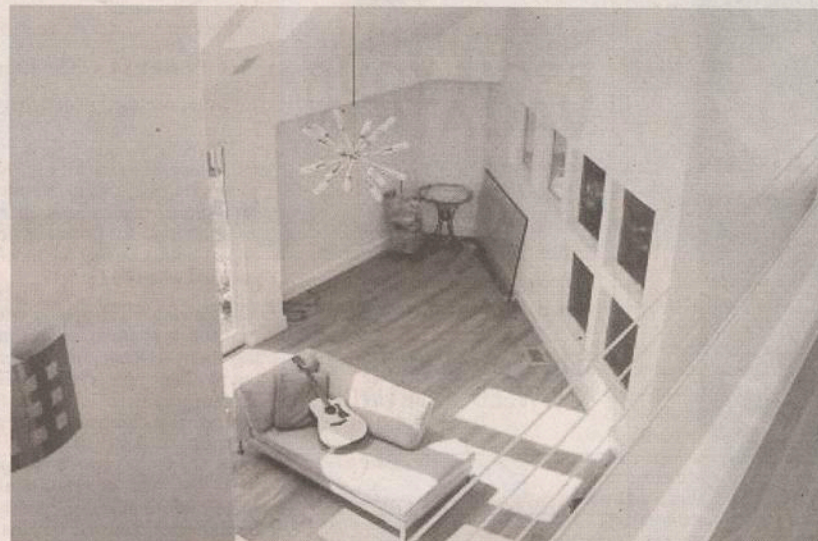
Leila Astarabadi, an interior decorator, and Bentley Meeker, a lighting designer, had a "fiery" four-year relationship, Ms. Astarabadi said — "which is probably why we had so many orangey red colors" in their Upper West Side apartment. "There was a

The New York Times

GOODBYE GILT After they split up, Leila Astarabadi, far right, and Bentley Meeker, below right, let loose, décorwise. She gravitated to light, healing

colors. He furnished his house, below left, with a leather sofa and a sunburst chandelier.

They left behind the heavy look of their Upper West Side apartment, right.



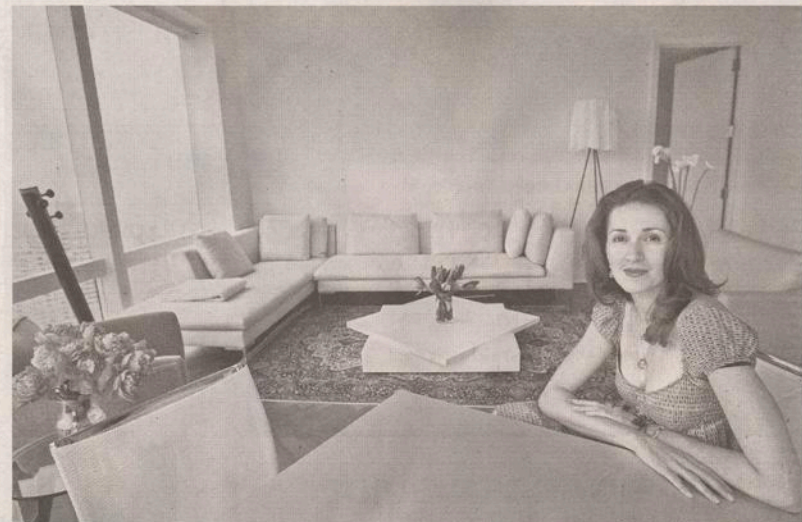
heaviness," she said, in all the wood and ornate furniture that she chose in decorating the place. "The décor represented how I felt. There was no lightness, and everything was very dark."

After they split in late 2001, Ms. Astarabadi, who had studied interior design and yoga during the marriage, gravitated to "healing" light colors and modern design. Now 39, she lives in an apartment on a high floor at Time Warner Center furnished with pieces like a Piero Lissoni high-gloss white console and Niedermairer lucite tables. The process of healing after a painful break up has taken time, she said, but decorating was an important step "towards creating a safe sanctuary and place for reflection."

Mr. Meeker, meanwhile, also turned his back on the couple's design scheme. He bought a house in Water Mill, N.Y., and installed bluestone throughout, from the driveway through the interior (where it compliments the kitchen's stainless steel cabinets) and out onto the patio. He furnished the house with light-colored contemporary suede and leather sofas, a llama-hair shag rug and a 10-foot-long acrylic table that he bought at the International Contemporary Furniture fair in New York.

Mr. Meeker, 38, said he found it "cathartic" to design his home as he pleased — "It's helped me discover who I am," he said — and to be able to live in a space free of tumbled marble and ornate plaster fireplaces.

House&Home



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times



Lars Klove for The New York Times

Constance Ahrons, the author of "The Good Divorce," because "it is no longer assumed that the home and décor is the priority of the woman" alone.

Dr. Susan Heitler, a family therapist in Denver who has written books on conflict resolution, has observed much the same in her own clinical practice.

"Many more décor decisions need to be made jointly, which causes more conflicts than ever before," she said. Dr. Heitler offers a workshop for couples at her Web site that includes conflicts arising from decorating a home. Many couples, in fact, now break up over "the power and control that's exercised through décor," according to Dr. Eaker Weil. Dr. Heitler recalls a couple that fought over the height for hanging pictures. The wife was shorter and wanted them at her eye level, while the husband wanted them at his. "The underlying power struggle was who counted in the relationship more," said Dr. Heitler.

The décor wars are not being fought only between the sexes, of course. Peter Quinn, a partner in John Rosselli & Associates D.C., a store in Georgetown that sells antiques and decorative arts, said that he could trace the power struggles of his last relationship through "the placement of possessions" in the Dupont Circle apartment he shared with his ex-boyfriend. A mahogany entrance table that he has now given pride of place in his hallway, for example, was relegated to a back bedroom for six years. "My former boyfriend said he didn't like the table," said Mr. Quinn, 47. "I gave in. But giving in all the time begins to stunt you."

"I get pleasure every time I walk into my apartment and am now surrounded by things I love," Mr. Quinn said. "They are put exactly where I want them. I gave myself up for so long and then found myself again."

Nor does he miss having to use a rococo gold mirror while shaving.

Although their new homes would seem to have much more in common with one other than with the old apartment, both Mr. Meeker and Ms. Astarabadi say that the new spaces offer clear evidence of their incompatibility. "Bentley likes things that are bigger and on a grander scale than I do," Ms. Astarabadi said.

Not only can decorating reassure people that they were right to separate, it may plant the idea in the first place. Now that the media celebrates taste and style in men as well as women, interior design is a new flash point in romantic relationships. Fighting over décor has become a bigger issue, said