

Step Inside Breco Interiors

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Metromode, 4/1/2010

If you hire Mario Buatta to decorate your place, better like florals because you're getting the "prince of chintz." With Jennifer Post, it's all light and minimalism. At the lower price range, HGTV's shows fit into catchy categories – say, *Design on a Dime*, or *Trading Spaces* – one day and one thousand dollars to transform a room.

Then, there's Breco. Pat phrases defy John Breco, interior designer and owner of Breco Interiors. "I take a very peculiar approach," he offers, "and if it's mixy-matchy, and let's match my carpet and paint and wallpaper, you've got the wrong guy." The 61-year-old interior designer based in Farmington Hills and Pompano Beach, Florida has been in the business for over 40 years. "You're talking with a dinosaur here. If you go near my home, you're going to see tusks," he chortles.

Breco traces his beginnings to his slick, Hollywood-type house — white sofa, white baby grand, huge white plaster peaks on the fireplace. "I always had a flair for the high drama, plus I lived in a surreal world of celluloid reality." He loved old Hollywood movies. "My reality as a kid wasn't so pleasant, so I was like, 'I'm getting out of here.' "

One couple, friends of his, liked his style. They'd also seen a *Detroit News* cover story featuring the 19-year-old as Detroit's youngest talk show host. They wanted him, and only him, to decorate. While he'd been into design since age 16, "I had no idea that people did this for a living," he explains. "And I really thought that the mother went to Montgomery Ward's and put everything on the charge like my mother did."

Breco wised up after the couple paid him \$4,500 in cash, upfront. When he stood in their kitchen, tasked with finding wall covering, "...I thought I would drop dead. What wall covering? I didn't know there was any such thing. So, I got to the phone book and I looked up wallpaper and I went to meet somebody, and he explained what it was to me so that I had less of a trail of naiveté."

After this first initiation, the babe in the woods (or deer in the headlights) trained on the job. For the next three-and-a-half years, Breco apprenticed in tile and marble setting, painting, carpentry, cutting acetates, silk screening, and carpeting. The business took off and his reputation spread around metro Detroit. Soon clients were flying him to their homes in Florida. Tired of the winters, at age 31 he lit out for the sunshine state. His work took him here, there, and everywhere: Manhattan, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Chicago, Dallas, South Padre Island, Palm Springs, Tucson.

To and fro

But about 10 years ago, he says, simply, "God let me go home." He bought a house in Farmington Hills. Now winter is his favorite season. "Everybody bitches about the gray skies, and I say, 'Ah, don't you think it's wrapped in pearls? Come on.' "

Business is slow locally, so he still works around the country. Three-quarters of his business is residential. The clientele are of all ethnicities and range in age from 25 to 90. He's also done up many doctor and real estate offices and restaurants. He declines to talk pricing, or name many specific projects because some have changed over time. One of his signature projects is the former fine-dining restaurant at the Copper Creek golf course in Farmington Hills. Today, he's at a client site in Atlanta's Buckhead neighborhood. But Michigan is his domicile.

What brought him back? "Smell. Smell," he says unequivocally. "Living in South Florida you have the smell of red tide, or nothing; except in about two weeks from now, gorgeous gardenias." In Michigan, though, every hour has a different nuance. "Morning has its own wonderful cloaked smell just wrapped in this dew. A bright smell, and the cutting of the grass comes along with that. Dusk has another smell that's quieter. Winter has a fiery, almost peppery smell. Spring has all the blossoms and the lilacs and the peonies."

On-the-job persona

Breco isn't the type who whips through your home, making you feel like Alice in Wonderland after she drank the shrinking potion. "When I was a kid, we were extremely poor and every day was a challenge. I lived in a cellar," he recounts, "and I'd sidle up against that furnace just to stay warm and anything after that was a privilege. So, I've had the luxury of growing up seeing each and every faith and stage of life. At this juncture when I'm taken into someone's home, I never censure it, I never judge it, never rip it apart like most people do as a dalliance because it's trespassing, and it's their stuff. The only time I do rip something apart is when I'm being paid for it."

He usually spends 20 to 40 hours talking with the client before making purchases. "And I explain to them that it's really, really important that I don't give them a house that belongs to me, but that I give them an installation that belongs to them." He adds, "Never put something on your sofa that you wouldn't put on your back because you can take a shirt off but you can't take a sofa off."

Breco uses all-natural fabrics, what arouses the skin. "There is a common denominator that runs through all of my work, and that's the fact that it's sensual... not sexual, but it's sensual."

Although he doesn't sculpt anymore, he's also known for bas-relief artwork that adorns walls around the country. Faced with a small budget while on a job at the Turnberry resort in Miami, he molded his first Asian face with \$4.50 buckets of joint compound. And it only got bigger from there. The owner of the Fox Theater in Philadelphia commissioned him for a 26-foot-wide, 19-foot-high Isadora Duncan.

Some pieces are up to 40 feet wide and 20 feet tall. The biggest ones took him between four and six months. Those have six- to twelve-thousand pounds of plaster, hand-mixed in four-pound batches to allow for set-up and molding. Each batch took 45 minutes to mix and form, so do the math, he says. Influences run from Asian to Art Deco, Egyptian, and the human body.

While mostly self-taught, he's had mentors. He worked with New York-based Sylvia Goldberg, whom he would later visit as she suffered from brain cancer. "She said 'I was smart, but you were clever,'" he recalls. "It was the most amazing thing that had happened to me, was someone of that ilk [mentored me] and it left me empowered. I'm sure you can appreciate, if you have no education, no matter how good you are, you're left with a moderate compendium of insecurity. I used to make jokes, 'What if they find out it's really me??' "

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Mentoring helped because when business was booming, Breco had 20 jobs a year, 17 going at any given time. He used to have an office, a secretary. No more. He's down to one assistant now. He feels he could have maintained higher overhead if he'd developed a signature style and repeated it ad nauseam. "But I chose the other route and that was to make sure that everyone was totally individualized. Because to me, if you're going to hire a designer and pay him what he asks for, you deserve exclusivity," he argues.

Cookie-cutter style ticks him off. "You shouldn't be able to walk into someone else's house and see your stuff. That is the cardinal sin of this industry. Look at what happened in Michigan starting about five or six years ago. Everything became instant inheritance. It all looked like your grandmother's furniture recovered. What was up with that? So, everyone gets that because that's the new fashion? I don't think so," he says disdainfully.

But what he's seen around the country could be replicated in Michigan, he feels. In sunny Florida, it's brighter and more casual. And California isn't shy, either. By comparison, "in Michigan, we are conditioned to be habitual," he observes. "No matter where you drive, from the most expensive neighborhoods to the least expensive neighborhoods, the primary colors that are used on homes are ashen, gray, and shrouded. What's up with them? They're all depressing... You can have a beautiful color that doesn't have to be screaming... I'm not talking about an unnatural color that's a horror from a paint stick."

Dwell on health, he says. Even brown works, in the right shade. "... You can take a brown that's like this mustard brown color that's murky and drab, or you can take the color of bread baking in an oven. That's brown too, but it's golden, and it's rich, and it's healthy."

The most complementary colors can be found outside. "I had the luxury of going to the Cannes Film Festival, and being at the Hôtel du Cap for a few days wasn't shabby. And the gardens were beautiful. The roses were exquisite. The sun is gorgeous," he goes on

airily. "If you borrow — not even borrow — if you seize — the colors that nature freely gives you, and apply those to your life, it's a whole different payoff. Think about sunsets and how they're mixed. People say, 'I would never mix turquoise with blue and orange and gold.' Look at the sun," he counters.

He's a firm believer in using everything at your disposal. Most of us own things that are so precious, so glam, the only touch they get is the annual purging of the dust bunnies. "If God has given you a set of eight magnificent crystal glasses, go out and buy two more so you can break 'em. And *use* the damn things!"

His mother had "good" dishes that were only for company. "I couldn't figure out how come I wasn't good enough to use the dishes and how could I get that company ticket so I could get back in and use those dishes? Well, she had a double-wide when she died. The double-wide caught on fire and it burnt to the ground in four minutes. And all those dishes were gone... From that moment on, anything I've had, I've used."

His Farmington Hills residence is done like a men's club. Read: 12-to-15-foot ceilings, an antler chandelier, a perforated onyx fireplace (seven fireplaces total), wing-back leopard chairs, cheetah carpeting, an amber and cognac color scheme. The place overlooks deep woods and a brook. Cellphones don't work in his backyard because the "forestation" is so thick. On the other hand, his Florida home, the same one he purchased in Pompano Beach at age 31, is contemporary, with curved walls and a Deco-y feel.

Waxing eloquent on wind

Breco has a lot to say. The talk drifts from political leadership to energy policy and how aesthetics fit in. Recently he wrote an op-ed pushing for wind energy. "If people would just figure this out, all the wind that's up and down the coast, up in upper Michigan and lower Michigan at the tip, we could be powering this entire state!" In a letter to Obama, he suggested laying substructures for wind turbines during road construction projects. Wind turbines line I-80 in Iowa and Nebraska, so why not Michigan?

"Those things, while people object to them, if you put them together properly, they can be gorgeous. It can be like a ballet." He'd stagger the heights and use different tonal qualities. "One could be ivory, one could be cream, a pale, pale blue, a pale peach, and you'd have a bouquet of flowers dancing in the sky."

Does he see himself gussying up turbines? "In a heartbeat," he says emphatically.

He raves about Detroit's Eastern Market, the largest public historic market district in the country. "There's one of every flavor, with the guys that sell the incense and the guys that sell the mushrooms, ba-ba, ba-ba, ba-ba." (Et cetera would be just too dry an expression). He couldn't wait to get away in his youth; now he touts the seasons. His M.O.? Be resourceful, and as mentioned before, use your stuff. The cookbook he's writing now, *Cook What You Got and Shut Up*, follows this aesthetic.

"There's good history [in Michigan], there's some dark history there. But there is good history there. And every day can be a good day if you're looking for it. That's what keeps me in Michigan."