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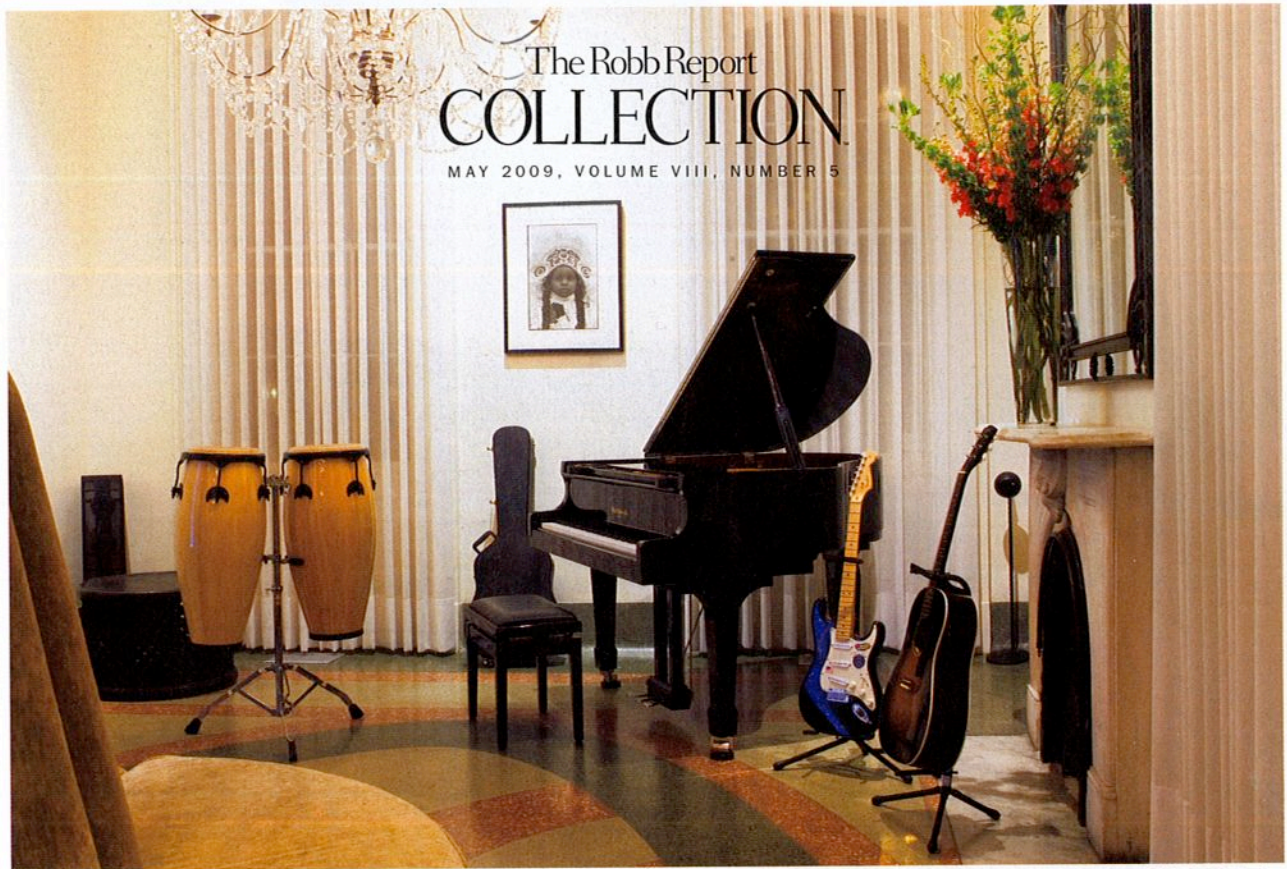
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Big Easy Redux

Jazzing up a New Orleans mansion.

BY ANDREW MYERS

AFTER PHOTOGRAPHY BY WEST FREEMAN

WHEN YOU'RE MAKING gumbo, the ingredients can vary enormously. Yet if you know its base, and your fundamentals, those variations cannot only satiate, they can astound—allowing an innovative chef to reinvent the dish, while keeping it true to its origins. Such is also the case with homes in historic sections of the oldest American cities. Or so says Los Angeles-based designer LM Pagano, who recently finished this 10,000-square-foot antebellum house in New Orleans' French Quarter for developer, hotelier, and native-son Sean Cummings.

Renovating and decorating an old

house is always formidable. Renovating and decorating an 1840s Italianate mansion, located in the most architecturally and historically significant section of a storied metropolis with a unique culture, aesthetic, perspective, and

hold on the collective conscious, is fraught. There's the danger of creating bed-and-breakfast, cozy-corner kitsch dioramas in which owners become less inhabitants than custodians ("It's an off-the-period chamber pot, which for several years we unfortunately thought was a soup tureen"), or of failing to realize that, unlike antiques, historic houses are living



Designer LM Pagano helped New Orleans developer Sean Cummings revamp his home. Opposite: The entrance. Above: The music room.

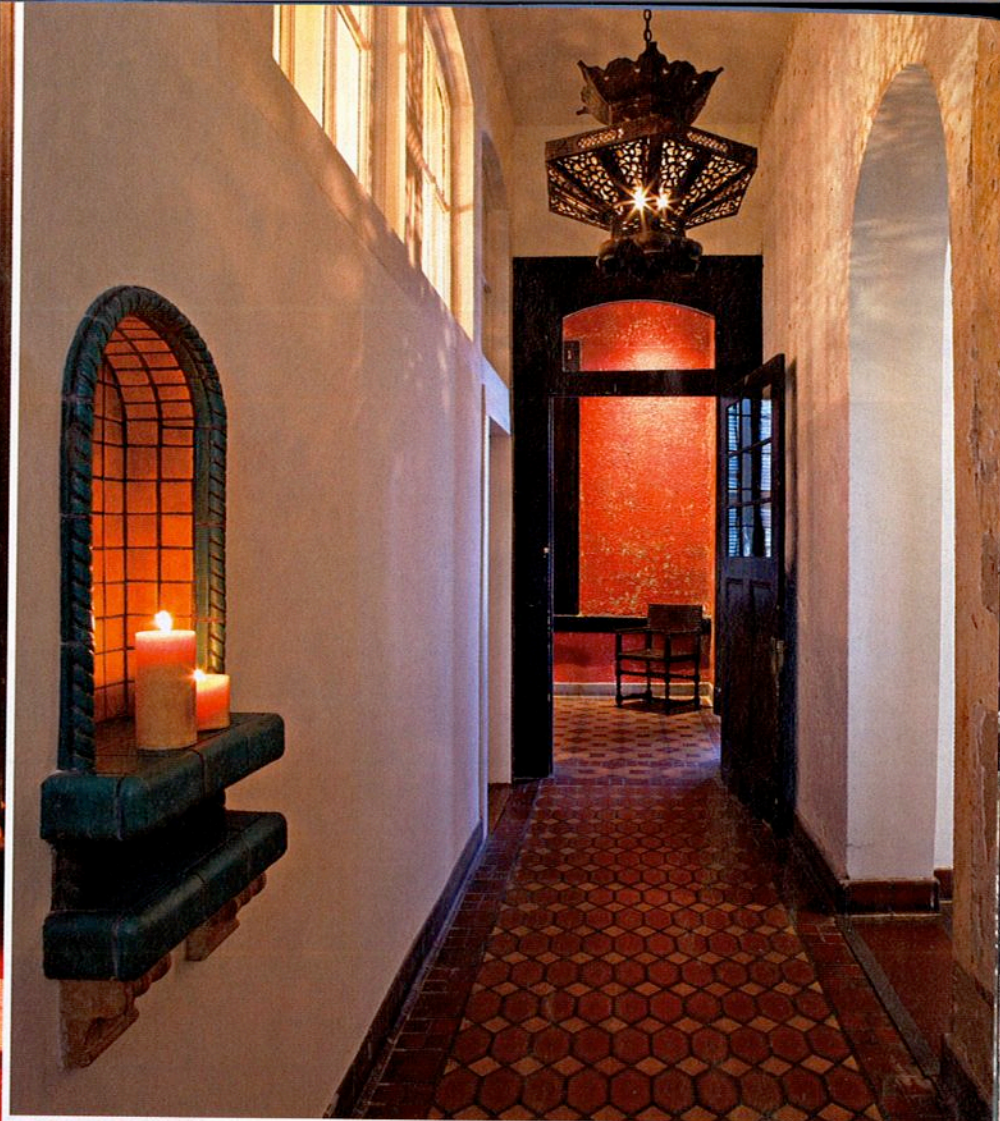


entities, which must change, grow, and evolve or risk becoming ossified, brittle museums to the past.

How did Pagano plan to escape these pitfalls? "Sean and I were interested in a forward viewpoint," says Pagano of her nouvelle New Orleans aesthetic. "We wanted to build upon the past while taking the house and its design to the next level." That translates to interiors made modern by a monochromatic paint ("Iceberg White, it's called," she says), serving to highlight the 13- and 15-foot ceilings with their intricate moldings and medallions, the 1920s terrazzo and

original oak and heart pine floors, as well as the carefully culled pieces of furniture, and fine and decorative art.

"We wanted everything to have some kind of direct connection to New Orleans and how we think of New Orleans," says Pagano, pointing to the entryway's shimmering Swarovski lighting fixture/sculpture that flows from the ceiling and spills onto the floor. Composed of 22,000 crystals and weighing 1,400 pounds, it took two artisans from the company's Austrian headquarters five days to install. "It's completely modern but evokes the traditional crystal



Above left: The bar retained its windows and tilework, as did the hallway (top), which gained a hanging lantern. "This house absolutely rocks at night," says the designer, who gutted the 1840s Italianate mansion yet managed to honor its character.

chandeliers found throughout New Orleans," Pagano explains, adding that its name—"Cascade"—refers to rain, a meteorological condition to which the city is prone, and water, around, under, and upon which the city is built.

That same sanctity and sense of beauty and humor continue in the music room. West African pieces from the early 20th century—an oversize king's chair opposite an

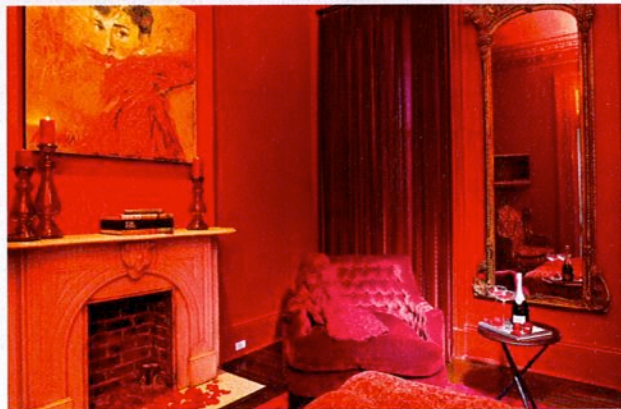
intricately carved fertility bed—hold court close to two contemporary Victorian-style armchairs, their wood burned with a blowtorch then upholstered in black vinyl by Dutch artist Maarten Baas, separated by an iron side table by New Orleans blacksmith Darryl Reeves. The ensemble is adjacent to a large velvet tufted roundabout by Pagano and within dancing distance of a black lacquer baby grand



Above: As throughout the house, the dining room's moldings were kept but subdued. Right: The painting of Audrey Hepburn, hung in the red parlor, is by New Orleans artist David Harouni.

piano and a collection of guitars and drums. "Beautiful objects," Cummings calls them, while he and Pagano explain how a central theme and story unites them. The West African pieces, for example, speak of the city's indebtedness to African culture, but Pagano had the fertility bed silver-plated and lacquered, adding a luminosity underscoring its beauty as a sculptural object ("Not that it makes it any more comfortable," she adds). Likewise the roundabout is upholstered in antiqued velvet, a material favored in boudoirs and bordellos, and yet the color here is not clichéd crimson—it is a modern sage. One might even argue that the Baas-burned armchairs refer to the great fire of 1788, which destroyed a huge portion of the city, but both Cummings and Pagano smile at that stretch.

Adorning the walls are photographs by Herman Leonard, who has captured the jazz greats of the 20th century—"Armstrong, Ellington, Fitzgerald, you name them," says Pagano, adding that Cummings has the single largest collection of Leonard's work (displayed throughout his home and International House, one of his two New Orleans hotels). Joining them are a photograph of a Mardi Gras Indian child by New Orleans native Keith Calhoun and, over the fireplace in the adjacent billiard room, a photo of a squeeze box by artist John Glenn is hung above an installation of Veuve Clicquot boxes by local artist Brian Perkins—"A good spirit and good liquid spirit," Cummings says.



Perhaps both rooms' greatest luxury, Pagano says, is their open spaces, an assertion that holds true for the house as a whole: "There's nothing to block the flow or impede the eye." But even minimalism in New Orleans is multilayered. The music room's very moniker, and its photographs and instruments, pay homage to a previous owner, legendary music producer Daniel Lanois, who used the address as both his home and that of his company, Kingsway Studios. Here he recorded (and often housed) groups and artists such as the Rolling Stones, U2, Pearl Jam, Bob Dylan, and Peter Gabriel. Not to mention LM Pagano, who in the 1990s sang backup on a jazz album recorded within these walls, and who also designed the home's interiors for previous owner and longtime client, actor Nicolas Cage, from whom Cummings bought the property.

Walk a few feet, scratch the surface (metaphorically, please), and get another story. Across the entryway, the rich jambalaya



Two walls were knocked out of cramped spaces to create the upstairs sitting room. The painting is by local artist Nicole Charbonnet.

continues. Pagano painted the front parlor, traditionally a formal space in which guests were received, entirely in red, “one saturated color for a calming effect,” she says. The tufted, claret chenille, Pagano-designed “chair-and-a-half” sits next to a practical, oversize ottoman (upholstered in an impractical but beautiful Italian burned-back velvet adorned with gold leaf), which rests atop a Nanimarquina wool rug with a floral motif that plays against the expected Oriental and alludes to the agrarian lands upriver. On the wall, opposite the doorway to the dining room and connected bar, hangs an ornate 19th-century gilt Italian mirror decorated with grapes, underscoring the city’s emphasis on entertainment, epicurean pursuits, and gracious living (not to forget, inserts Cummings, neither the importance of Italian immigrants to the city, nor, Pagano adds, that Sean loves wine).

Not even the painting of Audrey Hepburn is purely decorative. First, it is by New Orleans artist David Harouni. Second, it was sold at a benefit for the New Orleans Children’s Hospital, of which Cummings is an enthusiastic supporter. Third, Cummings is a friend of Hepburn’s son, Sean Ferrer. Fourth, Cummings finds great inspiration in the late star and humanitarian’s elegance, charity, and “quiet achievement.” And, there’s a



story. “During the auction, Sean and I, on opposite sides of the room, simultaneously realized we were both bidding on the painting,” Cummings recalls. Bowing out gracefully, he was subsequently presented with the painting as a gift from Ferrer.

“Ol’ Man River,” the hit song from the 1927 musical *Show Boat*, tells a poignant story of hardship, struggle, and social class against the immutable indifference of the Mississippi, which “keeps on rollin’ along.” Katrina, of course, reminded us that nothing* is immutable—not the course of a river, the protection of levees, or the surety of an effective governmental response. Fortunately, the disaster and its aftermath also underscored that individual heroism and innovative renewal efforts are similarly—and grandly—flexible. Perhaps more than in any city in the United States, the past melds with the present

in New Orleans, creating something rich, unique, and irreplaceable, and demonstrating that an “After” is dependent on, rather than separate from, a “Before.” So it is with the city as a whole, and with Sean Cummings’ house particularly, where the story doesn’t end, but continues to unfold. □

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