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Stylemakers at Home

Esteban Lopez • Barbara Rourke

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Collectibles, Mid-Century Modern finds, antiques and contemporary furniture are deftly combined in the loft shared by Esteban Lopez and James Niebling.





METROPOLITAN MIX

*Couple combine eclectic interior
design and fashion savvy for a
distinctive, urban look*

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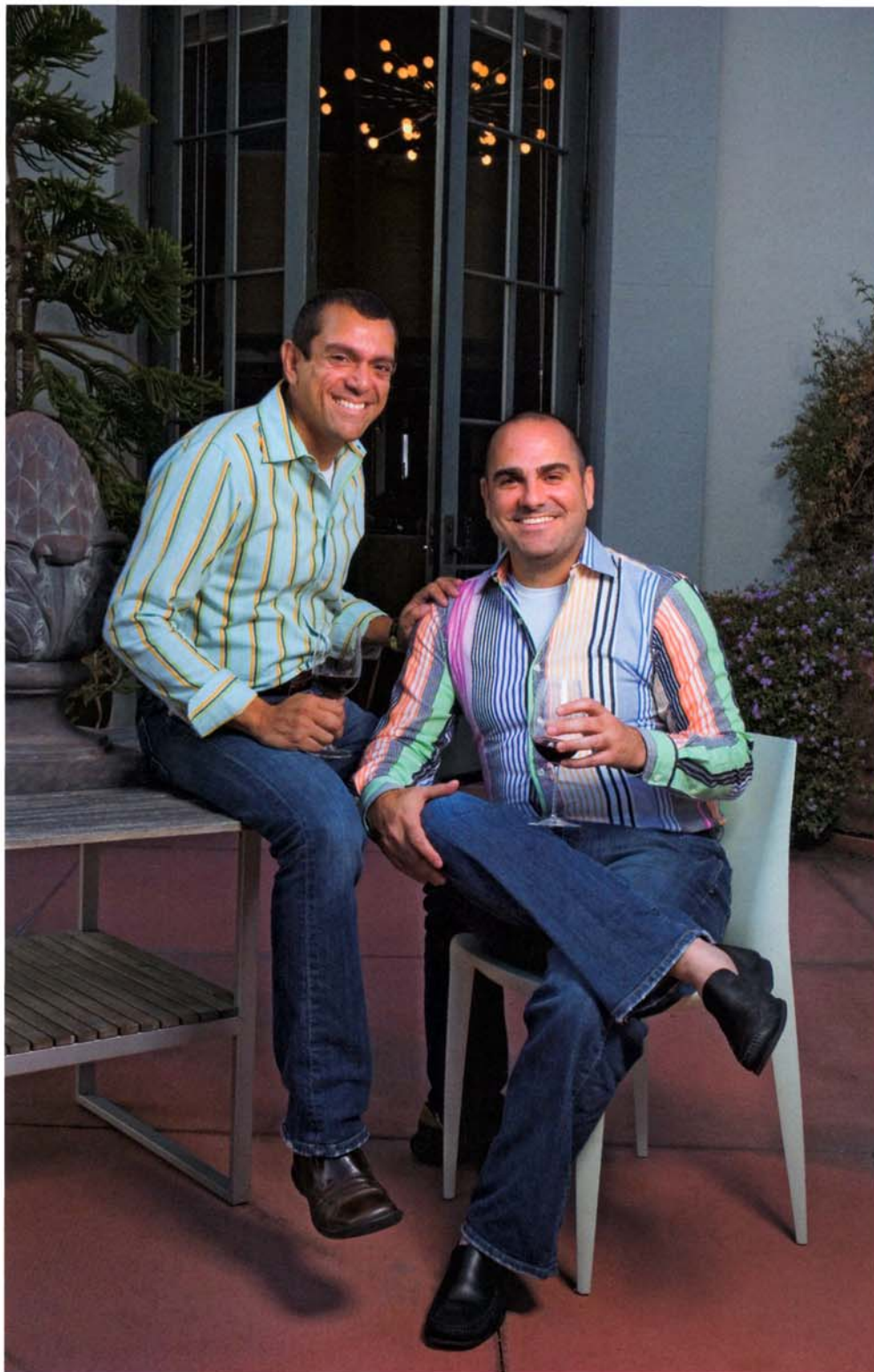
Designer Esteban Lopez (left) and James Niebling relax on the patio of their downtown loft. Its high ceilings reminded them of a former home in New York City.

Five years ago, Esteban Lopez and James Niebling abandoned thriving careers in New York City to move to San Diego. “I know, you’re wondering, what were we thinking,” says Niebling, with a deep bass chuckle and a shake of his head.

The creative duo, partners in life and business, had visited San Diego many times — “we loved the weather, of course,” Niebling continued. The slower pace was appealing, too. But Lopez, an interior designer, and Niebling, a fashion industry veteran, sensed opportunities here away from the Big Apple’s bare-fisted competitiveness. “We saw San Diego as an untapped resource,” Niebling says. “We felt we could make our mark here.”

Since then, the two have prospered in step with the growing urbanity of their adopted city. A year ago, they moved Esteban Interiors, their successful design business and gallery, from Little Italy to a jewel-box spot on Girard Avenue in the heart of the burgeoning La Jolla Design District. The showroom highlights Lopez’s eclectic style and furniture designs, as well as Niebling’s passion for collectible art glass.

“Did we ever look back and say, ‘Oh my God, did we do the right thing?’ Sure,” says Niebling. “But in the past year and a half, we’ve felt an acceleration of change. People are getting away from Tuscan style and moving to a more metropolitan look. They have traveled, stayed in fine hotels, seen contemporary design. And they’re understanding what we do a bit more.”



Niebling arranged his colorful Blenko glass in eye-catching vignettes.

TRANSITIONS HOME

Lopez, 42, a native New Yorker, started his career as a landscape designer after graduating from the New York Botanic Garden’s School of Professional Horticulture. “I got tired of waiting for things to grow,” he says. “I really wanted more immediate gratification, so that’s why I gravitated to interior design.”

Classes at the New York School of Interior Design seemed redundant — he’d had

Adjacent to the kitchen is a Burke dining room table and chairs. Linen draperies soften light from the loft's many windows.





An antique screen originally from France and purchased in New York is a backdrop for a Ligne Roset sleeper-sofa in the living room.

already studied color theory, space planning and the like in college. So, in 1997, he struck out on his own, developing his portfolio (on view at estebaninteriors.com) and client list while honing his personal style.

Niebling, 44, who is from Menlo Park, worked in fashion retailing for Macy's in San Francisco before taking jobs with The Limited, Ann Taylor and Ralph Lauren, a post that brought him to New York.

He and Lopez met in 1999 and moved into an apartment in TriBeCa, in New York's financial district. Lopez was there alone two years later when the North Tow-

er of the World Trade Center, just a block and a half away, crashed to the ground.

"The whole apartment building just shook," he says, still wide-eyed from the memory. "You always think of your home as someplace that keeps the city out. Not on that day. I saw things that were never reported."

Hours of chaos, fear and confusion would pass before the two would get back in touch. Weeks went by before they were allowed brief visits to their former home, cordoned off with the rest of the World Trade Center destruction. After three months of "homelessness," they moved

into the first-floor apartment of an Upper East Side brownstone impeccably restored by a couple formerly from San Diego.

Two years later, when Lopez and Niebling decided to pull up roots, that tiny apartment with its garden-patio and their haunting 9/11 experiences influenced their house hunting here. They rented a ground-floor 1,100-square-foot loft apartment in what had been the historic El Cortez Hotel and purchased it a year later when the downtown landmark was converted to condos.

"We knew we wanted a loft and were attracted to the high ceilings. It seemed the easiest way to make the transition from New York," Niebling says. "We liked that it was downtown and the bay views, but it was far enough away from the center of things to seem like a sanctuary."

"We needed to feel at home, and we felt at home there."

THREADS RUN THROUGH

Guests enter Lopez and Niebling's loft through a patio container garden that embraces a weathered Ikea wood table surrounded by sleek silvery-green Mario Bellini chairs. In the center of the table is an acorn finial garden ornament. It's a fitting prelude to the signature Lopez interior that waits behind tall French doors.

Asked to describe his design point of view, Lopez starts with his affection for Art Deco and Mid-Century Modern styles. "I love soft curves, sexy legs and high-contrast marquetry in Art Deco," he explains. "Mid-Century Modern — I loved how they used metal. Work by Vladimir Kagan — it's iconic; Verner Panton — I love everything he's done; Frank Lloyd Wright — the architecture, not the furniture. It's easy to see how modern design is still affecting the world."

But don't expect rooms that seem stopped in time, in the mid-20th century. Those classic styles are "like a thread running through Esteban's designs," Niebling says. "But his sensibility is modern, so there are surprises mixed in."

"I may add something antique, some-



The upstairs bedroom was designed by Lopez to include a sitting area as well as storage and a computer desk. Niebling selected the soothing blue for the walls.



Sputnik lighting from the 1950s inspired Lopez's sparking ceiling light for the living room.

thing rough-hewn, something playful, something a little bit serious but not so serious it's not approachable," Lopez elaborates. "I try to stay away from trendy and go instead for timelessness, but I don't want stuffy. It's a fine tap dance."

Making the mix work, he insists, calls for "restraint. You have to be able to edit, so you don't have too much of one thing or too many competing styles. You don't want to get over tchotchke-fied."

Like so many of his contemporaries, Lopez is committed to using "green" items

from renewable resources, often reaching for innovative commercial products or finding ways "to make old things new again rather than discarding them."

When working with clients or brainstorming projects, the strengths of both men come into play. "Incredible cutting-edge design, lighting and space planning are Esteban's strengths," Niebling says admiringly. "I bring color to the mix from my fashion days, and I keep the client's needs and wishes in the forefront. It's a good balance."

STORIES TO TELL

"No more and no less," Lopez says with a knowing look at his partner. The subject is Niebling's colorful art glass collection, on view in artful vignettes throughout their loft.

"I admit I get a little carried away," Niebling says about the mostly vintage, curvaceous pieces from the 1950-'70s designed by Wayne Husted for the West Virginia company Blenko. "When they

are grouped together, they look like a cool cityscape. And they seem to have movement when the light reflects off them. I find them mesmerizing."

On the ground floor, home to the living room, kitchen, dining room, sitting room and guest bath, the Blenko pieces mix with Danish modern rosewood cabinets, a sinuous vintage Le Corbusier chaise lounge and a Ligne Roset Nomade Express sleeper-sofa upholstered in a muted orange bouclé. Overhead is a sparkling 32-arm light fixture modeled by Lopez after the popular Sputnik design from the 1950s.

Just as fashion experts know labels or landscape designers rattle off botanical Latin, Lopez and Niebling quickly ID pieces, their provenance and the stories they conceal.

Typical is their impassioned description of an antique screen, their favorite find, purchased several years ago in New York and now the backdrop for the living room sofa.



Lopez's admiration for Mid-Century Modern design inspired the purchase of collectibles from the era like this George Nelson ball clock.

"It's French and came out of a German estate in Argentina. It's really traveled the world," Lopez says. "It's hand-painted silk chinoiserie with hand-applied gold leaf. It's breathtaking. We had to have it."

A white Burke dining table and chairs sit adjacent to the kitchen — "we're going to remodel it," says Lopez, with a look that says don't look. "It's a space-waster." Farther back is a sitting room with mocha walls (Pratt & Lambert Sepia Brown), a

1956 Kofod-Larsen "Elizabeth" chair, a Warren Platner wire table and Italian Murano-glass lamps snapped up on antiquing trips to Palm Springs.

Lopez often works in the sitting room, tweaking designs in AutoCAD on his laptop; guests quickly claim the cozy space when the two entertain. "I love it when people feel at home here," Lopez says. Adds Niebling, "I love it when people think the loft is so much bigger than it is.

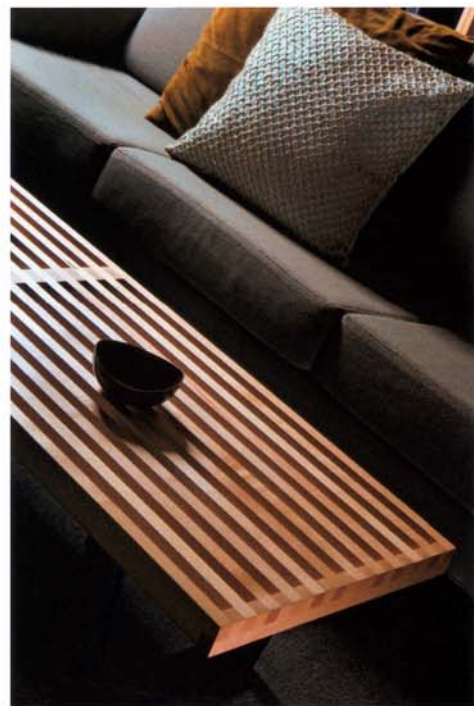
It's Esteban's skill that makes it seem so spacious."

Upstairs, bedding and window coverings play off a blue wall (Niebling picked the soft shade) with a simple white graphic design that distracts the eye from an awkward ceiling soffit. Linen draperies with a blue and brown geometric band soften light from the tall windows. Or so it seems.

"The windows look symmetrical from the outside, but inside they are chopped up by the second floor. You only see the top third of the windows in the bedroom," Lopez says. "I puzzled over how to treat them, then decided to hang Roman shades to cover the wall as if it were a window. It really balanced the scale."

Across from the bed and a ceruse-finished rift-cut oak chest of drawers designed by Lopez is another sitting area anchored by a George Nelson sofa from New York's Modernica. In front of it is another George Nelson piece — a slatted birch bench with a story to tell.

"We bought that at an auction of pieces from the first season of 'The Apprentice,'" Niebling said. "Just think, Omarosa (Manigault-Stallworth) sat on that." 🍃



This birch bench was used on the set of "The Apprentice" during its first season.