



Interior design by

BENJAMIN DHONG

“Little humble moments make
a room feel confident.”

A sculpture by Dan Corbin draws the eye toward the view of the bay in this San Francisco living room. Designer Benjamin Dhong used a monochromatic palette throughout the house to create serenity. Walls are painted Donald Kaufman Color DKC-13, trim is Benjamin Moore Linen White, and sofas are in an A. Rudin chenille. OPPOSITE: Armchairs in Glant's Mohair are pulled up to a vintage ottoman in Le Zebre linen by Brunswick & Fils.

Interview by LISA CREGAN Photographs by JOSÉ PICAYO





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LISA CREGAN: The first thing that struck me is the unusual way you've arranged the living room.

BENJAMIN DHONG: Most people probably would have stuck all the furniture around the fireplace, with a sofa plopped dead center. But that would have cut the room in half. I don't like amputating any parts of a room. This feels intimate and expansive at the same time. I love an enfilade, seeing through a room as far as possible.

The second thing that caught my eye is that big banquette in the dining room.

I wanted it to extend the entire length of the room. I put it there to make the room feel more alive. We opened the dining room to the kitchen so it wouldn't be so single-use. I want all my rooms to be multipurpose. There's nothing sadder than a stagnant space. Now guests love to sit on the banquette while the owners cook—there might be 15 people there—and after dinner they lounge on it, chatting. It makes that area the heart of the house, not just for eating but for living.

If that space is for living and entertaining, what is the living room for?

Mostly I envisioned it as a serene place for them to retreat and be by themselves. That's why the walls are a little darker and there are big lounge chairs by the fireplace. At the end of the day, drink in hand, they can put their legs up on that wonderful ottoman. The zebra brings in a tiny bit of edge that doesn't intrude. I like zebra, but not too much of it—that's a pattern that can definitely be overdone.

You did contrasting trim in the living room, but in other rooms it's the same color as the walls.

Painting it the same color feels more modern to me. But the trim is semigloss, so your eyes read 'contrast,' even though it's subtle. It's rich and luscious without being distracting.

And the color of the sofas matches the walls.

Yes, I like the biggest furniture in the room, my sofas, to disappear or blend into the walls, with pillows and throws that pop. People don't think of white as being a pop color, but it can be.

Okay, I admit I'm one of those people.

When I work with a monochromatic palette, I layer all those quiet neutrals to the point where the room is starving for color. Then you give it a little bit of white and it's such a relief; the effect of the white is heightened. But it's not overwhelming, so the mood stays serene.

The kitchen brings in a dark color, on the cabinets.

It's part of the dining room, and I felt it needed to

maintain some formality. White would have looked way too kitchen-y. This dark gray looks like furniture at night. It's so sexy when the light hits it and flickers off the Calacatta marble.

And at the same time, it's not striving for glamour.

I like kitchens to feel like they've always been there, to match a style appropriate to the age of the house—this is a Tudor, built in the early 1900s. I hate to see a supermodern kitchen in an old house.

This client seems to have had a big budget.

What? Oh no, not at all. This was about smart shopping. We mixed splurges like the Calacatta marble with a lot of things from Crate & Barrel, Room & Board, Wisteria, West Elm, Restoration Hardware. I never want everything in a room to be expensive. I think expensive shoes look better if you're wearing them with jeans. And antiques are even more handsome on a jute rug. Basically it's about balance—between things that say 'Look at me' and things that are humble and quiet. Little humble moments make a room feel confident. And juxtaposing them with the precious is what's so chic today.

Where do you think interior design is headed?

Livable elegance is what everybody wants right now. Order, but not perfection. My clients say, 'I want something modern in spirit but warm and rich.' I think everyone now falls somewhere between modern and traditional. They've seen it all, everything, and they want it all—beauty and practicality, formal and relaxed, old and new, serene and stimulating.

What makes a happy house?

People like to be intimate, to congregate in nice, cozy spaces. We've become a nation of megamansions, where there are huge spaces in houses that just don't feel good. I'll sometimes ask everyone at a party to stand up and pull their chairs closer to the coffee table. I'll say, 'How does that feel?' You feel connected to other people when things are closer. I think a house absolutely has to have a lot of little tables to be happy. When you walk into a room and you see a little table or a stool pulled up to a chair, you immediately imagine curling up with a cup of coffee or a drink. You think: 'This is a happy house.' It's always open. It's the same idea as the writing desk in the bedroom—it tells you that this is a place that's used, that's loved, that's inviting, that's human. It's important to fill people's heads with notions like that.

PRODUCED BY DORETTA SPERDUTO

1. Dhong used straight pieces of a sectional from Room & Board to make a dining room banquette. It covers an entire wall but doesn't overwhelm the room because the faux-suede is in the same tone as the walls and trim—Basic Beige by Glidden. Table from Ralph Lauren Home. Prince Aha stool, Design Within Reach. 2. He kept the entry spare, adding zebra-covered benches and a jute runner for graphic punch and texture. 3. The Nobilis Woods and Marbles wallpaper in the "rustic chic" bathroom is reminiscent of old barn wood, but the slight silvery shimmer gives it a subdued elegance. Gothic Twig mirror from Gump's. 4. Calacatta Gold marble pops against kitchen cabinets painted Benjamin Moore's Temptation.



The master bedroom is given low-key sumptuousness with rich layers of different textures in the same tones. Dhong is a “big believer” in big bedside tables: “I hate rinky-dink tables. We need a place for all our things, and it allows for beautiful tablescapes—and empty space!” Crate & Barrel’s Colette bed is dressed in Restoration Hardware Italian Hotel collection linens. Prints by Agnes Martin. OPPOSITE: “Usually a photo of a flower is a bit too sweet for me,” Dhong says. “But the scale of Chris Flach’s rose, captured at its loveliest, makes it modern. The warm tones lend softness and elegance.” He paired the linen-covered French settee from Wisteria with a block table from ABC Carpet & Home: “Not only is the juxtaposition pleasing, but I love the way small silver trays look on the block.” Secretary from Williams-Sonoma Home.

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