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Photos by Tim Street-Porter

## Designing Dudes

M. G. Lord  
September 1, 2003

Lorenzo De' Medici did not leave the business of decorating his palaces to his wife. He hired Tuscany's best architects and designers, then oversaw every detail, from sumptuous stone floors to elaborately frescoed ceilings. When it comes to their houses, today's Renaissance men—business leaders and patrons of the arts—are following in Lorenzo the Magnificent's tradition, or so say the designers who work with them.

Larry Wangberg, former chairman of Tech TV, a Paul Allen company, reviewed every decision for the French country-style vacation home that he is building in Sun Valley, Idaho. While never insensitive to the taste of his wife, Michelle, Wangberg imprinted his own style on the house, personally selecting pieces of furniture while on trips to Bordeaux, Provence and Burgundy.

"Larry is a guy's guy," says Thomas M. Beeton, Wangberg's design guru. "He loves huntin', fishin' and decoratin', in that order." And the house shows it. "European, but not fussy," as Beeton describes it, the house features all the accoutrements of hunting—a moose head over a fireplace and, in Wangberg's bathroom, a tall rack that includes a wood plaque with antlers.



New York designer Greg Jordan has also noticed that titans of business are taking a greater interest in their homes. "It used to be that all the decorating meetings were with the wife," says Jordan. "And the husband would say, 'Whatever she wants. I just write the check.'" Now, many top businessmen have fallen in love with the design process. "And they have done their homework," Jordan adds. "They don't say, 'I want a blue room.' They say, 'I want my study to have a Regency feel.'"

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Photos by Tim Street-Porter

## Designing Dudes

M. G. Lord  
September 1, 2003

This brave new attitude is due in part to a cultural shift. Masculine identity is less fragile than it was 30 years ago. Men feel comfortable discussing design and color, often to a degree that surprises designers. Jordan, for instance, was startled by a prominent businessman who took issue with the placement of a copper beech in his garden. "He told me, 'Don't you think that the garden needs a lavender color there? That tree looks a little harsh.'"



Businessmen are also willing to be involved with design when they trust the business practices of the designer. "They view themselves as the captain of a team that consists of the designer, the architect and the contractor," Beeton explains. "It's not about control, it's about creating a particular vision." His client, Larry Wangberg, concurs. Beeton is easy to work with because "he cares not just about beauty but about functionality," Wangberg says. What's more, the private residence has taken on a new importance in the post-September 11 world. "Your home is the one thing you have some control over," explains Jordan. "It's an expression of your success and of how you live as a family."

This is a new breed of design-minded men who have made their marks in fields ranging from finance to entertainment to real estate development. In Beeton's world they include Donald Bren, president and CEO of the Irvine Company, Steve Tisch, president and CEO of the Steve Tisch Company, and Edward Slatkin, cofounder with his brother of the Edward Thomas Company, which owns such Santa Monica beachfront hotels as Shutters and Casa Del Mar. But Beverly Hills resident Vin DiBona, chairman of Vin DiBona Productions, is probably the apotheosis of the design-sawvy male. He describes restoring his 1891 Stanford White house in Newport, R.I., as "the thrill of my life."

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In 1972, DiBona, who grew up in nearby Cranston, R.I., bought the three-story "cottage," with 28 rooms and a garden designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, for \$92,000. Although best known as the creator of America's Funniest Home Videos, DiBona took his design responsibility very seriously. "With that house and with those names attached, I knew I had better do the right thing," he says. He studied the period and did his research, and he learned to appreciate styles he had formerly dismissed. "I used to think Victorian meant red crushed velvet on ball-and-claw-foot couches," DiBona says. But he learned instead that it meant free-flowing colors, such as the seven-tone palette he and Beeton used for the interiors. Their focus on design was intense. One evening, DiBona recalls, the two visited a frame shop in Newport that was open at midnight. Even when he returned to Hollywood, DiBona continued the search for the perfect door escutcheon, which he eventually found at Liz's Antique Hardware in Los Angeles. When a matching escutcheon could not be located, Beeton arranged for an exact replica to be cast. DiBona was faithful to the house's Victorian details, down to the 20,000 hand-cut semicircular shingles on the roof. A tower room, painted by muralist Dana Westring to resemble the interior of a hot-air balloon, is his one indulgence—more Edwardian than Victorian.



Back in L.A., DiBona, recently divorced, has moved into a Tuscan-style townhouse in Beverly Hills that reflects his diverse aesthetic passions: an 18th-century Italian crenulated chest shares space with Biedermeier furniture and a modest \$500 lamp. DiBona's car collection—a 1958 Mercedes 300 SL, a 1995 Bentley Continental R Coupe, a 2003 Maserati and a 1993 Jaguar—vehicles that Beeton felt deserved better than "a dull, boring garage," now repose on a more worthy sea grass sisal floor.

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## Designing Dudes

M. G. Lord  
September 1, 2003

Hotelier Ed Slatkin embraced the Medici model long before he and his wife, Dana, began renovating the 1926 French Normandy garden cottage that they own in Los Angeles. He began acquiring contemporary art 20 years ago, building a collection that includes works by Gerhard Richter, Andy Warhol and Ross Bleckner. For his own house, Slatkin knew that he did not want what he calls "generic luxury"—the sort of "tasteful but boring" interiors found in many upscale hotel chains. He wanted his home to be about him, filled with original desks and chairs and lamps, immune from the "value engineering" necessary in a hotel. Value engineering is about compromise, finding the perfect fabric at a high-end showroom and then figuring out how to obtain it more cheaply elsewhere.

Slatkin also feels that a home should reflect "where you are in your life." In his view, if you are "casual enough to wear sweats to dinner," you should not live in "a stuffy house dripping with French antiques." Beeton helped Slatkin discern exactly what he wanted. He urged him to cut photos from design magazines of interiors that inspired him. "I showed him the way, and he ran with it," Beeton says. The house is "as much a portrait of him as any material thing could be."



It is a dazzling portrait, ranging from what Beeton terms the "cuckoo" Italian chandeliers inside to the elaborate conservatory at the back and an outdoor fireplace in the garden. During the renovation, the home, which was formerly owned by Barrie Chase, Fred Astaire's last dancing partner, expanded from 5,500 square feet to 8,500 square feet. Slatkin also learned to appreciate the role of the architect—in this case, [Richardson Robertson III](#). "Rick is very good with details," Slatkin says, describing Robertson's sensitivity to ceiling height—14 feet is too much, 9 to 10 1/2 feet is about right.

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## Designing Dudes

M. G. Lord  
September 1, 2003

Not all design-minded business leaders are a breeze to work with, but then, neither was Lorenzo de' Medici. Peter McCoy, head of McCoy Construction, a Los Angeles firm, faced an unusual challenge with a high-powered client who could not visualize from the blueprints how his finished house would look. McCoy is prepared to meet unusual challenges—before going into construction, he served as the president of Sotheby's West Coast office, as a deputy assistant to President Ronald Reagan, and as an Undersecretary of Commerce. Taking a cue from the entertainment industry, in which the client worked, McCoy figured out a way to help him picture his future home.

He hired a muralist to paint a life-size version of the house and placed it on the property, as if it were a movie set. The mural was 35 feet high, 100 feet long, and took about three months to complete. Although painting the backdrop slowed construction, it gave the client exactly what he needed—the confidence to move forward on the real thing.



**Thomas M. Beeton**, 310.657.5600;  
**Greg Jordan**, 212.570.4470;  
**Richardson Robertson III**, 213.236.3200;  
**Peter McCoy**, 310.278.3503

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