

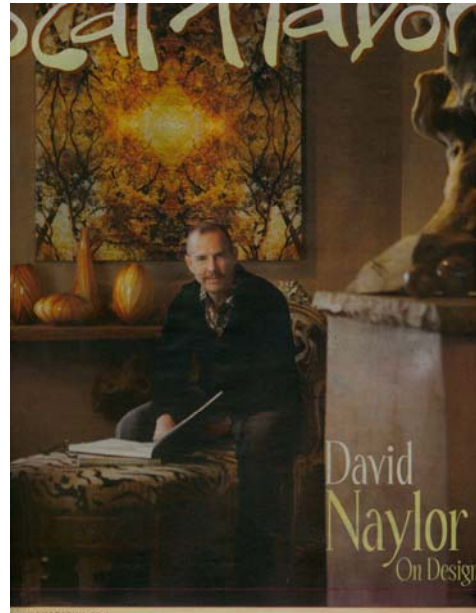
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David Naylor on Design: Confessions of an Author **Tania Casselle**

Interior designer David Naylor played hard to get for nearly two years before agreeing to write his book *Old World Interiors: A Modern Interpretation*.

Mainly because the book that publisher Gibbs Smith wanted from him wasn't the book Naylor wanted to write.

“They wanted it to be very Italian or Mediterranean, and that’s an influence, but it wasn’t a focus for me. I look at lots of cultures when I’m designing for a client.”



This is despite the fact that Naylor spent a summer in Anacapri and traveling round Italy as an impoverished art student, trading paintings for lodgings. He stole lemons and ate the candied almonds thrown at weddings. “It was a meal!” he says, agreeing there's worse places to be broke. “But I couldn't do a book on Italian architecture. That's not how I approach a job. I’m trying to get so many things happening in a house.”

Naylor set the book idea aside, but Gibbs Smith himself, the man who founded the eponymous publishing company, kept knocking at his door. So Naylor presented photos of recent projects, explaining his design process. “Why something was made, and how it was made, and what it was made from, and who it was made for. Gibbs Smith was very allowing. He said ‘Write the book you want to write, tell the story of your workrooms and your projects.’ That’s when I signed the contract.”

The resulting coffee table book is beautiful, smart, and inspiring, revealing the interior design philosophy of Naylor's Visions Design Group, which sources unique pieces from around the globe, and works with artisans to create custom designs.

So once the focus of *Old World Interiors* was agreed, it was all plain sailing?

Naylor laughs, as he frequently does during our interview. We're sitting in his Santa Fe showroom beside a gnarled frangipani trunk from Indonesia that serves as an architectural column, the marble spheres nesting in its knots lending a Tolkienesque fairy tale vibe. Although all the pieces surrounding us are dramatic, some boldly contemporary, they also feel comfortable. Naylor's designs aren't new and different purely for the sake of it, there's a sense of organic tradition, albeit with a twist, and that's what's reflected in the book. The book that Naylor now had to write, although he was surprised to discover that a publisher doesn't tell you how to actually DO that.

“It was daunting, so I thought: Right, let's break this down in the same way I would for a job. You don't eat an elephant in one day.” As might be expected for a designer, he decided to photograph everything first, trusting that the book's structure would emerge from the images.

Naylor and photographer Kate Russell (whose photos also illustrate this article) spent 10 months shooting homes Naylor had worked on over the last decade in New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, California and Oregon.

“I go into a house and see what I want to shoot, but Kate sees things differently and I find if I leave her alone, if I don't tell her what I want, we get a better shot. She shows me something I wasn't expecting, a surprising point of view. ”

He points at the book's cover, where Russell shot a raised dining room through a rotunda entry hall. She stood her tripod in the powder room to get the angle she wanted, manipulating the lighting to glow through an archway, perfectly illuminating the textures in a carved bench that looks as if it's lived several centuries in a Medici palace, but is in fact new from the workshop.

Naylor is grateful for his clients' enthusiasm as he re-entered their lives and their homes. “They were all flattered. They were vying for the cover.” His influence continued as he tweaked their rooms for photography. In one, where the client hadn't bought art yet, Naylor placed a striking John Bonath photograph over the fireplace: a mythical male nude with cigar and snake. (Satisfy your curiosity by checking it out in Visions Design's showroom.)

“It was a classic living room,” says Naylor, “and I wanted to put something in there a little shocking, a little racy.” The client loved it, and bought the print.

Once Naylor had his images, the themes for the book's chapters emerged over the next 10 months as he selected photos, writing around them and organizing into sections to illustrate his favorite design styles. He acknowledges that his method was frustrating to colleagues, and to the publishers who wanted his written text early.

"The process had to come out of seeing the whole. It was easy to sequence when I could see all the photos. I didn't want to write anything till I saw every shot."

He admits to "a proud moment" as he surveyed 300 photos from his career spread out on the floor around him, as a kind of retrospective of his work. He could have edited out earlier designs to focus on recent projects where he had bigger budgets and more experience, but he realized that the older work was still relevant. "Even my beginning work had a moxie and big thinking. The decisions I made then were decisions I'd make now."

Naylor provides his original design sketches beside the final photos - fine drawings of stained glass, or a carved Casablanca-style ceiling panel, to be custom-made in the workshop. "New homes sometimes have no link to history, and I try to add the history. That's a killer ceiling isn't it? I think that a house with a lot of handmade things is a nice house to be in."

While Naylor reads six books at once on subjects as eclectic as his design tastes (currently Jean Genet, Hillary Clinton, Barbara Walters, Annie Leibovitz, Barack Obama, and the memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*) he's not into the writing side so much, and for a design book, it's all about the visuals. He's too kind to state "a picture speaks a thousand words" to a writer interviewing him, but he's probably thinking it. Still, he wanted to make the text as sparky as possible, including a personal touch in the 'Confession' sections that sprinkle the book, sharing intimate and often irreverent insights into his process, likes, and dislikes. One Confession reveals that it's "kryptonite to my power" when clients hand over pages torn from interior magazines, especially when they add "I don't like anything in this picture, but I like the overall feeling."

Fortunately Naylor didn't have to upset any clients about the shot that won the cover. Gibbs Smith, who'd been out of the process after the initial discussions, returned to make cover decisions.

“That was a nice full circle,” says Naylor. “He told me what was a good front cover, a good back cover, and I listened.” Then he adds with a wicked grin that for the cover, he himself fancied a shot of a roll of bathroom tissue, hanging against tiles embedded with an ancient spiraled ammonite.

Naylor feels the book highlights his advice to new designers that if they don’t like what’s available already in the market, to figure out a way to make the pieces they want. He prefers watching the cooking channel, but when he’s seen TV design shows, he’s amazed at how differently other designers work. “I can’t imagine grabbing a client and taking them shopping through a design center. I had to create my own design center here in Santa Fe. We make our pieces, and I didn’t see anyone in the industry talking about that. I’ll make a table that looks contemporary, but it’s 100 year old teak wood, or wood that’s dredged from the Mississippi River, that’s been petrified underwater. This hand of history weaving with the modern context.”

Old World Interiors is selling well, proving especially popular in Europe, and Naylor is working on a companion volume. Meanwhile, on this warm February morning, I spy a hint of a tattoo beneath his short-sleeved black shirt. He obligingly rolls up his sleeve, and there's a large Mona Lisa, another Italian inspiration, although he acquired it in London. “We all went for tattoos with our last \$100.”

A Mona Lisa on the arm of a very modern man, living in a city that blends the old and the new so seamlessly. It fits perfectly with Naylor's philosophy. “We have a historic approach to how we do an interior. It’s not faddish, or what’s in vogue. We reach back for what we need instead of forward. There’s so much big play on contemporary, but I like to interpret it differently. ”