

## Designer Scramble

Out of the mansions and into the lofts, the Richmond Symphony Designer House gets ready to show off a new look.

by Deveron Timberlake

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Manchester is no Athens, but the frenzy surrounding a certain old bakery is, in a small way, a taste of what the Olympic city faced as it rushed to finish before its big event. In this instance, the venue is the Old Manchester Lofts on Commerce and Porter streets, the former Virginia Baking Company just across the Manchester Bridge from downtown Richmond.



It is here that construction workers and interior designers dodge each other in a cautious game of keep-away, as the clock ticks toward their Sept. 10 deadline. A water main breaks just about the time an artist is carefully adding gold filigree to a bedroom wall. Nail guns explode in one room while tapestry-covered bar stools are shuttled into another. Worlds collide, temperatures hover at a stultifying high degree and dust seems to permeate everything.

Through it all, übervolunteer Faye Holland is nonplussed, excited even, that in old, conservative Richmond, the Richmond Symphony Orchestra League is taking a big chance — throwing its considerable heft behind a project that will challenge visitors to cross the river and come into a part of town they've likely never paid to enter before.

The project is the Richmond Symphony Designer House, previously held in blue-chip mansions where fringe-heavy window treatments and fine antiques are de rigeur. This time, a cadre of decorators takes on 10 condominiums in the brick factory, where massive beams and concrete floors complement classic views of downtown.

"It's been waiting to happen in Richmond," says Larry Parker of Robert Rentz Interiors, who is painting walls a color called Grapefruit Slice and lining windows with lime iridescent taffeta. In another unit, Janet Brown arranges English velvet chairs in a living room and a large antique map in the stairwell. David Crow of Forbes Design Group chooses red paisley wallpaper; Mason-Butler will pull together antique rugs and clean-lined furniture. Steve Fotta, who runs Decorator's Warehouse, goes theatrical in his ice blue unit, where mannequins dressed as the Rat Pack will be posed on an upstairs stage.

Renmark & Associates is decorating its condominium around a fictional couple, Marella and Bronti DiNobili, whose local pied-à-terre boasts a crystal chandelier and original oil paintings by Ron Renmark. Sue Ellen Gregory's bedroom will feature pomegranates in a Raoul Textiles fabric, "chocolate with pink seeds," she exclaims. "I want to show that upscale, traditional design can live in a loft as easily as trendy and contemporary."

Palettes of chocolate brown and apple green appear in a couple of units, warming up the brick-and-ductwork aesthetic of the lofts, which are being developed by Robin Miller & Associates to

appeal to young professionals and empty-nesters. (More than two dozen of the building's 80 units are sold.)

Some of the construction work is being undone: Martin Rubenstein and Kitchen Designworks have stripped their condo to its bones to install new fixtures and furnishings. Alexandra Cotton Geanious, of Alexandra Cotton Interiors, removed the granite countertop in her unit's kitchen to show a new surface treatment in a creamy yellow tone. Decorative artist Lara Koplin is reworking plans for a mural that wraps around three walls, now that new industrial ductwork is claiming more territory than expected.

That's the challenge of this setting. Everything is in motion, forcing designers to be particularly flexible in hopes of handsome rewards down the line. For most, the project is a high-effort marketing blitz and a bit of a gamble. Some get immediate new business, and many take their chairs and beds and rugs and fabrics home for their personal decorating plans. Some merchandise is sold or returned to the manufacturer that loaned it. For everyone involved, the breathing gets easier once the preview party starts, with martinis and jazz supplementing the hoped-for oohs and aahs.

Is Richmond ready for designers in Manchester? "For one, it's going to be really unusual, and I think it is a great choice to draw a whole new market they've never tapped into before," says David Crow. "Let's give the usual people something different, and let's bring in some new blood, too." S

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