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SMALL LIVING SPACE, GRAND IDEAS

A Laguna Beach shopkeeper applies decorating strategies borrowed from his boutique



Allen J. Schaben, Los Angeles Times

ON LOCATION: Trey Russell uses his apartment, located behind his new home fashion boutique Aris in Laguna Beach, to display accessories in a home setting. His well-edited stylish apartment offers readers a number of design ideas for their own homes.

Learn from Russell's tips to make the most of any living space.

By Barbara Thornburg
November 8, 2008

>>> For Trey Russell, "less is more" is not just a modernist creed but a way of life. In his Laguna Beach boutique, Aris, and his second-story garden apartment behind the shop, there is a pared-down yet luxurious aesthetic on display.

Art books in both home and store sit in low, color-coordinated stacks. A row of dark wood boxes in graduated sizes -- think Russian nesting dolls -- hide the clutter of DVDs, playing cards and remote controls. Objets d'art are deftly juxtaposed: a Nymphenburg porcelain rhinoceros and a grouping of black jacket-less books; an Anne Ricketts sculpture of a bronze hand and a slender hourglass. One floral arrangement consists simply of a pale-yellow dahlia floating in a Chinese bowl.



From Trey Russell 12



Photos: An Aris affair in

"Whether you're displaying merchandise in a store or objects in your home, it's important to give each object breathing room," Russell says. "I treat each accessory as a piece of art; in a

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For the engaging Russell, merchandising his gift store -- a melange of home furnishings, high-end fashion, consignment clothing, jewelry, teas, chocolates and fresh seasonal flowers -- is like putting together a big puzzle. "Every day I get deliveries of new merchandise," he says. "I have to make it all fit in a small space and make it look attractive." Which is precisely the challenge so many people face in their homes, particularly as they prepare for the onslaught of holiday parties and houseguests.

Russell uses his 1,100-square-foot apartment overlooking the rooftops of north Laguna Beach as an extension of the store. It's as minimalist and restrained as a Beverly Hills boutique. Lilac-gray and violet-slate walls create a perfect foil for his collection of well-edited furnishings, upholstered in a subtle

palette of soothing alabaster, beige, gray and chocolate. Like his store, a stylish mix of affordable goods -- Pottery Barn shelves, West Elm bookcases and Crate & Barrel chairs -- keep company with Christian Liaigre consoles, stingray tables from France and \$3,000 Caleb Siemon art vases.

"Style is not about money, but about the mix. I want customers to be able to see the things I sell in my store in a home-like setting. There's no reason a one-bedroom apartment can't be just as stylish as a 5,000-square-foot home," says Russell, who can be seen most days dressed in smart yet casual attire -- white Gap jeans, a Polo tee and a jaunty, custom-made linen hat.

Russell keeps his clothes in a well-disciplined bedroom closet. The only furnishings in the room are his California king-size bed and a wall-mounted TV. When he added the bed, the wood closet doors could no longer open, so in typical fashion, the inventive retailer made changes.

New slate-gray, Belgian linen drapes, attached by rings to a metal track, pull back to reveal sports jackets arranged in a trio of subtle, earthy hues. Like items, such as V-neck sweaters, cashmere crews, short-sleeved Polos, long-sleeved Polos and button-down shirts, are precisely folded and stacked in neat piles -- not so surprising, since Russell once worked as a fashion sales associate at South Coast Plaza.

"I'm an expert in the art of folding," he quips.

"Seriously, most people have way too much stuff in their closets -- and their homes. There's no reason to keep a raincoat hanging 365 days of the year when you live in Southern California -- really. Just leave out things you really wear and love, and stash the rest away."

Good advice, especially for those residing in space-challenged apartments.

Metamorphosis

Just 10 years ago, Russell was living in Florida and working in the hospitality business when he decided to make the move from restaurant to retail and head west to Corona del Mar.

"I was more interested in watching CNN's 'Style With Elsa Clinch' and reading Metropolitan Home magazine than in food and wine," he says.

For the next five years, the garrulous Russell worked as a personal shopper for Prada, followed by a stint at A'Maree's, a high-fashion boutique in Newport Beach. He spent his spare time as a power seller on eBay, marketing high-end fashion and holding trunk shows at home to recycle "hardly worn haute couture."

Two years ago, he opened his version of a shop -- a gift boutique, as he calls it -- in a former 1950s Volkswagen dealership on a quiet strip of Pacific Coast Highway. Russell runs it like a friendly neighborhood restaurant.

Customers are welcomed with offers of Pellegrino, cappuccino or a cup of Marco Polo Mariages Frères tea. Then there are the snacks served family-style -- Java chips with spicy hummus, a bowl of chocolate almonds or popsicles for kids. On Saturdays, regulars know that mimosas and strawberries are served in the garden behind the store -- all the better to wander into his nearby annex -- two rooms

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beneath his apartment building that offer consignment clothing and Missoni linens. But how does it feel when everything in your home is for sale, one might wonder?

Although he won't part with his pair of antique tortoise shells -- "they're family heirlooms," he says -- everything else has a price.

"Just the other day, a woman customer came in and fell in love with my linen sofa -- gone," he says with a smile. "It's OK. I'll make a new one. Change is always good."

Thornburg is a Times staff writer.

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