

Is This What Happiness Looks Like?



Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

Dennis Rolland's bedroom for the 2006 Hampton Designer Showhouse in Bridgehampton, N.Y., reflects an affinity for exuberant colors. [More Photos >](#)

By DAN SHAW

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FOR 22 years Joanne and Daniel Megna lived in monochromatic splendor on Staten Island. “Everything was beige,” said Mrs. Megna, who was reluctant to change the décor by Ruben de Saavedra, who was one of Manhattan’s chicest decorators in the 1980’s. “It was very elegant and very quiet.”

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When the couple recently decided to renovate and refurbish, they hired Dennis Rolland, another Manhattan designer, because they admired the work he had done for their friends. But Mr. Rolland’s reputation for using intense colors made Mrs. Megna nervous. “There were many sleepless nights,” she said.

She eventually put her fears aside and agreed, along with her husband, to banana yellow striped walls in the foyer, coral walls and draperies in the living room, turquoise chairs in the dining room and winter sky blue walls in the bedroom.

“It’s something you have to get used to,” Mrs. Megna said.

But, she added: “As Dennis guided us toward more color, a

new world opened up to us. This is very joyful. It’s a happy house. It makes me personally feel more alive.”

In the last decade the social sciences have become increasingly focused on happiness and what accounts for it, and over the past several months the rest of the culture has been catching up. The best-attended course at [Harvard](#) last semester was Positive Psych, an introduction to a new field of psychology that eschews the traditional approach of focusing on pathologies in favor of studying the sources of happiness — “a class whose content resembles that of many a self-help book,” as The Boston Globe reported. Last month New York magazine published a cover story on the amount of interest in the subject, citing a spate of new books, the six-year-old Journal of Happiness Studies and courses at more than 100 colleges, all of which address the question of what makes people happy.

And in the fall “The Architecture of Happiness,” by the philosopher Alain de Botton, who lives in England, will be published in the United States. In it he argues that physical environment is a crucial contributor to well-being. Like it or not, he suggests, the spaces we live in shape our sense of happiness and of self, so we had better choose them carefully.

Even before this vogue took hold in America, however, a number of influential East Coast decorators were exploring the same issues, and advancing a theory of their own: that a maximalist, color-saturated approach to interiors is a secret to happiness — maybe even *the* secret.

“Your home should be like a good dose of Zoloft,” Jonathan Adler, the ceramist and decorator, and one of the most prominent members of this group, wrote in his 2005 book, “My Prescription for Anti-Depressive Living.”

But whether the unrelentingly cheery interiors Mr. Adler and his colleagues create always have that kind of uplifting effect — or are more likely to drive people crazy — is a matter of some debate. What is clear is that the new school of happiness décor is producing interiors that evoke strong responses in everyone who spends time in them.

THESE designers are not the first to try cultivating happiness; many, in fact, trace their mission to the influence of the midcentury decorator Dorothy Draper, who wrote the 1939 book “Decorating Is Fun!” Draper, currently the subject of a major exhibit at the [Museum of the City of New York](#), studied with the Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, the author of the 1952 book “Power of Positive Thinking.” She saw herself as an evangelist, charged with spreading the word that “lovely clear colors have a vital effect on our mental happiness.”

For her designing descendants, too, color is something of a religion. Alexandra Stoddard, a Park Avenue decorator who has written some 20 design and self-help books, including “Choosing Happiness,” is zealous about the subject.

“I go by nature,” she said. “Beige is not a color in the rainbow; it has no energy. Why would you want a beige sky? Would you want beige water?”

Another prominent member of the group, Jamie Drake, is more pragmatic in his critique. “Beige can look sad quickly,” he said. “It doesn’t hide the physical and emotional wear and tear of the city.”

But the bigger issue for him, and for many of his colleagues, is the conformism and absence of personality he sees in the neutral palette. “With all due respect to Mr. Armani,” he said, “every one of those interiors looks alike.”

William Diamond, a partner in the color-happy Manhattan firm Diamond Baratta Design, is similarly scornful of what he calls “the blank, classy, tasteful style,” and claims to be bewildered by its broad appeal. (A disclosure: I was the writer for a coffee-table book about the firm’s decorating for Bulfinch Press, which will be published in October.) To Mr. Adler, who uses “happy chic” to describe his own work, the reason is obvious: fear. Sounding indignant, he blamed a “dour obscurantism” in the design, art and literary worlds for making easy-to-understand, cheerful interiors seem uncool.

“If you are dour and oblique, you are accorded tremendous respect because people are intimidated,” he said.

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And John Loecke, an up-and-coming designer whose vibrant rooms have been published in House Beautiful and O at Home, is dismissive of neutral interiors, which “may be nice but won’t make you feel overjoyed,” he said. “People have gotten very safe. Maybe they are afraid of being too happy.”

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Not everyone, of course, accepts the arguments of the happyists. Calvin Tsao, a partner in the New York architecture firm Tsao & McKown, known for its luxurious but understated interiors, said that he does not appreciate their conclusion that beige is the “archetypal sign of a life drained of passion.” He said that he doubts that a life drenched in color is necessarily “filled with passion and joie de vivre,” adding, “I don’t think it’s as simple as that.”

Mr. de Botton, for his part, defended his own monochromatic decorating style by turning the happyists’ psychological speculations on their head. “I think we decorate to get away from what we fear,” he said, and “exuberant, noisy colors principally appeal to people whose greatest fear is quiet — deathlike quiet.”

Those who prefer subdued palettes, on the other hand, are very likely to have busy lives full of exuberance and chaos, “which is why minimalism has its best chance and most fervent adherents in big cities like New York and London,” he said.

“A real riot of color does unnerve me,” he went on. “I think, ‘This interior looks like how I feel on a bad day,’ and I don’t want more of that.”

Joan Kron, the author of “Home-Psych: The Social Psychology of Home and Decoration,” is more blunt about her skepticism. “If your husband dies in a yellow room, will you be less sad?” she said. “How many divorces take place in colorful houses? Give me a break.”

Even Leatrice Eiseman, a professional color advocate in her capacity as executive director of the Pantone Color Institute in Carlstadt, N.J., who has written six books on color, admits that it is possible to overdose. “Too much bright color can be too much stimulation for the eye,” she said. “It can be nerve-racking.”

Or at least irritating, in the view of Kristan Cunningham, an interior designer and the host of “Design on a Dime,” on HGTV. She identifies with “a generation of workaholics who want to come home to something relaxing,” she said. “I love color but I happen to live in an all-white house, and I have never been happier anywhere. Bright yellow walls would not make me happy.”

Some in the happy decorating movement have chosen a middle path, cultivating happiness through a judiciousness in their use of color.

“If you have all happy colors it comes off as saccharine,” said Miles Redd, a New York decorator who often balances colors like robin’s-egg blue and grass green with small amounts of muddy ones as a foil. He has painted his own living room a midrange pink offset with touches of black and white, and the result is a more restrained version of happy décor.

“Ever since I was a child I had a Fred Astaire ‘Top Hat’ apartment in my mind; that was the thing I thought was glamorous and happy,” he said. “I have always been trying to achieve it, and this is the closest I have come.”

After years of married life in an all-white apartment, Christina Juarez, a publicist who works from her home on the Upper East Side, was determined to make cheerful color choices for the apartment she would share with her daughter, Sofia, after her divorce. “I wanted to make sure she was living in a happy environment,” she said.

But like Mr. Redd, and like many nonprofessional happy decorators who are not as comfortable as Mr. Drake and Mr. Diamond are with an exuberant palette, she opted for a compromise. Her daughter’s bedroom is decorated in vivid shades of pink and her home office is canary yellow with chartreuse accents. But she sleeps in a room that combines hot pink and chartreuse with chocolate brown, and the foyer and the hallways of the apartment are painted shades of brown.

Those who are comfortable living entirely in candy colors, meanwhile, find renewal at every turn. “When I get up in the morning, there is a feeling of joy,” said May Baratta, 80, who sleeps in an alarming sunflower yellow bedroom. “My living room puts a smile on my face,” she added, attributing her good mood to the periwinkle blue curtains, chartreuse linen walls, psychedelic floral upholstery and cyclamen pink throw pillows.

Mrs. Baratta’s kaleidoscopic apartment in Boca Raton, Fla., which she shares with her husband, Tony, also 80, was decorated by their son Tony and his business partner, Mr. Diamond, of Diamond Baratta Design.

“It has been the best thing that has ever happened to me,” she said with a mother’s fervor. “It makes me very, *very* happy.”