

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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From horticulture to
haute couture

Continental Self



Tino Zervudachi: Interiors Around the World (by Natasha Fraser; Flammarion, rrp £55)

If first exposure counts, the mise-en-scène of Tino Zervudachi's childhood was surely formative. In his grandparents' apartment in Alexandria were the furnishings of their previous Paris flat, decorated by Maison Jansen; Zervudachi's great-uncle Peter was a renowned antique dealer, latterly in Vevey, Switzerland, whose clients included the Marchesa Casati and Giovanni Agnelli; as a young man, Tino was fortunate in friends including David Hicks, Geoffrey Bennison and Madeleine Castaing. And then there was the lengthy partnership with David Mlinaric, beginning when Tino was 18. Given such diverse and distinguished influences, it is hardly surprising that the designer has described his style as 'Continental'.

Natasha Fraser's smart monograph celebrates a career spanning four decades and a handful of continents. More than 30 featured projects include the designer's own New York pied-à-terre and a beach house in the Bahamas. Both Zervudachi himself, and all those interviewed by the author who have worked alongside him,

deny a signature style, praising instead his sensitivity to architectural spaces and wide-ranging enthusiasms. 'A foot in the past and a foot in the present', the assessment of one New York-based associate, does indeed characterise his work. So does the designer's own view of his un-British outlook: even London-based projects glitter with an overseas polish. All bear out Fraser's verdict that Zervudachi's stock-in-trade comprises 'carefully crafted, architecturally thoughtful interiors'.

For a man whose career began in the 1980s, Zervudachi has consistently embraced both an approach and an aesthetic far removed from the swags-and-tails excesses of that cushion-filled, frilly decade. From Mlinaric, he learned the importance of getting right the architectural bones of a given space; he learned too to incorporate within a scheme features tailored to a client's particular way of life. Yet the Zervudachi idiom, honed and continually evolving, extends beyond bespoke functionalism. All the interiors featured here suggest sumptuous sleekness; in all is a prevailing orderliness, the reassurance of a not-too-manicured perfection.

Zervudachi excels at harmonious juxtapositions: a painted Louis XVI chair

stationed below a zingy gouache by Alexander Calder, its swirling snail shell of thick black outlines a reflection of the concave chair back; a simple wooden figure from Indonesia on a marble-topped giltwood table, the slope of the figure's shoulders reflected in the curve of cabriole legs, polished stone a foil to the matt wood. Bespoke fabrics and modern black-and-white photography recur. Zervudachi's decorating is tactile and points to informed connoisseurship. If, as is sometimes claimed for interior design, it is witty, its wit is of a rarefied variety.

By contrast, Fraser's text eschews jeux d'esprit. This is a deeply admiring, occasionally portentous response to Zervudachi's sophisticated portfolio. Overwhelmingly her focus is on the design process as much as its outcome; absent is any idea of the impact on their occupants of these highly sensual schemes, or any exploration of what it is like to find oneself in a Zervudachi room, house, yacht or château. Perhaps this scarcely matters: many of these photographs speak for themselves, prompts for dreaming. *Matthew Dennison is the author of 'Teller of the Unexpected: The Life of Roald Dahl, An Unofficial Biography' (Apollo)*

A spectacular double-height room in a mountain guest chalet in the Alps. A TV-watching gallery can be glimpsed at upper right

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