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REAL ESTATE | DESIGN | THAT'S DEBATABLE

Can an Utterly Blank Wall Be Chic?

No art. No wallpaper. Statement-making or sad? Interior designers weigh in on the polarizing topic of the unadorned wall



GREAT PLAIN In a New York penthouse, designer Timothy Brown let the architecture do the talking.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON/OTTO

By *Rima Suqi*

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YES

IN AN ERA of maximalism, when we celebrate near-baroque layers of color, texture and pattern, leaving a wall completely devoid of decoration is the interior-design equivalent of a double-dog dare. Carla Weisberg, who designs fabrics, wallpapers and rugs as well as interiors, would hardly self-identify as a minimalist. But the New Yorker has risen to the restraint challenge, noting that sometimes going au naturel can balance a décor scheme. After blanketing the walls of an entry from floor to ceiling with items from a client's collections—including 1950s Argentine pulp-art book covers and vintage signage—she convinced the avid accumulator to leave an adjacent hallway bare. “It allows him to experience the space at different speeds and levels, with room for visual pauses,” she explained.

Timothy Brown, an interior designer in New York, left the walls in a client's Upper East Side master bedroom (pictured above) completely unadorned,

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acknowledging that the spot above the Donald Judd-inspired bed was potentially “the perfect place to hang a piece of art.” But the client was adamant that her penthouse aerie remain

visually quiet, and Mr. Brown acquiesced. The arches and city views remain unchallenged by distracting art, and help lend the room a divine calm.

Walls boasting artisanal finishes like lacquer or Venetian plaster often function as works of art themselves. Ditto those clad with building materials such as decorative tile, exotic wood or, in the case of a Hamptons, N.Y., home that Mr. Brown is currently designing, stone. “The architect suggested covering the fireplace wall with the same Jerusalem limestone used on the floor,” he said. “It acts as a feature on its own; there’s no reason to put art on that wall.”

NO

LIKE PEOPLE MADE uncomfortable by prolonged silence, proponents of lavishly layered walls similarly feel the need to fill a void. To them, a naked wall seems a missed opportunity to express one’s personal style and create an artful installation.

“A painted wall absent of art of any kind seems not only a waste of prime real estate, but incomplete and unfinished,” insisted Ken Fulk, a designer based in San Francisco and New York. If you ask him, one of the most commonly overlooked potential galleries is the stairwell.

“I find it one of the most compelling places to hang a collection,” he said, but maybe not the Picasso, which could fall victim to roughhousing kids or absent-minded guests with a cocktail in hand. Instead he suggests a salon wall of photographs and memorabilia.

The walls only fools leave bare? Those that are next to undesirable views or marred by architectural flaws. London designer Kit Kemp, co-owner and creative director of Firmdale Hotels, has worked with the quirks and blemishes of historical buildings, where multilayered embellishment can hide eyesores. For instance: a window that’s too small for a wall. If you dress it with a curtain “that goes up to the cornice or ceiling, and then hang large pictures around it, you can change the dimension and feel of the room,” she explained. “It distracts from something that isn’t perfect.”

In Ms. Kemp’s own London living room, most walls are upholstered in linen; those flanking the fireplace host antique oxidized mirrors, which help make the intimate space seem larger. Framed artworks hang on all vertical surfaces. “The only minimalism I like is cluttered minimalism,” she joked.

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