

## **A ROOM OF HER OWN - Why isn't the carpet here? Where's the perfect green? A young designer finds the answers en route to an eye-popping debut in the S.F. Decorator Showcase.**

Susan Fornoff, Chronicle Staff Writer  
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When 28-year-old Caitlin Moran submitted her rookie bid on Jan. 26 for a room in this year's San Francisco Decorator Showcase, she shunned the traditional design board and arranged her wall, carpet and fabric samples in a chocolate box tied in white ribbon.

Lest anyone merely wonder about her boldness in a competition among hundreds of Bay Area designers, she then advertised it by including Cole & Son's Orchid, the most eye-popping piece of wallpaper that would ever stick to the walls at the 104-year-old mansion atop Presidio Heights.

Design coordinator Delanie Borden admired not only Moran's guts but also her plan to turn the tiny room next to the master suite into a lilac-blue-green "Her Office." She admired it so much, in fact, that she called Moran to see if she'd mind doing a bigger room.

By Feb. 1, Moran was off and running toward an April 24 completion date. Along the way, she shared with us an inside look at the agonies and ecstasies of a young designer's first showcase. And away we go ...

### **MARCH 7**

Moran puts her passions on the table in our first meeting. She'd grown up in Texas, gotten her art history degree at the University of Colorado, taken a design program at UCLA then started in the business before finishing that degree. In 2004, after three years at the prestigious New York City firm of Vicente Wolf, an Interior Design magazine Hall of Famer, she says, "I knew I was ready to make a mark for myself. I knew it had to happen soon, and I was ready to move to San Francisco."

She set up a drafting table and computer desk in the living room of her one-bedroom apartment in Pacific Heights, satisfied one client and more followed. Last year, she toured the S.F. Showcase on Cherry Street, and when seamstress Susan Lind Chastain told her in January that the 2006 showcase was going out for bids, Moran set herself a \$10,000 budget and threw her chocolate box into the ring.

By this day, she's already paid eight visits to the house, measuring and ordering carpet, wallpaper and drapes. The room -- Spot No. 21 on the audio tour -- is about 12 feet by 12 feet, with an 8-foot-high ceiling that had an electrical fixture and an oval window on both of the two outer walls -- one of the windows had a radiator below it. It also has a closet where she intends to extend what she describes as a "jewel box concept for the lady of the house."

"She's not running a Fortune 500 company, but running her calendar and sending invitations," says Moran, who already has named her fictional client Clarissa Sloan Huffington. She's trying to find the right desk lamp, envisioning where to hang photos, inventing award certificates -- "Mensa? Badminton? A culinary institute?" -- for Clarissa's walls. "I picture her a woman of many talents, and at least in her 40s," Moran says. "This is not a 24-year-old's office."

Moran outlines her simple plan: a lilac carpet and simple lilac window treatments. Close the ceiling fixture, paint the ceiling, put light sconces ("with very sinuous thin arms, so it reminds me of the orchid") on the walls alongside the windows. Put folding mirrors below the windows to conceal that eyesore radiator. Erect a lilac ribbon board on one wall and fill it with Clarissa's invitations. Lacquer a parson's desk to match the carpet and station it in the corner between the two window walls, with a linen-cushioned chair behind it and a green-cushioned bench in front of it. Lacquer a file cabinet to match and install it in a closet, along with fancy storage boxes.

That \$10,000 budget is supposed to cover "everything," Moran says, including the required showcase ad and her Web site launch (at [www.caitlinmoraninteriors.com](http://www.caitlinmoraninteriors.com)). But don't try this at home -- designers typically are able to borrow things from the top showrooms in the city for the publicity that showcases bring, so \$10,000 goes a long way for them.

She starts with her big expenses -- painters, drapes, carpet -- then begins to sweat the accessories for all of that lilac, green and blue.

"It's going to be a colorful room," she perhaps understates. "But I want people to remember it."

## **MARCH 15**

An e-mail arrives from Moran lamenting, "Who knew selecting the color on the ribbon board could be so daunting? I can't seem to find the perfect green; everything is looking too mustard or too pale."

And: "What color to paint the chair I discovered at an estate sale? The line and scale of the chair are feminine and complement the color of the wallpaper perfectly, but the chair is presently Pepto-pink, which certainly will not work." Her options: smoky lavender, apple green, deep lilac and indigo.

At least she's made some decisions: The bench will be upholstered in apple green velvet and the chair cushion in the soft shagreen leather hide she bought from Edelman. "I just have to have shagreen in this room!" she declares. "What speaks luxury more than sharkskin, even though it may be faux?"

Conscious of that budget, she surfs through eBay and outbids the competitors on the "perfect tie-back shields for the window treatments," then has them faux painted to match the rest of the hardware.

## **MARCH 24**

Exactly one month before the showcase opens to the media, Moran is back from visiting a client in New York, where she had hoped to find some accessories. She flies home with a

little silver tray in the shape of a leaf, "perhaps where I can lay my optimally positioned business cards," she e-mails.

The carefully chosen carpet, however, is "somewhere on a ship at sea and I do not think it is going to get here in time." Not comfortable with waiting for such a crucial element, she has found another, "more gray than the indigo color," that will work. Now, though, she has to catch the desk and file cabinet before they've been lacquered to match the original carpet -- or have them redone.

She's also debating such matters as linen or silk for the sconce shades ("textured vs. fussy"), how much to puddle her drapes and which accessories to place on the desk. Trivial, you think? "Small matters that will make quite a visual statement," writes Moran.

She's still looking for that perfect green ribbon, by the way.

"Yes, I am positive that the perfect green exists, no doubt in my mind," she writes. "Of course, I am trying very hard to make everything as close to perfection as I possibly can, but I am comforted at the thought of how most of my favorite things, whether it be rooms or a chocolate chip cookie, are imperfect, and that is why I like them."

## **APRIL 12**

We visit the now-carpeted room on a rainy day when workers are fixing a leaky window and Steve Ulsh is putting up the wallpaper. Is the Orchid a challenge for him? "It's English," he says, which apparently means "It's a pain."

The ceiling, sans fixture, looks calm and smooth in a custom color matching the lilac wallpaper background and, even with the carpet fiasco and having to buy new paint for the furniture, Moran is still under budget. The Pepto-pink chair is being painted Blue Gaspe, to match the wall trim; it's going to have a light green shagreen cushion. She's found desk accessories at Benjamin Stork and now she's staying up late framing a photo gallery of black-and-whites for the closet.

Fellow designers she's gotten to know find out it's her first showcase and say, "Ohhh," she says. "They say people walk in and don't know you're the designer and say, 'Ew.' I've been working on my thick skin."

## **APRIL 19**

Moran's flying to New York the next day for her client's installation and won't be back until Monday night. Her mom, Kay Watson, is coming in from Dallas to stand in for her for Monday's first media event.

But, Moran's not nervous. The furniture is in, the drapes hung. Clarissa's certificates and diplomas are on the wall -- and so is a "modern, grayish-whitish watercolor, very minimal" that Moran found in a gallery in Dallas.

Art, on that wallpaper?

"I think it's a nice balance," she says. "Seeing things come together, I'm just so pleased. The nervousness is over and I'm just excited."

## **APRIL 24**

Moran's vision has come together in a way that's sophisticated but not stuffy, colorful but not busy. The bench, a real looker by Ironies with a sumptuous green velvet cushion, sits in front of the desk; the formerly "Pepto-pink" chair is in the opposite corner between the sconces, with a newly loaned silvery table by Gregorius/Pineo alongside; and the ribbon board, covered in the lilac drape fabric, ornate invitations and the perfect ribbon ("apple green grosgrain -- not quite the same color as the leaves on the wallpaper, but almost," Moran says later) behind.

The wallpaper brings visitors in to look at Clarissa's certificates. Mom knows them by heart: "Harvard undergrad, law school Yale, biz school Wharton. Synchronized swimming championship, badminton mixed doubles, sharpshooter."

In the closet, an ornate mirror reflects a wall of black-and-white photos, many of them, Watson points out, old family photos. Books are stacked on the shelves, along with Clarissa's "secret stash," a silver cup of cigarettes and a bottle of Jim Beam. A fax has just arrived: "Dinner at GD was sublime as usual. You always spoil me on my birthday. Greatly looking forward to the 4th on Nantucket. It just wouldn't be summer without our trip. Kisses, Victoria." On the desk, amid a blue-and-white lamp, a silver urn and a striking glass vase, a letter is in progress: "Dear Charles -- You have been on my mind lately. I think I am ready to see you."

"It was," Watson says, "wonderful hearing Clarissa be born and develop."

Watson, looking just like her tall, blond, thin daughter, says it was a trip watching Caitlin be born and develop. "When she was a little girl, she would change clothes 10 times a day."

Business cards are on the leaf tray in the closet, on Clarissa's desk, and on the late-arriving silvery table. But Mom can't explain why the chair cushion is light green satin and not light green shagreen. Where is the shagreen, anyway, The Chronicle wants to know?

## **APRIL 26**

Moran, presiding ebulliently over Stop 21 on Media Day, is laughing about failing to inform her mother about the shagreen. She flips the satin chair cushion over, and there it is. "I made the cushion double-sided because I didn't know what would have the most impact." Then she goes into the closet and points out a tray that she's had covered in the shagreen.

"It's been exciting to see people drawn into the closet, because it could have been a forgotten space," she says. "Having the mirror I think draws people in."

"So many people are remarking, 'It's such a soothing room,' and I wasn't expecting that really to be the reaction, being that the wallpaper has such a strong quality."

Moran isn't sure yet what people really think, but whispers heard among the tough critics outside the room are positive, and Showcase design coordinator Borden says, "She definitely pulled it off."

Who's Charles, anyway? "An old friend," Moran says.

The letter, she notes, isn't finished yet. Neither, we suspect, is Moran.

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#### Material world of 'Her Office'

Design showrooms and vendors typically price their wares lower to the trade than to retail, and for a designer showcase room, they often offer deeper discounts or loan pieces for the month. Here's a list of Caitlin Moran's suppliers for her room, with retail price information from those willing to share, plus a list of the hardworking folks who got her work done on time:

Wallpaper: Cole & Sons (the Orchid, in lilac), \$136/roll, available at Lee Jofa

Carpet: Masland Keystone (Coronet), available at Stark Carpet

Desk chair: Lee Industries, available at Witford

Chair fabric: Duralee linen (Natural)

Custom desk and file drawer: pricing and information available at [www.crespiland.com](http://www.crespiland.com)

Bench: Danica by Ironies, available at Kneedler Faucher

Cushion fabric on bench: Velvet, \$32/yard, available at Sal Beressi Fabrics

Reversible cushion on wood frame chair: Shagreen, \$36/square foot, available at Edelman; Satin Stephanois, available at Clarence House

Table: Gregorius/Pineo's Capri, available at Kneedler Faucher

Drapery fabric: Jane Churchill Mina (Lilac), available at Cowtan & Tout

Drapery trim: Samuel and Sons (Aqua Melange), available at Kneedler Faucher

Wall sconces: Vendome Double Light Sconce by Visual Comfort

Custom lampshades: Bella Shades

Various accessories: Benjamin Stork, the Desk Set, Pottery Barn

Paint: Ross Painting (415) 455-0766

Wallpaper hanging: Steve Ush (415) 924-3453

Drapery fabrication: Susan Lind Chastain (415) 701-8898

Metal finisher/faux painting: Lanza Fine Finishes (415) 281-9106

Upholstery: Kevin G's Custom Upholstery (415) 643-4531

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## Seeing the home

The San Francisco Decorator Showcase is open now through May 29 at 3701 Washington St.

Hours: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursday; 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sundays and Memorial Day

Admission: \$30, \$25 for seniors. Includes self-guided audio tour.

Information: Call (415) 447-5830 or visit [www.sanfranciscoshowcase.org](http://www.sanfranciscoshowcase.org)

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