

THAT'S AMORE

Andrei Navrozov meets Celeste Dell'Anna — an interior designer who won't get into bed with a client unless he's sure they'll still love him in the morning

Evolved discussion of men and their failings is the woman's prerogative. Men are brought up to be binary. When I was an undergraduate, all that my contemporaries would ask of one of their lot who had been out on a date, was: 'So, did you get in last night?' As a rule, nothing beyond a gleeful yea or a shamefaced nay was ever solicited or imparted.

The same puerile machismo bedevils our approach to the utilitarian arts, from photography to architecture. We're the clients. We want the job done, and we want it done on time and within budget. If we're dealing with a composer or a painter, we may yet entertain some vaguely feminine scruples, but any attempt to peer into the soul of the person hired to build our house or to film our daughter's wedding will be met with near universal bafflement bordering on scorn.

An art as precariously balanced between the fine and the applied as interior design is particularly vulnerable. On the one hand, its ambiguous position makes it a breeding ground for every species of picturesque impostor, seeming to justify the no-nonsense approach on the part of the charlatan-weary client. On the other hand, the client isn't ordering a dozen shirts. He is very nearly asking the designer to depict his life in bathroom marble and library bronze: at times all of it, complete with intimate caprices and private prejudices; at other times what portion of it he may regard as essential to his public persona. As with the heroine of

Saki's *The Unbearable Bassington*, who 'dimly recognised that her drawing-room was her soul', the client's personality is often but the designer's rendering of it.

In overall importance, that puts the interior designer somewhere between one's wife and one's wife's psychiatrist, or at the very least up there with the portrait painters and poets laureate of yesteryear. Yet he is largely perceived by his modern-day patrons as a glorified builder — that is to say, a hired hand with some latent capacity for litigious extortion.

Celeste Dell'Anna turns the tables on the client, refusing to be treated as an object and insisting that any relationship must be meaningful. The Milan-based heir to the realm of Maximalism in interior design that was the studio of the legendary Renzo Mongiardino — where Dell'Anna's ascent began when the old master entrusted him with the Fifth Avenue residence of Stavros Niarchos — rejects lucrative commissions that have no depth and has been known to take on projects spurned by other designers as insignificant. In romantic terms, he is like the man who demands to know what you and your date talked about at dinner, what she was like in bed, and whether you'll be seeing each other tomorrow.

I caught up with Dell'Anna in his newly opened offices in Chelsea Harbour, where he spends at least one day a week overseeing ongoing projects in Britain. At the moment these include a 1,600m² residence in the Boltons, with the largest private swimming pool in London, which he is

Photography by Sasha Gusov

Above: Celeste Dell'Anna. Opposite: The master bathroom on the Dell'Anna-designed yacht Force Blue, and one of his team's sketches

designing for a European client whose villa near St Moritz he has recently completed.

On the outside, the man before me is a flamboyant dresser, with a penchant for silk cravats and alligator skins; an inveterate gourmand, notwithstanding an evident somatic tendency to plumpness; in short, an Italian Lover type, part Fellini and part Falstaff. On the inside, however, as it quickly becomes apparent once the conversation turns to the designer's favourite subject — 'the ideal client' — the man is part Stoic philosopher, part troubadour poet, who talks about the world's richest men as though he were an exiled emperor, with only a sundial for entertainment, and they were nations on the brink of epochal decline.

Dell'Anna cut his teeth on the interiors of yachts. There was M/Y *Shergar* for the Aga Khan in 1995, followed by the 65m M/Y *Force Blue*

for Flavio Briatore, whose house in Oxfordshire he has also done, and, in 1999, the 40m M/Y *Fortuna*, part of Spain's *Patrimonio Nacional* in the use of the Spanish royal family, commissioned through the good offices of the King.

'The yachts were my prolegomena,' says Dell'Anna. 'Not only because they taught me about space, its uses and misuses, and its sublime economies at sea, where every centimetre counts the way it ought to count on land. No, they were like windows on the souls of my clients, because no house can ever bring the owner's personality to the fore the way a boat does. In a house, a specially ventilated shoe cupboard accommodating 160 pairs of shoes, which I've had to design for the master suite of one yacht, would have been a perfectly dispassionate proposition.'

'I was never a snob,' muses Dell'Anna, absent-mindedly stirring a small espresso. 'So when I tell you that His Majesty is one of just two ideal clients I've had in my whole career as a designer, you should also know that the other was an obscure Italian businessman for whom I designed a modest villa. As far as my creative relationship with them was concerned, they were both princes of the blood, and the fact that one happened to be a king and the other a manufacturer, with a couple of factories in the north of Italy, was neither here nor there.'

'Four-fifths of an artist's life is the quest for the worthy patron. Not for money, not for power or influence, but for the taste that delights in meeting your own halfway, for the nobility of spirit with an indulgent smile for your most audacious fancies, for the innate individualism to which the give-and-take of aesthetic debate is second nature.' I remark that he sounds like a knight errant in search of the lady fair.

'And what's so strange about that?' he fumes. 'Do you think that a man who wants to find the love of his life can be helped by society go-betweens and the thin-lipped gossip of dowries? No, he must travel far and wide, get into unpleasant scrapes, journey by train in India and sleep rough in

London. He would do well to excise arrogance, and to embrace adventure.

'In my own career, for example, the social variegation that has taken place around St Moritz, where I've designed a number of houses over the past twenty years, has done me a world of good, as people began to quit the Suvretta for the outlying villages, places like La Punt, Zuoz, Madulain, Champfèr. When the Suvretta was the establishment, much

the way the Upper East Side still is in Manhattan, it was a magnet for the nouveaux riches, with a single dominant of taste, which was never mine. I have always believed that vulgar exhibitionism is more evident in minimalism than in opulence.

'Now that the establishment has broken up, largely under the weight of its own predictability, I stand a far better chance of finding an individualistically minded client in

these new enclaves. In fact, when it comes down to looking for the ideal soulmate, you may have better luck in Trafalgar Square on New Year's Eve than at a princess's levee in a stuffy Roman palazzo.'

What of the still more spectacular break-up of the wider financial world, I ask him? Where does that leave the creative artist in his lifelong grasping for the lifeboats of patronage? 'With greater opportunities than ever before,' parries Dell'Anna. 'Provided he'd rather design a cottage for an impoverished prince than a palace for a spiritual pauper.' J

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Photography by Marc Paris

