The New York Times

SELF-SERVICE Mirabel Richtel eating from a pouch in her home in San Francisco.

ABOVE, DREW KELLY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; RIGHT, TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Putting the Squeeze On a Family Ritual

Are food pouches the solution to mealtime struggles or a convenient cop-out?

By MATT RICHTEL

AT mealtime, I turn into a vaudevillian. The Contortionist. Dr. Airplane. Maestro the Great.

"I will make this bite of avocado disappear — in your mouth!"

My lovely assistant is my daughter, Mirabel, age 22 months, strapped into a highchair. She might well demur, pursing her lips. Or sometimes she'll meet my overture with raised arms and a single word: "Out!"

It's a challenge that will be familiar to anyone who has tried to feed a baby developing both a palate and free will.

Enter Neil Grimmer, who wants to smooth out an age-old family power dynamic by empowering children.

Mr. Grimmer, 40, is the chief executive of Plum Organics, one of the pioneers of a booming new business: food pouches for babies and toddlers. The pouches have little plastic spouts at the top from which a mix of organic fruits, veggies and grains (about 100 calories' worth) can be sucked. Now our children can eat on the run, too.

Since Plum Organics, in Emeryville, Calif., introduced the pouches in 2008, the category has taken off with competitors. In the last year or so, even big names like Gerber and Earth's Best have gotten into the act. So have boutique companies like Ella's Kitchen, Happy Baby and Sprout Baby Food.

And although the pouches cost $1.40 to $2, nearly double the price of food sold in a jar (a difference that reflects, in part, higher production costs), major retailers like Safeway, Target, Whole Foods and Babies "R" Us are stocking up.

Mr. Grimmer believes the pouch's popularity can be attributed to the emergence of a new way of relating to our children. He calls it "free-range parenting."

Parents, he explained, want to be as flexible as modern life demands. And when it comes to eating, that means doing away with structured mealtimes in favor of a less structured alternative that happens not at set times, but whenever a child is hungry.

What Mr. Grimmer is selling, he said, is a way to facilitate that:

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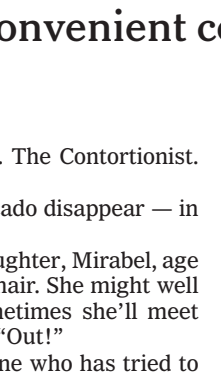
ON LOCATION

Tree by Tree, Yurt by Yurt

The founder of Apartment Therapy learns from mistakes.

By ELAINE LOUIE



EAST HAMPTON, N.Y.

MAXWELL GILLINGHAM-RYAN is widely known as Mr. Apartment Therapy, the designer who created the popular Apartment Therapy Web site and has written three interior-design books under that brand name.

But here in the Springs neighborhood, where his family has owned property since the 1970s, he is Mr. House, Barn and Yurt Therapy.

Mr. Gillingham-Ryan's mother, an artist named Mary Bayes Ryan, 79, owns a house and 18 acres on what was once Fireplace Lodge, a summer camp with rolling meadows, a forest and a rocky descent to Gardiners Bay.

In 1996, Mr. Gillingham-Ryan, who is now 46, bought a two-story shingled house on an adjacent quarter-acre for $220,000, two doors down from an identical tract home owned by his brother, Oliver Ryan, 44, who founded the Web site Social Workout, an exercise-based social network.

The family has since added a barn and six yurts, and Mr. Gillingham-Ryan has spent $50,000 decorating them and his house, building fire pits and installing hot tubs. He has also designed a wooden out-

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ERIC STRIFFLER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

HANDS-ON Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan creates an approachable Long Island retreat where entertaining takes place in the barn.

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

In Defense of The Decorator

An entire ecosystem of makers relies on a profession that is often singled out for snark.

By PENELOPE GREEN

DONNA MAY WOODS is trying to explain the complexities of a hot-pink and turquoise silk brocatelle.

"If you've ever been to camp or rehab," she begins encouragingly, using the humble potholder you might make there as a reference for a rapid-fire tutorial on the history of fine textiles that ranges from the practices of Italy's 15th-century mills to the mountains of Afghanistan, which in the decorating world is known less as a training ground for terrorists than as a producer of ikat, the voguish, woozy-looking fabric.

The brocatelle is one of hundreds of fabric samples pinned like bright flags to foam-core boards and stacked in swirling piles that cover every surface of her office at Clarence House, the half-century-old fabric company in the Decoration and Design Building in Manhattan.

That's where Ms. Woods, a textile designer, has been working on a line of luxury fabrics that will make its debut early next year. Bob Appelbaum, the president of Clarence House, believed there was a hole in the market at the very high end. In other words, there was no product quite right for those who

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rwise?

could become Frank Lloyd Wright. But most design programs, and their users, have limitations.

"Even though you can draw a pretty picture with the software," said Pamela Rodriguez, a veteran kitchen designer, "you have to ask, 'Can it be built?' And 'Should it be built?'"

Ms. Rodriguez, 55, learned that the hard way when she used Chief Architect to draft plans for a kitchen remodel in her home in Santa Maria, Calif. Even with years of professional experience, she ran into trouble when she took the renderings to the city's planning department. Her plans, she discovered, called for the removal of a shear wall that helped support the impact of earthquake loads and kept the roof attached.

"Those things were never evident in my beautiful renderings," she said, adding that to make the design doable, another shear wall had to be built at a cost of $5,000.

Despite her experience with Chief Architect — or perhaps because of it — Ms. Rodriguez said that she and many other design professionals dread having a client come to them with a self-generated plan. "They've drawn a picture and think, 'Oh, this is going to work,'" she said. "But they've got a dishwasher door that opens into the stove door."

John Isch, a principal of RWA Architects in Cincinnati, said he has met with a few clients who have created plans using design software. "The problem is when they put it down and can't imagine it any other way," Mr. Isch said. "Getting them to see other options could be difficult."

People tend to think of architects as simply providing the drawings, he added, without realizing how many other issues they deal with, like creating a design that's in harmony with the site and the climate, following local building codes and coordinating with vendors and tradesmen. "That's a lot for the lay person to take on," Mr. Isch said.

Even Ms. Petrisik, the extreme D.I.Y.er, said she and her husband would think twice before tackling a bigger project like designing a house using Floorplanner or SketchUp. "I could see us feeling empowered by the program, but I could also see the program giving us false confidence," she said. "It feels like an awfully big gamble."

Owen Kennerly, a San Francisco architect, said he doesn't think design programs can replace an architect, but he has found them "useful in conveying a client's intent," he said. "And also giving them an appreciation for the challenges of space planning, thereby aiding their design savviness."

Ply Gem's Designed Exterior program, which was created with the input of BSB Design, an architecture firm in Des Moines, offers a hybrid model. It allows people to choose from a range of options (windows, brick and stone veneer, siding, trim colors) selected by architects — in other words, architecture with training wheels. (Toll Brothers, the custom home builder, has a similar online tool called Design Your Own Home.) As Deryl Patterson, a partner at BSB Design, said: "We can't possibly teach people to be architects online. But we can give them the confidence to say, 'Think what someone with imagination, creativity and confidence can do with my house.'"

When it comes to employing computer-designed plans to build real projects, though, Ms. Petersik and her husband have established what may be the golden rule. "We always ask ourselves, what's the worst that could happen?" she said. "If it's structural or electrical, that's when we go to the pros."

'Like' My Room

WITH booming e-commerce and the proliferation of showrooms that encourage anyone to wander in off the street, design is so closely within reach that the average shopper doesn't have to extend an arm. But just because consumers have grown more autonomous doesn't mean they have the experience and taste to dispense with advisers and friends. And where's the fun in filling a digital shopping cart all by yourself?

Project Décor, a Web site that opened for business on Monday, combines e-commerce and social media to create a virtual, democratic design center. Founded by three entrepreneurs — Andy Appelbaum, Cliff Sirlin and Aaron Wallace — the site lets visitors drag and drop products from 50 international design brands onto an inspiration board or a photo of an existing room and solicit responses from a decorator, family member, respected friend or benevolent stranger. (The boards can be shared on the Project Décor site or on Facebook, Twitter or Pinterest.)

Products may be searched by category (like lamps), manufacturer (like Artecnica), color (like orange) or genre (children's furniture) or picked up from the boards of professional designers like Campion Platt, who have been invited to create vignettes.

Any of the 5,000-plus items can be bought on the spot. The e-commerce model also allows shoppers access to goods off the beaten path — offerings by obscure young companies, exotic international labels and even contract furniture companies like Bernhardt Design that have never marketed directly to consumers until now. Brooke Stoddard, the site's creative director, said she expected more than 100 brands to be on the site by the end of the year.

Visitors, who are encouraged to form "teams" to trade decorating ideas and follow "friends," may be tempted to use Project Décor strictly for entertainment. Ms. Stoddard described the site as a "creative platform overlaid with a fertile social landscape." It's a place to hang out and covet, less snooty than a showroom, more intimate than a mall and filled with the kind of inspiration that used to be torn from shelter magazines before so many of them went the way of the fainting couch.

JULIE LASKY

Defending the Decorator

From Page 1, This Section

have an appetite for $1,000-a-yard silk damasks woven in 200-year-old European mills.

"It is not unusual for our clients to have a chair that's worth a million dollars," Ms. Woods said. The fabric, she added, "needs to match that."

With the economies of entire countries in smoking ruins, it would seem an odd time for such a venture. But as economists like Paul Krugman point out, life at the top has never been better, as the superwealthy have doubled their share of income in the last three decades. What this means for society as a whole is troublesome; what it means for the arcane world that Ms. Woods and others inhabit, the Galápagos-like ecosystem of artists and artisans, vendors and installers (the upholsterers, decorative painters, furniture finishers, antiques dealers and, yes, the decorators who employ them all) is that extinction has been put aside, once again.

Decorating is a profession that often ends up as a punch line in a takedown of the 1 percent. But it remains the support system for an entire industry of makers, the manufacturers, craftspeople and artisans whose skills can stretch back to traditions hatched centuries ago, in much the same way the fashion business used to support those in the garment district.

But despite the rising fortunes of a few, this is a curious, and not altogether stable, moment for a profession that has been repeatedly battered in the last two decades, its numbers horribly thinned, first by AIDS, then by three recessions.

Add to that a paradigm shift away from the old decorator-assisted living for those at the high end, engineered by years of relentless D.I.Y. cable programming, along with shelter guides like Martha Stewart Living and the late Domino. They exhorted young money — new money — to do it themselves, while promoting the fortunes of a curious breed of designer celebrities you'd have to have serious judgment issues to let loose in your house (cue Bravo's "Million Dollar Decorators," now gearing up for its second season).

All these forces have created a climate in which, as Stephen Drucker, who has been editor in chief of House Beautiful and Martha Stewart Living, put it: "It's not so cool anymore to credit the decorator. You're supposed to have curated your own eclectic, wonderful life, not order Mario by the yard."

Which is not to say that the big brands aren't working as hard as they ever did.

At 76, Mario Buatta is still answering his own phone, as he always has, to take care of clients like Mariah Carey and the financier Wilbur Ross. Bunny Williams, who though only 67 is the decorating world's grande dame, noted that while business has steadied in the last year, "no one is taking it for granted," she said. "Everyone is working harder than ever."

Designers say they help sustain artisans with skills that stretch back centuries.

Ms. Williams said that on any given day, "There might be 300 or more people doing something for our jobs: the people who make the down pillows, the cabinetmaker from Salisbury, Conn., who can be a stay-at-home dad because of his craft, the furniture restorer. It goes on and on. And their work is what makes our work unique: we can do things that are unique, and not mass produced."

William Sofield, the Princeton-educated designer of Tom Ford's sleek emporia, likes to say that he has "resuscitated every trade that's about to die."

He ticked them off: eggshell marquetry in an apartment on Fifth Avenue. Elaborate decorative painting, like the silver leaf on the bronze elevator doors in the Soho Grand, painted by the artist Nancy Lorenz after the elevators had been installed, "which meant she was painting at the same time the doors were opening and closing." In a new building he designed on East 79th Street for the Brodsky Organization, bricks are being hand-laid, old-school-style, by New York City masons; the door hardware comes from P. E. Guerin, a foundry in the West Village; limestone relief sculptures designed by Mr. Sofield on a clay model in his dining room are being made by an Indiana sculptor from Indiana limestone.

While marshaling the efforts of what might be hundreds of artisans into a single project, some decorators find they are behaving more like C.E.O.'s pitching their shareholders. Brian McCarthy, a Parish-Hadley alumnus with impeccable art-history credentials (he is the only decorator since Elsie de Wolfe who has been allowed to alter the interiors of the Frick Collection), said lately that he's more engaged in conversations about an interior's investment potential than in conversations about how the space will feel.

FRITZ VON DER SCHULENBURG

"Because of what happened in the art market," he said, "everyone wants to know, 'Is it a good investment?'"

Not that this isn't a valid question, he said, detailing a long back-and-forth with a client about a Lucite pedestal for an armillary versus a cast-bronze one (the Lucite option, less costly, won), which this reporter half-listened to while frantically Googling the word "armillary."

Mr. McCarthy, whose knowledge of European antiques is formidable and fascinating, can defend an interior in precise detail: why a chocolate-brown lacquer ceiling reinvigorates the architecture of a room, how the shape of that armillary required a very particular volume beneath it, why the carpet must be sisal and the Venetian plaster tone-on-tone, why the depth of the sofa should be exactly this number of inches, and so forth.

Yet price has entered the calculus of that narrative in a new way. No longer is the price a simple matter of a client's budget. It now includes an anticipation that the investment will accrue value down the road.

"It comes up all the time," said Darren Henault, another conjurer of luxurious interiors. "People say, 'What am I going to get out of it, what's my return?'" To that end, Mr. Henault promises to price a job based on the investment potential of a property.

"If a couple just purchased an apartment for $1,000 a square foot, and they plan on staying there for 5 or 10 years, maybe they can sell it for $1,500 a square foot," he said. "That's a budget. It doesn't come from nowhere, it comes from the market. Then you back into it. For $500 a square foot, you can't get gold fixtures or hand-painted Gracie wallpaper, but you can do O.K."

Mr. Henault has created a software program to track a project's expenses down to the last penny and fixture, which can be updated on a secure server by each client. At the start of a project, he said: "We itemize everything that's going to be in a room, and put them on a spreadsheet. We give each item a high number and a low number" — ranging from, as he puts it, "cheap and cheerful to European antiques" — "then we start looking at things with the client, visiting the showrooms, and it's the client's responsibility to stay on budget. It's absurdly simple. Business 101."

But it's a necessary tool, he said, in a business freighted with assumptions that the work of a decorator is somehow illegitimate.

"Why is my time any less valuable than anyone else's?" Mr. Henault said. "Because I'm choosing wallpaper? Well, if you think choosing wallpaper is insignificant, then *you* go do it. Why is the way I run my business any different than the way a lawyer or hedge fund manager runs theirs?"

Like many of his peers, Mr. Henault bills hourly for his services: meetings with clients, phone calls, shopping for objects. Then he charges a percentage markup on the things he buys.

"I'm not a discount shop, I'm not here so you can get the cheapest price," he said. "I'm here to spend your money well."

It is true that the money for decorating is still big, said Scott Salvator, who counts 11,000 vendors connected to his 20-year-old firm. With a renovation, the cost can be equal to half the purchase price of a property, he added: "But it's spread out over time, over years, and the lion's share goes to the vendors. What decorator lives like Givenchy or Valentino? If you look at the hours put into a lampshade, you could be working at Burger King."

Margaret Russell, editor in chief of Architectural Digest, recalled the drama when her friend Michael Smith decorated the Oval Office, for a reveal just before Labor Day in 2010.

After the earth-tones critique — "the audacity of taupe," Arianna Huffington described its décor, cunningly, in The New York Times — what really irritated Ms. Russell was the carping about cost (which in any case was paid for by a private fund, as every White House decoration since the first has been). "I remember Ann Curry on the 'Today' show saying, 'That must be expensive, how much did it cost?' implying that it was a great deal," she said. "In truth, everything was the quality and cost that it should be: it's the president's office. What's most important, though, is that everything in that office was made in America."

Like the president's new rug, which was made in Grand Rapids, Mich. Or the hand-painted wallpaper, made by artists at the Elizabeth Dow Studio in Sag Harbor, N.Y. Or a pair of lamps made by Christopher Spitzmiller, a Manhattan ceramist. (American labor, as both political parties like to point out, does not come cheap. Yet no one wants to pay that bill.)

"Everyone wants their home to reflect themselves, but how do you do that in a time of globalization?" said Daniella Ohad Smith, a design historian. "How do you create your own taste, if everyone has access to the same goods? Also, not everyone has an aesthetic sense, but everyone wants a beautiful home."

A stunning book published recently by Rizzoli, "Be Your Own Decorator" by Susanna Salk, is filled with the glossy projects of high-end designers like Celerie Kemble, Miles Redd, Katie Ridder and others. Ms. Salk's intention is to draw inspiration from the pros. But page after page, its perfect vignettes unintentionally make the point that civilians like you and I may be incapable of replicating a skilled decorator's work, in the same way that the pages of Domino magazine used to elicit a sort of panicked malaise in some readers.

"The ability to walk into an empty room and see it finished in their heads — that is a gift that most people do not have," Mr. Drucker said. "I certainly don't. It's a crazy, God-given special gift. Yet decorators have been targets of ridicule forever."

Mr. Sofield, for his part, eschews the word "decorating" entirely.

"I don't like it, I think it's pejorative," he said. "I prefer to use words like movable" — to refer to interior design — "and stationary," for architecture.

And for the record, Mr. Sofield is of the opinion that decorating (er, the movable stuff) gives a better return than art.

"No matter what," he said, "at least you can sit on it or eat off it."

STEWART CAIRNS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

TREVOR TONDRO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

DECORATED A living room like this one on the Upper East Side, top, designed by Brian McCarthy, a Parish-Hadley alumnus, might contain the work of six different artisans, from the custom-made sofa to the faux-parchment walls. Brand-name decorators like Bunny Williams, left, and Scott Salvator help to support a community of makers and vendors.