



Time Out Chicago
November 2005

NATE BERKUS

A Twist of Nate

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Tony Peregrin

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Nate Berkus—the designing icon with a camera-ready smile and plush toy-cute personality—remembers exactly where his career began: He was in grade school, and his mother, and interior designer, asked him to help rearrange the living-room furniture.

Now, as a 34-year-old Chicago decorator, Berkus has become the industry's golden boy. His line of home furnishings (think sea-grass lamps, wool window panels and autumn-colored bedding) recently debuted at Linens 'n Things nationwide, and his first book, *Home Rules*, published this month, offers Berkus' commandments on the do's and don'ts of decorating. Berkus called us recently and described what it's like to be a household name, how a room can be inspired by a silver baby rattle and what he'd be doing if he weren't an interior designer.

Time Out Chicago: Considering all the attention paid to your physical appearance, was it a deliberate choice not to fill *Home Rules* with pictures of yourself?

Nate Berkus: Yes. That choice is directly tied to my decorating philosophy, which is that the work is not about me. A how-to design book with a bunch of pictures of me isn't going to help anyone.

TOC: What are some of the most unusual requests you've received from a client?

NB: I've had clients show me their favorite shirt for ideas on color and texture. I've been given an old silver baby rattle, and from that we were able to figure out that she liked things that were worn by time, surfaces that had a worn finish.

TOC: How do you know when you're finally done with a room/house/project?

NB: A space is not a meal—you're never done. Designs evolve. After I complete a project, I love when a client further personalizes it. I may not always agree, but I love getting a call or when someone sends me an image from Africa of something they have found and want to incorporate into the room.

TOC: What are some quick, easy and inexpensive solutions for improving a living space (aside from painting a wall)?

NB: Pillows. Rugs. Lamps. Update your accessories and the room will be transformed.

TOC: What was it like the first time you walked into a Linens 'n Things and you saw pictures of your smiling mug everywhere?

NB: It was surreal. I walked into the Linens 'n Things in Lakeview, where the first shop was installed, and the signage was up and my name was on everything and I thought two things: I hope this works, and this is the realization of a long-standing dream for me (and I really hope this works!).

TOC: How do you react to people who approach you in public? Are you able to go about your day as a "normal" person would?

NB: I was at The Container Store last night, you know, looking for some things because I was reorganizing my closet, and I was wearing this ski cap and some people did approach me. I am very touched by the sentiment behind that. People are very supportive and I want to hear what they have to say. I mean, I live like a normal person, but people approaching me is normal now.

TOC: Speaking of the public, what qualities do you most admire in men? And in women?



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NB: They would be the same for both. Confidence. Coming from a connected place. Humor. Strong sense of self.

TOC: Where do you like to hang out in Chicago?

NB: RL is my favorite restaurant. It's fantastic, it feels like a living room and I have a special relationship with the staff there. I love About Face Theatre—[artistic director] Eric Rosen is a true visionary. I also love the Chicago Antique Market, the one on West Randolph Street. I've been going on that, and that is something that this city was seriously lacking. The quality of merchandise there is incredible.

TOC: On Oprah, you claimed to have some of the items from Linens 'n Things Nate Berkus collection in your own home. Is that true?

NB: Yes.

TOC: Really?

NB: Yes! I really do have my own products in my house. During the sampling process, where we kind of try out the products, I saw a rug I really liked, and I told them, "Give that to me. I designed it."

TOC: What's your greatest extravagance?

NB: [Pauses] Watches. I collect watches.

TOC: What occupation, other than your own, would you like to try?

NB: I think I would be a good therapist. A therapist has the same skills as a good director: empathy, and a sort of non-ego-based approach to things.