

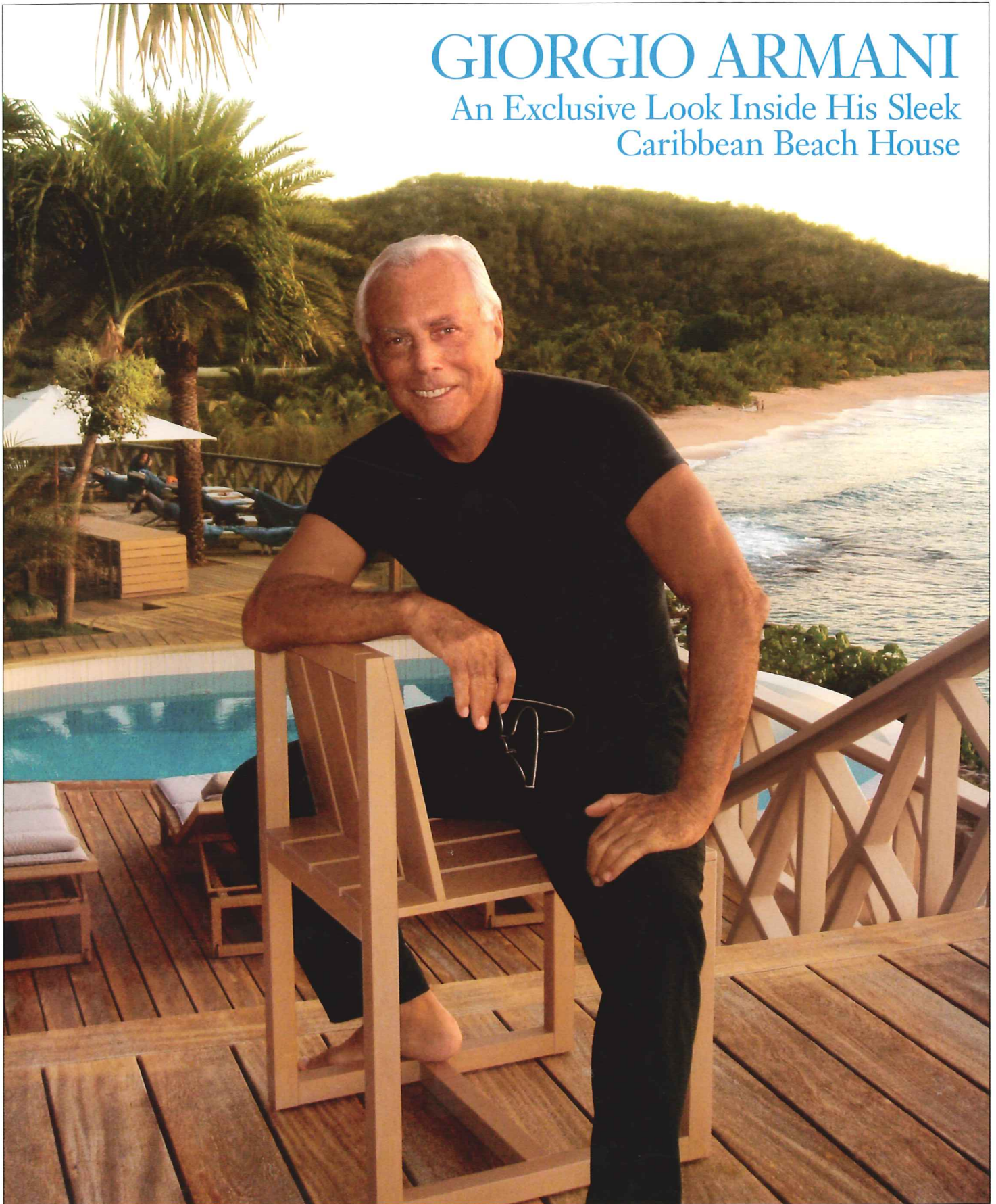
ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF DESIGN

NOVEMBER 2006

GIORGIO ARMANI

An Exclusive Look Inside His Sleek
Caribbean Beach House



REVOLUTION in BOSTON

A HISTORIC BACK BAY PENTHOUSE GETS A MINIMALIST PERSPECTIVE

Interior Architecture and Design by Zen Associates
Text by Michael Frank/Photography by Richard Mandelkorn



The Japanese-born, Boston-based architect and designer Maho Abe has noticed that she has recently had an uncanny habit of attracting single male clients who are looking for interiors they inevitably describe as pared down, sleek and functional. "They come to me asking for everything empty and clean, and I give them that, but I try to give them other, subtler things too," she says. "All practicality and no warmth or elegance is

no way to live—even if you are a guy on your own."

A recent client of Abe's, the new owner of a spacious if initially quirky Back Bay duplex, fit in with her general profile. A scientist and a venture capitalist, he was a divorced father of three young sons who had acquired 5,000 square feet on the top two floors of a chateau-style mansion, which had been designed in 1899 by Charles Brigham for a copper tycoon. The developer envisioned a traditional four-bedroom lay-

ABOVE: Maho Abe, of the Boston-based architectural firm Zen Associates, renovated a 5,000-square-foot apartment inhabiting two floors of the Burrell Mansion in Boston. **RIGHT:** The lower-floor entrance leads into the living area, where a mobile wall creates either a tight entrance space or an open living area. The fireplace, at rear, is set into a backlit onyx wall.





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out for the space; the client had a different idea.

“I wanted a contemporary minimalist interior with Japanese touches that would inspire creativity,” he says. “It had to be as open as possible, receptive to my ever-changing art collection, suffused in light, comfortable for family life and yet clearly intended for adult entertaining. And I wanted to retain a sense of surprise: I liked walking into a traditional building with its ornate lobby, then coming upstairs to find the unexpected.”

Abe rose to, and was thrilled by, the challenges of the space. Because it is at the top of the building, it had a ceiling that broke into various sizes, shapes and slopes, which recalled the designer’s native Japan, where tiny rooms are often animated by unusual ceilings. Its top-floor location also allowed her to introduce skylights to bring light into dark parts of the main floor, where the kitchen and dining area serve as a central anchor.

The rooms downstairs are not conventionally defined. This work is done instead by suggestion, or through the clever use of unusual features or visual games. The entrance, for example, is configured by a movable wall, which evokes for Abe a classic Japanese greeting space but which can be swung open during large parties; the wall also provides the client with further options for displaying his artwork. Another dual-functioning idea of Abe’s



The sofa in the living area was placed where the client can best listen to his music. *Two Nudes*, late 1906 by Marc Leavitt hangs on the wall at right. "We devised a system of steel guide runs around the apartment, so the owner can hang and rehang his ever-changing art collection from fishing line," notes Abe.





is the line of five columns, not all of them structural, that delineates a long gallery; flat on one side to display paintings or works on paper, the columns are pierced with niches on the other side to accommodate three-dimensional art. For Abe these gestures make it possible to “have the open space but not the boredom of the open space.” “Phantom” rooms are one solution; another is to use layering and transparency, both typical of the Japanese houses in which she grew up.

Abe enlivened the interiors through her use of varying materials. The designer and her client both liked limestone, but rather than using only a single shade, she called for a large

square of blue limestone in the kitchen area and filled out the rest of the apartment with limestone in a quieter beige tone. She framed the existing and often ornate windows with a second, more contemporary layer of glass bordered in maple, which she stained blue gray to look like metal; her intention wasn’t to hide the original fenestration but to treat it as another work of art. And as in most of her projects, she inserted a shock of red, here in a niche, because red “for us Japanese can be loud or quiet. It can accept any other color. It can be interesting and mysterious at the same time.”

“Interesting and mysterious at the same time” is a fitting

ABOVE: The kitchen is located on the lower floor between the dining and living areas. “He wanted an all-stainless-steel kitchen,” says Abe, who took its industrial aesthetic further by using impermeable-concrete countertops. **LEFT:** A maple staircase appears to float in its stairwell—the result of a transparent mesh wall conceived to visually expand the narrow corridor.



encapsulation for Abe's work here—in her deft finessing of the downstairs common areas and in her equally imaginative articulation of the path upstairs and the upstairs itself. The staircase Abe designed consists of floating dark-stained maple risers and a chocolate-colored leather banister, all clad in transparent mesh, an effect she calls (with a laugh) “very man-like,” though it might also be seen as very Japanese.

The top floor has its own masculine, and Japanese, aspects. There's the eight-foot square bed: Set into a well in the floor and centered under a five-foot-square skylight, it evokes a futon. There is the

shower: Set under another skylight and largely open to the rest of the room, it has a hint of the Japanese bathhouse to it. And there is the terrace, where the building's past and present come together in provocative layered harmony: Truncated 19th-century turrets rise up over bamboo fencing, which in turn frames a contemporary deck with sleek outdoor furniture, a spa and a barbecue.

“This is an apartment that can embrace many different kinds of lives at the same time,” the client says contentedly, “all of them without a stitch of clutter, as I'd hoped, but both with considerably more beauty than I ever imagined.” □

ABOVE: In the master bedroom, the owner “asked for an oversize bed under an oversize skylight but insisted on sleeping in a dark room. So we installed blackout shades that cross horizontally under the skylight,” says Abe. **LEFT:** A corridor connects the master bath to the bedroom. To the left is a bar at the top of the stairs; the door to the right opens onto the roof deck.

Cathedral ceilings in the family room provide another element of spaciousness in the apartment. *For Jean-Paul*, 1989, by Keith Haring is displayed in the adjoining guest room. Its ceiling-height door usually remains open, as the space was ultimately designed to be an extension of the family room.



The rooftop deck serves as an ideal entertaining space, with a dining area, a spa and room for sunbathing. *Ipe* flooring and a bamboo fence, custom-designed by Zen Associates, maintain the simple yet elegant look. Grill from Viking. Outdoor furniture from Richard Schultz.

