

# AVENUE



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*Architect and interior designer Robert  
Couturier relaxes in his Manhattan home.*

# A BEAUTIFUL MIND

Architect and designer *Robert Couturier*  
embraces life and applies it to every  
aspect of his celebrated career

BY ALEX SINCLAIR

When he moved to New York in 1978, acclaimed architect and designer Robert Couturier remembers the city fondly as “a wonderful mess!” With genuine excitement he describes “this incredible sense of modernism crashing down and a feeling that it was a blank slate, that everything and anything was permissible.”

Out of the collision between the uninhibited world of Warhol and Studio 54, and 20-year-old Couturier’s Parisian upbringing (he was raised in a family house designed by Jean-Michel Frank) emerged a unique sensibility that combines rampant creativity and a celebration of life, a signature vibrancy that has influenced his noted design and architecture ever since.

Couturier’s philosophy on life as something versatile, something to be perpetually questioned and developed, is what feeds the look and feel he creates in his gloriously romantic, elegant interiors. His are hip, eclectic rooms that combine and contrast the elegant refinement of the past and the sleek luxury of the present. He insists he has no signature style to speak of other than detesting historical recreation, responding emotionally to individual pieces, whether period or modern, and adhering as much as possible to his own instinct about a client’s personality and the kind of home they desire.

“Robert is probably one of the most knowledgeable, cultured, intelligent men in New York,” says Amy Fine Collins, a special correspondent for *Vanity Fair*, whose latest book *The God of Driving* (Simon & Schuster, 2004)

was inspired by the period when she and Couturier decided to learn how to drive. “He wears his knowledge and intelligence lightly—it’s one of his charms—but he has great depth and weight of mind. His knowledge of history, art, genealogy, architecture and design are expansive. Someone once told me that most people are fixed by

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— Robert Couturier

the age of 16 in terms of their mental maturity, but Robert just continues to grow. There’s been a lot of pain in his growth, but he is the most loving, most generous, least lazy person I know, both mentally and physically.”

Couturier embraced New York because it emancipated him from his past and offered him carte blanche to

develop his ideas and sense of design. New York was the very antithesis of Paris, with its entrenched aesthetic, its fear of anything progressive and its impenetrable class system. “France is so static,” Couturier says. “Where you’re born is where you stay. Things are complicated and an effort. But I always felt that New York was so practical. The notion of beauty in Europe is so attached to these 19th century class values. I feel that design there stopped with Jean-Michel Frank and Emilio Terry. You have this weird combination of country towns that look as they did 50 or 100 years ago, and then they’ll go and plant a huge supermarket in the middle of them. It’s the whole imposition of ugliness versus beauty that makes you wonder what people see, whereas here I feel there’s this fascination with the wilderness that’s part of the American psyche.”

A personal introduction led to his first job with renowned restaurant and hotel designer Adam Tihany, and Couturier found himself “wanting to have fun more than design.” Within five years, he became a partner, and in 1986 he left to set up his own firm. “Thankfully, I had no idea how little I knew when I first arrived except that I never wanted to live in Paris,” he says ruefully, with his characteristic, impish grin, acknowledging that for most people the reverse is true. “I was fresh out of school and everything in my head, up to that point, was pulled out of books. I was this proper little upper-class French boy hanging out with hustlers, strippers, artists, society people and royalty, absorbing it all like a big blotter.”



Entrance hall and kitchen in 1742 farmhouse converted into a guest cottage by Couturier.



This melting pot of cultural influences has fueled Couturier's unique designs for the most demanding and exclusive clientele, in some of the most beautiful locales—from the sheer physical majesty of Aspen to Los Angeles moderne, Connecticut country, and some of the most elegant and distinctive townhouses and apartments in Paris and New York.

Couturier's introduction to the late Sir James Goldsmith marked a turning point in his ascending career. Unconventional to the extreme, the British banking tycoon interviewed the 23-year-old designer for a project on his New York house, then assigned the construction and design of his 60,000-square-foot palace in Mexico, which became the basis of their close friendship. "I just loved him," says Couturier. "He was like a father to me. He was very instinctive and had this incredible trust in my abilities. If he came to me today and asked me to do the same thing, I'd be overwhelmed, but at that time he gave me the confidence to take it on."

Almost all of Couturier's clients have become close friends because the

designer is drawn to working with people who are "curious and intellectually challenging, with a sense of humor, who have done stuff in their lives."

"I just don't understand it when people say you can't work with friends," he says. "Beatrice Stern is one of my dearest friends and we've worked together for years. When you know someone, there's a real trust between you. After all, we don't come naked. You have to know a person, their family background, their taste—it's all a great source of information when you're designing their home."

Couturier can tell at first glance, or first phone call, whether or not he will be able to take on a project. "The few occasions when I've gone against my instinct, the jobs were jinxed from the get-go," he says, recalling one in particular from pre-cell-phone days when he got a call from the

job site to say that the chandelier had fallen through the new dining room table.

Sarah Billingham-Solomon brought Couturier in to renovate and warm up her "dark and dreary" country house just outside the city. "I knew exactly what kind of effect I wanted, and Robert came in and just made it all happen,"

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she says. "He's extraordinary. He produces the exact house you want, but it doesn't look like anyone else's. For us, he created something very beautiful and intensely comfortable that represented us in every single way. He can take your granny's piece, put it in the middle of a room and make it look just great. I work at the Metropolitan Opera with designers and visual artists and Robert is a real extension of that. Looking at art and furniture with him is like having the most wonderful history lesson. He's a kind, brilliant, naughty, very funny human being, and very French—I just love him."

**C**outurier describes his methods as very impulsive, and artistic. "You have to have a certain modesty in this kind of work. I mean, we're not solving the problem of world hunger here. It's a wonderful job. I love every single minute of it, and it's very instinctive. You're creating a portrait of a person who lives in a house."

Writer Andrew Solomon engaged Couturier to rebuild and refurbish his landmark Victorian brownstone off Fifth Avenue and describes the designer as a member of his extended family.

"The house was in a decrepit state, but Robert was amazing," Solomon says. "He was meticulous with every doorknob, every single detail, and created a place that is extremely harmonious, comfortable, cozy and welcoming. He has a won-

*Couturier combines neutral shades with modern and traditional furniture and accessories to create this grand-scale entrance hall and staircase.*





*Formal salon in townhouse designed for clients in London.*

derful eye and finds the most extraordinary things, then puts them together with furniture of his own design."

**D**ana Hammond Stübgen has known Couturier for 27 years. The designer has worked on both her Manhattan apartment and her Florida house, and is her daughter's godfather. "Robert is very willing to listen to clients, be eclectic, and use whatever you have, not rip you off by buying new things and inflating the price," she says. "He's humble, kind and patient, and very innovative, with a style that combines French classic and modern."

Couturier spends weekends at his palatial house in Connecticut and during the week works and lives out of two floors of a SoHo loft that he has spent the last five years refurbishing in his eclectic fashion—a mix of 18th century French classic and contemporary with antiques juxtaposed against modern objets d'art, framed photography and wonderful French-style drapes that seem to flow endlessly from the incredibly high ceiling.

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— Amy Fine Collins

"It's finally complete," says the designer, looking around at his work, "so it's time to move." He'll take a few selected pieces and the rest will go to clients. He recently acquired three floors of the now-dilapidated site of The Mudd Club on White Street and is anxious to move and begin renovations. "Given how much time I once spent there, I've come full circle," he laughs.

**A** self-confessed insomniac, Couturier has never slept more than five hours a night since childhood. Thus, his day is extended and his mind is always working on ways to improve, hone and perfect his work.

"Even if I have frustrations—if deliveries are late, or pieces have broken in transit—I still get immense joy from doing what I do," he says. "I've learned that you should never limit yourself, that your personal taste is relevant and you have to respect it. Life's much too brief."



*The sitting area in Couturier's New York City master bedroom.*

**Robert can take your granny's piece, put it in the middle of a room and make it look just great. Looking at art and furniture with him is like having the most wonderful history lesson. — Sarah Billingham-Solomon**

Identifying his clients' needs and bringing their fantasies to life is Couturier's passion. "My clients want as good a home as possible," he explains. "I am a filter in that respect, and I try to create work that is particular to them and their interests, whether it's a particular type of photography or fabric. I try to make it work to their taste."

Ann Hearst describes how Couturier tackled the challenge of incorporating into her house "old, old European antiques and fireplaces" that had belonged to her family. "The place could so easily have become heavy and European," she says, "but Robert has been able to use them in such a way that the house maintains a very light and pretty feel."

Even the vendors who do business with him speak in glowing terms. Pierre Durand, who owns the Chinese Porcelain Company Antique Shop on Park Avenue, describes Couturier as 80 percent friend and 20 percent client.

"Robert is immensely charming and very witty, and his knowledge of the decorative arts runs very deep," he says. "He is extremely comfortable and versatile in many periods and loves to combine objects from different periods. He produces luxurious but extremely refined and elegant interiors and his selection of paintings and furniture is extraordinary."

Similarly, Roger Prigent, proprietor of Malmaison, an antique shop on the Upper East Side, speaks playfully of Couturier. "He's a little bit of a magician," Prigent says. He's very French—a glass of champagne and two drops of Chanel Number 5."

Couturier's idea of relaxation is to look at houses and study interiors in his perpetual quest to build upon the influences that motivate him. Responding and evolving with life's challenges, even if it means putting oneself in an uncomfortable place in order to grow, seems to be his antidote to narrow-mindedness and

stagnation. "One thing I really hate is when people are closed," he says. "It makes me mad, because they've condemned everything from the start."

For this architect/designer, there's a necessary element of risk that makes for truly great interior design. He's designed an entire suite of furniture in metal, wood and straw that should be delivered any day, together with bookcases in tobacco leaf and bronze, both sight unseen beyond the blueprints he submitted for their creation abroad.

"I defended my drawings and the designs were made up accordingly," he says. "Do I trust myself?" He beams and, leaning forward, raps on the wood coffee table a few times for luck. "Of course I do!"

In the end, it's all about spirit—a unique, whimsical, fun and joyful force of nature that is Robert Couturier—a refined combination of innate taste, high-French cultivation, and an inimitable appetite for life. ♦