

House & Home

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Picky Fingers Root In America's Attic

By DAVID COLMAN

LAST year, when eBay, the on-line market that is taking over the universe, came to Manhattan to put on a show house, it seemed thoroughly lacking in vision. Why would the 21st century's greatest retailing success story — "The Perfect Store," as a 2002 book called it — stoop to pick up a décor chestnut stale enough to date from Victorian England?

eBay's goals, to give the show-house world a shot of ragtag can-do and promote itself in the process, enjoyed a mixed success. The house was not open to the public, viewing it on-line was dizzying and by the time the contents were auctioned off months later, everyone had forgotten about it. Moreover, last year it was painfully clear which of the six designers could smoothly navigate the mammoth river basin that is eBay, and which neophytes floundered in alluvial sludge.

Now, in a season where show houses are proliferating like taxi medallions, eBay is back for Round 2, this time with a four-story town house open to the public on the Upper East Side and a vow to make it an annual event. There are eight fashionable participants — among them the golden-girl fabric designer Lulu de Kwiatkowski (who ordered a bed from China on eBay for \$678), the traditionalist Matthew Patrick Smyth (who scored a new Pottery Barn sofa on eBay) and the clever modernist Shawn Henderson (whose room teetered precariously, as eBay does itself, between good and bad, between the name-brand and the anonymous).

They and five others were rounded up by the design veteran Martan McEvoy and given budgets of \$8,000 to \$22,000 with the instructions that 90 percent of their rooms' content should come from eBay. While the eBay show house is still



After eBay sprees, eight designers play show and tell.

a poor relation to the grandeur of the nearby Kips Bay Decorator Show House, which closed on Monday, this year it has enough bite and brains to warrant a look.

Meg Whitman, eBay's chief executive, arrived in New York this week to promote the project and acknowledged that her mandate to keep eBay growing at its amazing rate is not easy. Today, the largest new growth sectors for the company are not in new merchandise,

as has been the case for the last several years, but in international sales. In Germany, Ms. Whitman said, nearly half of all online business is now done on www.ebay.de.

This huge machine of commerce, in which every seller and buyer knows the value of everything, has eroded the folksy spirit of eBay's early years, when personal checks and postage stamps were the coin of the realm. Today manufacturers have discovered eBay as a place to sell things that haven't made it at the mall.

But for the moment, the show house offers proof that there is still an enormous volume of cool merch, not only American, but from all over the world. This year, the rooms all achieve a certain polish. (Apparently, the hours that the designers logged with an eBay shopping expert were well spent.) Also, eBay enhanced its collaboration with the Alpha Workshops, a decorative arts studio in New York for crafts experts and designers who are HIV-positive. Last year, Alpha artisans just installed the show. This year they were put to work creating stencils, faux-painting furniture, designing a floor cloth and a rug, and so on.

It all looks good, but so what? A show house has to give you a reason to pay an entry fee and trudge up and down the steps. Are there fresh ideas, even impractical ones? Are there any insights into design, collecting and the Internet?

A few, interestingly, the designers not only sought out the objects they wanted, but they each also saw in eBay what they wanted to see. Katie Ridder, who said she thought of eBay as a kind of fascinating if mad mélange of far-flung oddities reminiscent of the Victorian era, created what she called "a curio cabinet." With disparate objects — among them sea urchin shells, colorful Turkish tiles recalling William Morris designs, and a set of egg prints — Ms. Ridder constructed a cool, deep turquoise office, with white stenciling via a paisley block she bought.

To do the dining room, Sheila Bridges eliminated the usual table and chairs. Putting a giant circular tufted ottoman in

the center of the room and punctuating the perimeter with a set of Louis-esque Henredon dining chairs (\$2,125 for eight), she made her room a valentine to that eBay staple, the plate. There are as many as 100,000 plates up for bids at any one time on eBay; Ms. Bridges narrowed it down to the banal Blue Willow. Supplemented with the same pattern in other colors, blue walls and pink sari fabric, Ms. Bridges' stately if not terribly imaginative room makes a good point for new decorators and eBayers alike: One can do worse than keep it simple.

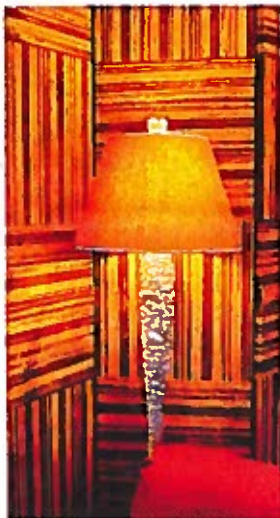
Across the way, Shawn Henderson's mauve-themed room (yes, mauve) is an intriguing set-up — a clash of taste and kitsch. The room is anchored by a raspberry suede Chippendale-style sofa (\$800), which its Houston-based seller said came from the offices of Enron. A George Nelson clock (\$599) and a set of Fornasetti Adam plates (1950) look down on a pair of inoffensive armchairs and a dining cabinet (\$127) that were described on eBay only as "Danish Modern" (a hilariously all-inclusive term common on the site, along with "Eames era").

For taste points alone, both Ms. de Kwiatkowski and the designer David Netto turned out engaging Eames-era spaces. Ms. de Kwiatkowski did her bedroom with end tables she painted herself with red Hascolac paint by Schreuder, the Dutch company, and lamps from Alpha Workshops (\$351 for the pair). Mr. Netto's nursery has a fully equipped Swedish Modern dollhouse (about \$1,500 on eBay). Both rooms have enough dash for the most painfully with-it hepcat. Ms. de Kwiatkowski, however, played by the rules, getting every stick of furniture in her room from eBay, while Mr. Netto furnished his room largely with his own possessions.

The eBay Show House 2004, at 148 East 63rd Street, will be open from June 12 to June 19, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekdays and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekends. Admission is \$25, proceeds benefit the Alpha Workshops, no children under 10. The contents of the show house will be auctioned on eBay starting next Thursday and ending on June 19. The making of this year's eBay show house will be the subject of "Point, Click, Design," on A&E Sunday at 9 p.m. Eastern time.

BUDGET SHOW HOUSE Far left, amassed on eBay by Katie Ridder: sea urchins, a bird's nest, a Chinese lobster sculpture and Uzbek textiles; left, chairs sold as Mies van der Rohe and a calfskin rug in a room by Lulu de Kwiatkowski. Sheila Bridges, below, incorporated an eBay staple, willow plates, and a table in faux wood-grain; below her, a collage of eBay ephemera by Thomas Jayne, inset.

They Got It All on eBay (or Did They?)



IN theory, 90 percent of the contents of each room came from eBay, and the budgets were to include paint, window treatments, special labor and supplies. But nearly every designer broke the rules. Most dodging was done through a loophole: the show house's beneficiary, the Alpha Workshops, contributed \$9,000 in hand-blocked wallpaper for Matthew Patrick Smyth as well as \$2,000 in wallpapering on his screen, seen at left, \$1,500 in faux wood-graining on a table for Sheila Bridges, a \$6,700 floor cloth for Thomas Jayne, and \$2,000 of custom painting for Isabelle Bosquet's outdoor room.

There were other shortcuts. Mr. Smyth hired his own contractor to build out a fireplace mantel. Lulu de Kwiatkowski used wallpaper from her own line — and it's not cheap. David Netto used much of his own furniture for the nursery and spent less than 40 percent of his \$10,000 eBay budget.

And the centerpiece of Ms. Bridges' room was a \$2,000 ottoman she said she bought six months ago on eBay, and then sold. But it was so good for her room, she said, that she ended up buying it back. "Size-wise, it was the perfect piece, and eBay agreed to let me do it," she said. And she's taking it with her when the show house closes.

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