

cool school,

italian style



While those around him dreamed in white, Greg Natale envisaged a world of pattern, texture, layered geometrics and the promise of recontextualising his Italian heritage, whereby a Murano chandelier or Baroque chair could be imbued with cool.

What started you in interior design?

I was one of those kids that knows what they want to do from age 10. I watched a lot of television and film and was inspired by the sets I saw. I decided really early on interior design. So from year seven, I was doing art and tech drawing for the HSC.

Did you start your practice straight from university?

No, my practice started in 2001. Before that I worked for three different architectural design firms from 1996 to 2001. Garth Barnett Designers, he's high-end residential. Then HBO + EMTB and that really taught me the art of producing drawings – awesome. We worked on some really beautiful projects like a Hilton in Auckland and ABN AMRO headquarters in Sydney. Then SJB working with Andrew Parr for a while and by that stage I was ready to start my own business.

Parr's one of the greats, but you have a very different aesthetic. Did that go towards going out on your own?

In 2001, it was pretty entrenched in minimalism everything was super built-in – it was almost like a spaceship where everything was integrated. So I could see that the next phase was going to be layering and decoration and where furniture pieces would become objects.

So how did that drive your thinking?

I had to ask myself, 'How am I going to look different? If I'm going to start my own business, am I going to keep doing what everyone is doing, which is basically minimalism, or am I going to do something different?'

Was there a key starting point?

I got the opportunity to do an apartment for my sister. I had no budget, but she didn't want a white box, so she pushed me out of the white box. Then I discovered Florence Broadhurst and Signature Prints and came up with this crazy scheme of doing this whole pattern on pattern thing. It was a Verner Panton response and it won the *Belle* magazine award and got into *Wallpaper** magazine and it really got me noticed by all the editors and that set the DNA for what I do now.

When did you start bringing in your Italian heritage?

I was this 'new kid on the block', so I needed to do things differently, set a new aesthetic. So, for my first apartment, I really looked at inspiration that only I could have. It was a BKH [Burley Katon Halliday] apartment, in Republic. I bought it because it had great bones, great space, clean lines, I didn't have to do anything to it structurally, but I didn't want to live in a white box. I thought, 'What

is the opposite of white?' But I didn't want to live in a black box, so I did this whole charcoal thing.

Then I thought, 'How do I make this different?' And I started looking at the family home. My parents built their dream home and decorated it in the eighties. Back then, Italian immigrants decorated their homes in reproduction Baroque furniture. I brought one of the armchairs into the apartment. It now had different context and was cool. I started looking at my background and added a big Murano chandelier. An aunt had decorated a Federation house with Murano chandeliers, but I was giving it a new context and it worked.

I was very inspired by the late English [designer] David Hicks and Verner Panton – the way Hicks mixed classic and clean lines together and layered them over with geometric patterns, and Panton did the pattern on pattern thing. I was doing my thing in Australia and then I discovered the work of Jonathan Adler and Kelly Wearstler and the whole Hollywood Regency exploded and I was part of this international style and the phone started ringing off the hook.

What impact did that have on the business?

We have 10 in the office now, with 40 projects this year. We do a lot and the office is growing. Five years ago, I had three people.



Are people seeing your work and saying, ‘I want that’ or ‘I want you’?

It’s a bit of both. I know I have a signature style, but it is very adaptable. There is a hard-edged minimalist house we have done, but it is still layered and warm. And I think to me that is what I want the common thread of my work to be: very warm and layered. There is a new build in Brisbane and that has morphed into a contemporary art deco feel, while the guesthouse on that property is in the New England style, so it is very varied.

You are one of the few Australian designers that admits the American influence.

I do have American influences. I think what Americans do so well and Europeans don’t do as much of and Australians not at all, is layering. And without even realising it I started using American furniture. It straightaway made my work look different to others.

Do you mix in antiques?

It depends on the project. There is a stud ranch we have done, which uses antiques. The client breeds Melbourne Cup horses, so he bought an established stud with an 1880s Victorian bluestone homestead. Amazing.

The house uses a guesthouse for buyers and conferences, like a private hotel.

Who are your influences?

I see myself more in Philip Johnson than [Ludwig] Mies van der Rohe, but van der Rohe is a huge influence on my work. I’m highly inspired by his materiality, the travertine marble of the Barcelona Pavilion. There is a minimalist house we are working on that is inspired by van der Rohe – it’s all marble, travertine and granite. I’m inspired by a whole lot of people – the early modernists van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. Then mid-century I’m inspired by Paul Rudolph, and Harry Seidler is like a god. Modern architects: I admire the work of David Chipperfield. Decorators: I’m inspired by the late Englishman David Hicks, a huge inspiration; Dorothy Draper, William Haines – both American designers. Now I’m influenced by William Sofield, who does all the Tom Ford stores – amazing designer. Kelly [Wearstler], Jonathan [Adler], I think David Katon is a genius, I think Paul Hecker is very clever. I think locally they are amazing.

Who’s doing good wallpaper at the moment?

Me! I’m doing another range for Porters at

the moment – I have my striped collection that was released in 2013. Cole and Son always do great papers.


Who is doing good rugs?

I think Yosi [Tal] at Designer Rugs is doing an incredible job. He really is the only Australian retailer who says, ‘I am going to push Australian design and make it the core of my business.’ And he does it with all the collaborations.

What’s next?

I’m doing a lot of collaborations at the moment, more wallpaper, more rugs and furniture. My big thing for this year is my first book, *The Tailored Interior* by Greg Natale, which is being published by Hardy Grant and coming in November 2014.

You mentioned your signature style, how do you manage that?

I know it’s a very signature style and I know my work is on trend, and I like it being on trend, but I inject the client’s personality into it. I spend a lot of time with them and really get into their heads and when I am choosing something I really put my feet into their shoes. 

project —
Astor Apartment

location —
Sydney, Australia

design —
Greg Natale

Astor Encore

text—Gillian Serisier
photography—Anson Smart

Playing on the opposites of a rich interior surrounded by light, Greg Natale has created a cocoon of sumptuous finishes that pay respectful homage to The Astor's heritage and era.





Previous—Regency
armchair upholstered in
Kelly Wearstler
'confetti' in cream

Opposite—Park Avenue
Bergere: Hickory Chair
by Laura Kincade
upholstered in Kelly
Wearstler 'Flair.' Custom
rug, Designer Rugs

Natale has chosen to paper both the drape overhang and window head to exaggerate the false drape height rather than negate the illusion.

The grande dame of Sydney apartments, The Astor on Sydney's Macquarie Street is quintessential glamorous inner city living. Built in 1923 with views across the Botanic Gardens, it has been the home to both Portia Geach and Barry Humphries.

Once the tallest building to risk the innovation of reinforced concrete, the Donald Esplin and Stuart Mould designed residence remains one of the most prestigious addresses in town. Magnificent ceiling heights, huge windows framing park views (with reversible steel frames, for ease of cleaning), glorious architectural mouldings, framed doors and spectacularly rich timber floors make this one of the finest. Rather than down play these elements, Natale has embraced both the glamour of the building itself and the 1920s with lush velvets, taffeta, gold detailing and thick wool rugs that allow the beauty of the flooring and architectural details their due.

As with all Natale interiors there are several layers at play that will shift and evolve with the client. At a glance it is the zebra skin rug, the pink touched chandeliers, rose-mauve cushions and fantastical geometric wallpapers that greet the eye. These, however, are ostensibly the last layers, the finishing touches that make the whole zing. The apartment as a shell is, in fact, coolly blue with white highlighting picture rails, architraves (door and ceiling) and the expansive ceilings, which are exaggerated by dropping the ceiling line to the upper picture rail. This is a strategy that works particularly well in conjunction with the large framed windows in serving to minimise the architectural line, while paradoxically constituting an architectural

highlight in its own right. Moreover, it creates a sense of scale that allows the terrific height to be simultaneously grand and human.

In the main living room, the window treatment comprises drapes of heavy taffeta, in a slightly deeper, slightly greyer shade than the walls, offset by a broad dull gold Greek Key trim. Natale, however, is not a shy designer and the next layer is a boldly geometric rug in black and white with an equally boldly upholstered chair in black and white ikat anchoring the room's focus to the interior, despite the tree filled view beyond. A plump pink pillow dispels the overt masculinity of black and white masterfully. The large, but not overly fussy, Marie Therese chandelier creates a vertical midpoint, while a large vertical panel of architectural moulding serves to delineate the space. Both of these are countered by the extreme horizontality of a large velvet lounge in deep blue grey.

At centre, a mid-century oval glass coffee table with stylised gold rams' heads picks up the gold of the curtains, as do the ornate picture frames of the featured artworks and an abstract black and gold ceramic lamp base. Which is not to mention the extraordinary gold starburst framed mirror, collection of ceramics and gold on white sideboard. Leading into this room is arguably the most perfectly realised of the rooms. Comprising an alcove, rather than an actual room, the space is clearly defined by a single painting and chair of ideal proportions and weight, while thick woollen Kelly Wearstler upholstery in an elegant zigzag of black and white is offset by another plump pink pillow.



project
Astor Apartment



Opposite—Manhattan
from Designer rugs.
Kelly Wearstler
upholstery. Custom
cabinet. Daydream
Australia ice bucket

Above—Dorothy Draper
drawer unit



Left—Cole and Son's 'Hexagon' wallpaper, custom pigeon grey rug from Designer Rugs

Opposite—Custom black and white marble checkerboard flooring, splash back and counter in white Statuario Venato marble. Joinery: Porters Milk paint in Parterre

The master bedroom is ostensibly the lounge in reverse. That is, where the lounge boasted a geometric rug and architecturally defined walls, the bedroom is papered in a similar geometric print as the carpet in the lounge, while the rug is a large self-framed square of deep grey and cream. The drapes, in the same shade as the rug, are thick matte velvet, bringing warmth to the room. Interestingly, Natale has chosen to paper both the drape overhang and window head to exaggerate the false drape height rather than negate the illusion. It is, as Natale would say, a Verner Panton response, of using pattern on pattern to define the architectural lines. Colour has been introduced with embossed plum upholstery used on the bed end stool, fringed ikat cushions in plum and grey, the lilac touches of the Murano chandelier and a warm pink glass piece on the gold trimmed black dresser.

Colour plays a linking role throughout the apartment with muted shades of pink, blue, green, gold, brown and plum making up the abstracted pattern of the dining

room chair upholstery. These colours are then separated out to the rooms in pairs framed by the black and white elements of the design. The pink and lilac of the master bedroom, or pink and blue of the lounge, for example. Green and plum in combination is visited for the second bedroom, where a much lighter palette is brought into play. The walls are again papered, but for this room Natale has chosen a large diamond pattern of a slightly three-dimensional ilk. The room is much smaller, but rather than add dimension through a Spartan approach, Natale has allowed the room's grandeur to exist in its height by pooling the mid green bedspread onto a framed rug of the same shade. All of this is overhung by a small but quite lovely Vienna chandelier and backdropped by white drapes trimmed in soft brown.

Green is stunningly revisited in the kitchen, which, while small, has been filled high and low with abundant glass-faced cabinetry. Effectively, this leaves the entire mid section as clear bench space and is

the sort of solution cooks appreciate.

A black and white marble checkerboard (Black Nero Maquina and Statuario Venato White) pays homage to the building's era while being rather cheeky for appearing in the kitchen (and bathroom) rather than the foyer.

The nature of Natale's work lies in his ability to be both of a particular style and able to surprise at the same time. This allows the client to be completely present within the Natale stylisation. In this case it's the collection of the owner; the apartment decoration does not interfere with the art, which is exhibited in its own right and not as an element of the design. As such, each painting is given its own space, has been hung to an appropriate viewing height (rather than centred on the wall) and placed to create a dialogue between the paintings. Just as importantly, objects such as the Daydream Australia anodised apple, a favourite with mid-century object collectors, is given a home, adding a shot of vibrancy to the whole. 

