

Whimsical night lights for sweeter dreams.

BY TIM MCKEOUGH



Tarnish-free silver, pineapple walls and great Kentucky estates.

Home

The New York Times

IN THE GARDEN



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAN HARRIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) HANDS PLANTING SEEDS IN BATTERY PARK; A WEEKSVILLE HOUSE; HAND-SPACING PEANUT SEEDS; SECOND-GRADERS FARM IN BATTERY PARK; A WEEKSVILLE HOUSE; SEEDLINGS ARE PLANTED IN MOVABLE BURLAP SACKS; WATERING CHORES; PLANTING AT WEEKSVILLE; IN THE SHADOW OF DOWNTOWN TOWERS; HAND-SPACING PEANUT SEEDS.

THE DETAILS



SHANNY GORTA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
Massimo Vignelli, an Italian who left his mark on American design, died on Tuesday at age 83.

Design's Exacting Grammarian

In letters to a master before his death, loving reflections of what he had taught.

By JULIE LASRY

What would it be like to read your own obituary? Massimo Vignelli, the renowned designer who died Tuesday at the age of 83, had that chance a thousand times over. On May 14, after being hospitalized for an irreparable heart condition, Mr. Vignelli returned home to the Upper East Side apartment he shared with his wife and creative partner, Lella, and found the first outpourings of a deluge of mail that summed up the accomplishments of a remarkable career.

It was his son, Luca, who first suggested the "Dear Massimo" letter-writing campaign, which invited all those whose lives had been touched by him to express their gratitude.

The call for mail whipped around the Internet starting on May 9. By May 20, letters filled multiple crates.

"To see what people are saying, I cannot repeat it even, because I feel blushing," Mr. Vignelli said that day, seated at a desk in his double-height living room next to a giant window of leaded glass. (Though he lived in the United States for 49 years, the Italian-born designer still spoke endearingly mangled English.)

Dressed in his habitual black, he had the same aquiline profile as always, the same irrepressible eyebrows. But he was as gaunt as a thin stroke of Bodoni, one of the few typefaces he used in his designs. (He famously confined himself to five or six out of the expanding font universe.)

"They talk about the quality of the work and the elegance of whatever we were doing."

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Are They Nuts?

New York gardeners are taking on the ultimate challenge: growing peanuts. Global warming aside, it's a dicey proposition for Yankees.

By MICHAEL TORTORELLO

A person who won't work for peanuts has no business trying to grow them in New York.

The peanut plant cannot be cultivated here, or so the common wisdom goes. Apparently, no one told the 7- and 8-year-olds from P.S. 230, in Kensington, Brooklyn. On a drizzly Friday morning a few weeks ago, a class of second graders turned up at Battery Urban Farm to sow a row of peanuts in Battery Park, at the rump end of Manhattan Island.

You don't need Mr. Peanut's monocle to

spot the problem. The seed of *Arachis hypogaea* — what most of us know as the salted thing in the shell — won't germinate until the soil stops shivering in mid-May. And the crop isn't ready to harvest for the greater part of a baseball season, the American definition of eternity itself.

For just this reason, the fresh peanut makes the rarest of cameos at the city's farmers' markets and community gardens. While the foodstuff is omnipresent, the botanical specimen is practically invisible in New York. And not just to second graders from Brooklyn, said Camilla Hammer, 26, a project manager at the nonprofit Battery Conservancy, which runs the farm.

"We're trying to grow things people don't immediately associate with plants," Ms. Hammer said.

The peanut, for a certain type of city gardener, is a quixotic project. Finding these

planters is a trip of its own, as I recently discovered. The hunt took me to the remnants of Weeksville, an intentional African-American community dating back to the 1840s, now patrolled by raging dacks. A few days later, I followed the New Jersey Turnpike to a Revolutionary War-era farmstead, to meet a Korean immigrant with a stoic theory of peanut agronomy.

But first, I walked through the gate of a bamboo pole fence (salvaged from the jungle-gym installation "Big Bamboo" at the Met) and found Ms. Hammer. She swore to be unimpressed by the odds.

"I expect it's going to go well," she said. "We've never had a crop failure."

A skeptic would say there's a first time for everything. But then a skeptic probably wouldn't believe that for the last four years, a one-acre food garden has been

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SHANNY GORTA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

When Podunk Is the Place to Be
A rambling house in small-town Minnesota contains one family's world. Page 5.

ON LOCATION

Cannon Falls, Minn.

The Innkeepers



1. Kathy and Dennis Brekken surprised even themselves when they decided to remain in the small town where they had spent most of their lives and build a house that would make others want to come and visit.



A rambling house was designed to be a magnet for family and friends. It worked.

By SANDY KEENAN

At more than 5,000 square feet, the sprawling house that Kathy and Dennis Brekken built on a remote stretch of the Cannon River, miles from the one-stoplight downtown of historic Cannon Falls, Minn., has the feeling of an old-world inn.

Everywhere, there are porches: open-air, screened and sun. Bedrooms and kitchens abound (there are three of the latter). There are also 35 styles of millwork and a secret passage.

"I know it seems like an odd house for two people," said Mr. Brekken, 67.

But as Mrs. Brekken, 65, explained, "We think of it as the center point for our family." The house, designed in 2006 by Todd Hansen, a Minneapolis architect, and recently renovated, was intended to act as a magnet for family and friends. It may have worked a little too well. Now even relatives who live a short drive away opt to spend the weekend no matter how insignificant the occasion.

"We just love that," Mrs. Brekken said. A former chief executive of Midwest at Cannon Falls, a holiday products business



started by her father in 1953, she grew up nearby and never imagined she would stay. As a young woman, she was determined to get away and referred to the little town in southeastern Minnesota as "this Podunk place."

Mr. Brekken grew up in the even small-

er town of Kenyon, Minn., on a farm that didn't have indoor plumbing until he was a teenager. ("You sure didn't dillydally in January or February," he said.)

The two met in town when she was 19 and married while she was at the University of Minnesota. (College was not for him.) Eventually, they both went to work for her father's company, alongside her older brother and younger sister.

"For a former Lutheran minister, my dad sure liked to make money," Mrs. Brekken said. "We did Christmas all year long." Amassing all the trimmings required frequent trips to Europe and Asia, often for weeks at a time, but somehow they managed to juggle that with the responsibilities of raising two young sons (Alex, now 39, and John, 36).

At least until 1984, when Mrs. Brekken's father informed her that he was retiring and putting her in charge of the company. She was 35.

That was when Mr. Brekken became the chief executive parent. Asked about the arrangement, which was fairly unconventional at the time, their son John said that it was even more unusual to have a mother who was a chief executive than it was to have a stay-at-home dad. "But it was all normal to us," he added.

And as Mrs. Brekken pointed out, her husband was much better with the boys. "I



was wound tight," she said. "He rolled with the punches."

The company thrived under her direction, expanding from \$30 million a year in sales to \$100 million. But over time, as the children grew up and started families of their own, she went to work on an exit strategy, selling the last of the family's holdings and retiring at 54.

At that point, the couple could have gone anywhere. Their decision to stay put surprised even them.

"It's just a little town of about 4,500 people," Mr. Brekken said.

Even so, Mrs. Brekken said, "We like it because it's not a suburb."

They bought six acres of riverfront property for \$350,000 and spent about that much again for Mr. Hansen's design services. With so much custom work, construction took 17 months and cost \$350 a square foot.

And now they are rarely alone. Holidays and weekends attract four generations of family. Plenty of friends, too.

"I never tire of having people here," Mrs. Brekken said. But even with three kitchens, the cooking gets old fast.

Recently she made a plea: She'll continue to handle weekends and holidays, she said, if someone else will only stop up and claim Thanksgiving. So far, she's had no takers.

SHOPPING WITH CHRISTINE INNAMORATO



Christine Innamorato, the creative director of Bonpoint, is shown with the Miffy XL lamp, about \$300, at Babesta, 877-266-9426, babesta.com, in TriBeCa.

Night Lights, Big City

In the city that never sleeps (as if), finding the kind of illumination that's an invitation to dream.

AS THE CREATIVE DIRECTOR of the French children's clothing company Bonpoint, Christine Innamorato spends a lot of time thinking about fashion. But interior design, she said, deserves just as much attention.

If you're trying to create a happy, comforting environment, "the decoration of a child's room is very important," said Ms. Innamorato, 48, speaking through an interpreter. That's why her company has a dedicated team of antique shoppers to furnish its 110 stores around the world, she said. In fact, she added, "When we show a nice dress in an armoire, sometimes the moms just want to buy the armoire."

But beyond furniture, "the quality of light is very important, and makes a big difference," she said. "It has to be warm and cozy. It's all about good energy."

In New York for the opening of a new Bonpoint store in SoHo, Ms. Innamorato took time out to shop for the most comforting sort of lighting: night lights.

At the Schoolhouse Electric & Supply Co. showroom in TriBeCa, she admired the Ion C-Series lamps in the window: bare bulbs with exposed filaments on brightly colored bases.

"The light is just soft enough for a child's night light, but it would also be good for an adult," she said. "I would use a number of them together."

At Babesta, she studied a large, playful lamp modeled on the cartoon character Miffy. "It's funny, but it's also comforting," she said of the bunny-shaped form.

And because it was so much bigger than the average night light, she added, "You could put it on the floor or on a table next to the bed."

She also liked the GummiLights by Jellio, battery-powered lamps made to look like oversized gummy bears.

Candy for the eyes, she called them: "You almost want to eat it."

And at Kikkerland, in the West Village, she picked out the Moon night light.

A small, plug-in model, it was one of the simplest she chose. But as a design inspiration, the moon is "ideal for a night light," she said. "It's a nice invitation to dream."

TIM MOKROGUCH



Star Egg lamp by J. Schultz: \$165 at Mini Jake, 718-782-2005, minijake.com.



Portable M Lamp by David Irwin for Juniper Design: \$219 at Bobby Berk Home, 866-965-9793, bobbyberkhome.com.



Night Light & Moon lamp by Kikkerland, 212-262-5000, kikkerland.com.



Perforated Star porcelain night lamp: \$39 at RH Baby & Child, 800-762-1751, rhbabyandchild.com.



Fawn porcelain night lamp: \$39 at RH Baby & Child, 800-762-1751, rhbabyandchild.com.



GummiLight by Jellio: \$50 at Babesta.



Ion C-Series lamp: \$109 at Schoolhouse Electric & Supply Co., 212-226-6113, schoolhouseelectric.com.



Translucent Giraffe night lamp: \$99 at Land of Nod, 800-933-9904, landofnod.com.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE BELLS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

5. "For us, it's all about the dogs," Mrs. Brekken said. Lulu poses in the family room, upstaging the couple's collection of antique dog portraits and paraphernalia.

6. The Saarinen table used for games is from Room & Board (about \$2,200). The Barbusa chairs, which swivel, are covered in Stroheim fabric.

7. Daphne's dog bed is from Garnet Hill. The antique cabinet was found in Maine; the vintage pitcher is from Red Wing Pottery, where Mrs. Brekken's great-grandfather worked.

8. The cabinetry in the kitchen was made by River City Builders & Millworks, in Nerstrand, Minn., the company that built the house. The floors are reclaimed Southern yellow pine.

9. The breakfast chairs are covered in faux leather; the striped fabric on the banquette is from Cowtan & Tout. The hanging fixture from Teka was treated with vinegar to create a patina.

10. The butler's pantry is painted in Huntington Green and At Sea from Benjamin Moore's.

11. The ladder, which runs on a 70-foot track, can be tucked away when not in use. The Albertslund ceiling fixture is from Louis Poulsen.

12. A yellow Jenny Lind bed that belonged to Mrs. Brekken's grandmother is paired with a metal one found at a garage sale. Some of the teddy bears are vintage Stoff. The privacy curtain is made from Flying Birds Fabric (\$79 a yard) from Cultural Cloth.

13. The antique wine-tasting table in the master bedroom is French. The maple floors are painted black.

14. A Jenny Lind wooden spool bed is covered with an antique quilt from Mrs. Brekken's collection. The Pinocchio dolls were among the products once sold by Midwest of Cannon Falls, the business Mrs. Brekken's father founded.

15. A vintage Norman Cherner Pretzel bentwood armchair sits beside a Chippendale breakfast front from the late 18th century.

16. A Ralph Lauren ottoman in tufted red leather keeps company with a folk-art table and nautically themed paintings.

