

renegade

game changers | thought leaders | rule breakers | style makers

COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 14

HOW TO
GRIEVE
IN THE
DIGITAL AGE

BILL CLINTON

remembering
ROBIN WILLIAMS

THE WOMAN
TIPPED TO LEAD
THE UN



RYAN
GOSLING

TALKS FALLING,
FAILING &
MOVING ON





THE APARTMENT THERAPIST

He tackles the SMALL SPACES, the cosy ONE-BEDDERS and the STORAGE-POOR NOOKS. Smaller still is the INTERIOR that this DESIGN and décor doc best treats – our headspace.

WORDS MELANIE DIMMITT

“**T**his chair that I’m sitting in right now is awful!” protests Maxwell Ryan, as we laugh at the irony – this kind of homely comfort, slumped and sweaty in his gorgeous (albeit un-air conditioned) family abode in The Hamptons. The Manhattan native is working in the country while daughter Ursula is at camp, and enjoys the seaside view while attending to his blog, Apartment Therapy – his other baby (a slightly bigger one).

Inspiring 10 million monthly readers, the blog offers cunning styling solutions, particularly for those boxed within urban sprawls. “When I started I was living in a very, very small apartment,” says Maxwell, who famously blogged the renovation of his then 23-square metre, one-bedroom pad (a feat speculated to have sadly spelt the end of his marriage). “Everybody I knew was living in a small apartment in New York and we were all dreaming of bigger homes, but driven by an inspiration to make the most out of our small homes.”

The recession inadvertently kept people in their modest dwellings. “So strangely enough the small space

thing seems to have grown,” he smiles. “I thought it would be much more interesting to make a beautiful small space – a very unique, special, cosy and wonderful retreat.” And it was about far more than aesthetics – Maxwell prescribes, as his site’s name would imply, a form of therapy.

In the first of his three books he articulated this inclination, attributing it to growing up in the separate homes of divorced parents. “I found myself being very sensitive to how differently I felt when I went from one to the other,” he says, recalling the transitions between his father’s spartan bachelor pad and the visually chaotic home of his artist

mother. “I remember when they were together, the house had felt whole.” It made quite an impact.

“I tried to think about it in terms of how I would like my home to be and, given that that’s what I knew, how I could take pieces from both and put them back together again.”

Maxwell went straight from college to an interior design company in New York, lasting about four months. “We were designing and making things for stores,” he says. “It wasn’t interior design, and I found it sort of pointless.” Making “very decorative” items that he wasn’t sure people actually needed, he struggled with the ‘why’ of the role. “That was a big question, and I didn’t really know what to do with it.”

He changed course by starting a new one – training to be a teacher (“which would at least give me a job I could rely on”) and specialising in Waldorf education, where he was required to visit the homes of his students. He became fascinated by the impact and importance of the home. “There were many things I couldn’t control in my student’s lives, and many things that their parents couldn’t control,” he says.

“But one thing that I felt you could wrap your arms around, that you could do something with, that you could in a sense control, was your home.”

He found that the houses of students who performed well were not particularly rich or poor, but instead consciously well-kept. “Having a good home and taking care of it, on any financial level, seemed to be the secret,” he says, before cheekily adding, “I also think that if you’re happy, you see it in a person’s home. If you’re dating somebody and they show you their place and you don’t like it, it might give you reason to dig a little deeper.”

After seven years in the classroom, Maxwell felt pulled in yet another direction. “The Apple computer was

taking off, as had a number of other particularly Californian companies,” he says. “They were seen as creative, flexible, even honest, back then; able to be engines of change. That sounded really good to me, so I found myself gravitating towards the business space.”

He started Apartment Therapy as a design consultancy service in 2001, a gig that saw him scooting (literally on a scooter) around to clients in their homes. Part interior designer, part life

EVERYBODY I knew was living in a SMALL APARTMENT in NEW YORK and we were all DREAMING of BIGGER homes, but driven by an INSPIRATION to make the most out of our SMALL HOMES.

coach, he stresses that the therapy was no laughing matter. “You’re dealing with a personal space and there can be a lot of resistance – sometimes very deeply held and sometimes unconscious. Dealing with it in a step-by-step way, we made progress,” says Maxwell.

In addition to house calls, he sent out a weekly email with tips and recommendations to an increasing distribution list, making Maxwell ample blogger material – certainly according to his brother (and Silicon Valley familiar) Oliver. In 2004 the pair launched the Apartment Therapy site, which grew alongside Maxwell’s consultancy for a further four years. >

MAXWELL'S HOME



IMAGES COURTESY OF APARTMENT THERAPY



At this stage the blog made no money at all, but on blogging itself, the man was utterly sold.

"The amazing thing about it is the instant sense of audience," he marvels, "and how you can fine-tune your writing so quickly and flexibly when you're responding to what your audience is saying."

The real satisfaction, he continues, comes from having an idea, pushing it out into the world and then seeing how it's received. "And every time you hit publish, it's a thrill."

He decided to put in all his chips, and with five of his best writers in tow and the offer of a one-year ad contract, he made Apartment Therapy an entirely online enterprise.

"I figured that we'd learn enough during the course of the year to either get another contract like that or eventually have our own ad sales, which is what we did." He does admit, however, "it was terrifying".

"We had traffic but we didn't have as much as we needed, plus the recession hit right after I made that decision, so it was a very scary time." But the full-time focus showed in the quality

of the writing, their traffic leapt up and in retrospect, the recession proved beneficial. "Magazines began to fold and everybody started to turn to online as a part of their lives and part of the solution."

Offshoot sites emerged, covering tech, green living and family, and in 2012 they consolidated, making Apartment Therapy the ultimate lifestyle resource. The Kitchn (a cooking-related companion site founded by Maxwell and his former wife, food writer Sara Kate Gillingham) was the only one to retain its independence.

"I did a lot of soul-searching, checked around with all my editors and finally decided to go down to two," he says, having put The Kitchn on a trial basis. "If they could make it a year, they could stay." Make it they did, having recently surpassed Apartment Therapy in traffic stats.

The secret to creating an online empire? Reader-generated content.

"The web is really a two-way street," he says. "We're constantly receiving content or ideas and tips." House tours, before-and-after examples, parties – they all make it into the marvellous mix.

"Fifty per cent [of our content] is coming from that back and forth with our community. And that's what keeps it alive and different and keeps everyone on their toes – it's really fresh every day," says Maxwell. They even cast their readers in their advertisements – anyone's apartment in need of a fresh lick of paint?

"There was very much that intention of inclusiveness and growing," he says.

"Everyone's opinion and everyone's style has a home here – that's made us very accessible." Everyone who writes for the site is a reader of the site and the love emanates off the screen.

"We're very honest, we're very real," smiles Maxwell, with a warmth that says as much.

"We only hire readers, so they're all coming in loving the site, knowing the culture and the vibe, and wanting to join in and add their own angle to it." As far as he's concerned, it's an open home. ■

HOME OFFICE 101 with Maxwell Ryan

SEE IT AS SERIOUS STUFF

Often people are working from home because they're creative and they don't have enough money for an office, or they're being frugal, and that's all fine, but you have to treat your office as a very serious professional space and you have to make it support you.

COMPUTER IS KEY

One of the basic ways it can support you is physically. You should take care to have a really good computer situation – keyboard, light, a comfortable chair, all of that stuff is super important.

GIVE YOURSELF A PRIME POSITION

You want to give yourself a really nice part of your home to work in. You don't want to put yourself in the closet. Your work is one of the most primary things that you do in your life, so give it a best room. And don't put it in your bedroom, save your bedroom for nicer things.

GIVE IT SOME PERSONALITY

It's important when you do work from home to make it nice and give it personality. Pay attention to decorating it; making it pretty. Choose a nice lamp, a nice desk, perhaps painting the wall behind your desk, putting a nice big corkboard behind your desk so you can store all of your ideas. That stuff is lovely to do and you really can do it at home better than in the office.

POETRY OF THE HEART

With a standing INVITATION for visitors to join her for a cup of tea, IRENE MERTENS has created a retail space that lives up to its name: SUKHA, or 'joy of life'.

WORDS ELISSA WEBSTER

PHOTOGRAPHY: JELTIJE JANMAAT, ANNE DOKTER





Poetry is the first greeting that welcomes visitors to Sukha, a cosy reprieve on a lively uptown street in Amsterdam. Doodled and illustrated on the glass window that peeks out from behind the luscious greenery meandering up the walls, it sets the tone for the rest of the space, which is part retail store, part catch-up-with-a-friend.

More sketches and poems peek out from behind the earthy bohemian collections of natural timber homewares, handcrafted clothing and accessories, and ecological skincare products that Sukha's creator, Irene Mertens, carefully curates from her world travels.

With the help of the four other artistic souls who make up the Sukha team, Irene says she seeks to create a space drawn by light, nature and natural ingredients, that celebrates unique and sustainable design, and that embodies the joy of life, which is the Sanskrit meaning of 'sukha'.

"I wanted to create a bright and light spot in our overall busy lives," she explains.

"A place where you can, besides shopping, unwind and have a cup of tea. Sukha lives in a street full of young and ambitious entrepreneurs. We are surrounded by little restaurants and nice coffee spots and shops that sell their own homemade chocolates and oil and vinegar. Sukha is there for a piece of downtime."

And it's a particular variety of downtime with a flavour infused by wanderlust. From old plaids sourced in Bhutan to hats made from salvaged materials in Los Angeles and lavender and rosemary body scrubs from Sweden, Irene brings together Sukha's treasures from around the world. In homage to the traveller's spirit, Sukha has even developed its own label, Atelier Sukha, a range of rugs, knits, tops, blankets, furniture and even chandeliers that are handmade by local craftspeople in India and Nepal using natural materials.

"I find products everywhere, but mainly I run into them during my journeys," Irene smiles. "But I lost my heart in Nepal and India; here I have found the kindest people." ■

> SHOP THE LOOK

COUNTRY ROAD Fergus Marle Cushion, AU\$79.95, countryroad.com.au
H&M Candle, €4.95, hm.com/au **COUNTRY ROAD** Magritt Throw, AU\$149, countryroad.com.au **TARGET** Peninsula Lamp AU\$59 target.com.au

PHOTOGRAPHY: JELTJE JANMAAT, ANNE DOKTER

LIFE

There
 are
 Moments
 that I know
 I will long for
 even as I
 live them

-Judith Katzir

