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January 27, 2012 9:56 pm

Dictators of taste

By Peter York

With ostentatious interiors and over-the-top designs, despot decor is emerging as a trend in big western cities



A giant marble falcon in one of Saddam Hussein's Baghdad palaces, 1997

In August 2011, [Libyan rebels broke into the huge Gaddafi family compound](#) in Tripoli. They looted it and trashed it and then invited the world's media in to see it: the secret luxury, the extravagance, the decadent western brands. Journalists and TV presenters everywhere professed themselves amazed by the scale of what they saw, by the ostentation and vulgarity of it. Practically every sighted, sentient being in the world, for instance, will have seen the gilded sofa-bed affair in the house of Gaddafi's daughter Ayesha, with its "head" end carved in her image.

I was unsurprised and a bit underwhelmed by the revelations of the Gaddafi compound. It looked broadly as I'd expected but, if anything, rather disappointing, low-key and 1970s compared with other dictator-style mansions I'd seen. I've seen a lot of them, at least in photographs: Saddam Hussein's

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palaces in Iraq (more than 60) with their extraordinary over-scaled design and bizarre sado-masochistic pictures; [Imelda Marcos's](#) 1940s film-set rooms; emperor Bokassa's imperial everything; the Ceausescus' gigantic palace in Bucharest. I'd pored over pictures of all these places and more – the homes of 16 dictators from the 1890s to the 21st century – for my book *Dictators' Homes* back in 2005.

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The premise was absolute style – what happens when people with absolute power and absolute resources have their way with their buildings and interiors. My going-in point was ironic, frivolous and, frankly, rather snobbish. I was hoping the interiors would turn out to be completely over the top. I wasn't disappointed. I also started with some assumptions, namely that dictators were pretty much history and their decorating style would soon be too.

Working through those pictures, we codified the principles and practice of despot decor. We produced a get-the-look checklist of the kind you see in smart interior design magazines. The principles were straightforward. The classic dictator's home was designed to impress and intimidate, to tell you that this person commanded absolute power and resources and that you, the visitor, were a "worm" (a Gaddafi word for his enemies). He could have you for breakfast. And the classic dictator's home was designed to communicate all this in a nanosecond. There wasn't time for understatement or complexity – and certainly none for irony. Dictators' homes are non-ironic zones. They are designed to reinforce the Dear Leader cult of personality but at the same time they're very impersonal – there's no room for homey unposed photographs or the pram in the hall. They're places to plot and do deals, not real private spaces.

When early last year someone showed me some pictures of Gaddafi entertaining Jacob Zuma, the South African president, at the compound, I could just tick things off our checklist. French repro, check. Gold everywhere, check. Animal heroes, check. Pictures of ME as world leader, check.

But by then I had learnt a lot more about how dictators operate. And I'd revised my easy assumption that they were history; the cosy march-of-progress idea that dictators would just disappear in favour of democrats. The names and paymasters will change as the centre of the world economy moves to the Bric countries but dictators will be with us for decades yet.

Despot decor is increasing in certain spots around the

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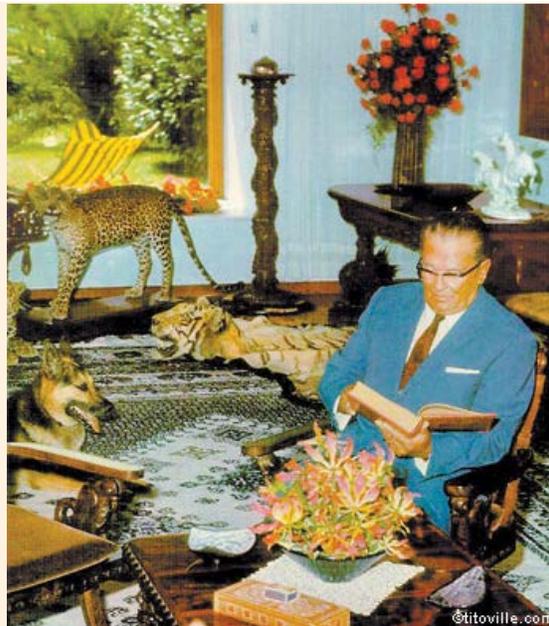
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Former Yugoslav leader Josip Tito

world. It's becoming a trend in big western cities but particularly in London, in so many ways the most important world city when it comes to the global super-rich.

The rich have been making their way to London since the 1990s. But the credit crunch and the Arab uprising have made the city into a positive torrent of flight capital. There are no A-list dictators yet but many from their families, their favoured friends and lieutenants – people who share their taste in interiors. As they've come, smart central London – particularly Knightsbridge and Mayfair – have become more expensive and more dictator-styled (just look at the [One Hyde Park](#) development).

Far from being a little blip of history, despot decor is coming your way if you live in a world city or an up-and-coming one. Successful people in all those new fast-growing places want to express their success. And despot decor – adapted – fits the bill. Like the robber baron style of the London/Paris/New York super-rich



Gilded couch inside the Tripoli home of Ayesha Gaddafi, August 2011

in the Edwardian Gilded Age, it can be fun and exuberant. It's not bound by ancient inhibitions or understated antique-worship. It can be sublimely comfortable – it certainly incorporates every latest strand of technology from plumbing to IT to AV. (There'll always be a media room and a home cinema.)

And there's a new generation of despot decor. It's the style of the playboy sons of dictators who've been to Harvard or the London School of Economics. New despot decor aims to say all the same things about money and power but in a different way. Instead of big rooms crammed with gold, there are big empty white rooms with giant technology – screens and systems – and big contemporary art of the accessible Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons kind. Or sexy black and white photographs. And lots of rare wood veneers and whale-willy leather. There's babe-magnet modern Italian furniture from B&B Italia and

branded everything from luxury designers.

This is now the dominant style once you get into the prime and super-prime areas of the world's fastest-growing cities. We may not come to love dictators but – look around you in your own city – we're certainly getting the look.

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How to get the look: when you've got Ferraris outside, get Versace inside

Big it up Make everything miles too impressively big for comfort or practicality. It works every time.

Go for gold Slather every possible surface with gold. The furniture, walls and ceiling mouldings – even the statuary. It says wealth/pride/power at a stroke.

Go repro The old architectural and furnishing styles of absolute monarchy really do the business – lots of decoration, lots of power symbolism. (But dictators don't like the real thing. Antiques are old and often shabby and that doesn't cut it. Better to buy new.)

Think French while you're in that repro mode. Repro French decoration and furniture has been the taste of thrusting big money for 150 years. It's fancier, curvier and altogether golder (ormolu) than anything Anglo-Saxon.



Italy's Benito Mussolini

Think hotel The design style that's most influenced dictator decor is the look of big city grand hotels with their eclectic mix of pastiche styles and their oversized public spaces.

Go for glass Get giant mirrors and chandeliers the size of cars to add to the fantasy value of those gigantic rooms.

Make it in marble Marble is the material of emperors. Marble makes things important, expensive and everlasting. So put it everywhere. Floors and walls, columns, tabletops and in sexy statuary. New shiny marble, of course, not dull old stuff.

Get big important pictures – 19th-century oils. Until recently contemporary art was seen as pointless and ugly in dictatorland. And Old Masters were often just dark and grim. But *art pompier* really does the business. Have your portrait everywhere. The most important pictures – the only ones that really matter – are of you, the Dear Leader, the superhuman. Feature yourself doing something heroic or mythological – or just meeting other Great Dictators.

Involve brands Increasingly, dictator style is a branded game. Everyone

knows the global luxury brands. You've got Rollers and Ferraris out front so get Versace sofas and D&G curtains inside.

Buy anything with animal heroes Lions in marble, eagles in gold. Everyone knows what they mean – they're Roman, they're Napoleonic, they're just like you!

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Bazán | January 29 11:17am | [Permalink](#)

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One hopes that these newcomers don't bring their secret services and their habit of toturing and then executing their neiighbors for trifles. Showing an obsessive interest in interior design may be reason enough to suffer water boarding in some of this countries. It is a peculiarly anglo-saxon journalist charcateristic to celebrate being relegated to the very bottom of the food chain by nauseating people who should be in prison or in their graves. The article's weak attempt at irony as a safety mechanism doesn't work, it is clear the author likes waht he sees. London's West End will continue to be the world's capital for pariahs, mass murderes, and thieves. In spite fo what locals in London think this sets them further and fureehr apart from NY where there is no room for Russian Oligarchs, Syrian desposts or Nigerian generals. These sorts would not be able to pass an interview with a Co-op board or get a second dinner reservation at a restaurant.

Borromini | January 29 3:18am | [Permalink](#)

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The writer's book would belong in the same file as small luxury hotel chic or provence country house decor:part of an expanding universe of "design" books with little insight beyond the concept itself.How about a "how to create this look " appendix.

Ozzi | January 28 11:28am | [Permalink](#)

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hey - lets have a look at the Blair home where a lot of the despots are greeted as clients ! all in the best possible taste of course!

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We used to call this conspicuous consumption. And it sure is making a comeback.