A Subtle Counterchic

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

EVERY YEAR for the past three years, a small book of interiors has come quietly from a publisher with the evocative name of Quick Fox, and while they could not exactly be called subversive books, there is something about them that suggests an assured kind of counterchic. Offbeat is not the right word, either, because these books are much better than that. What they seem to do, through a knowing kind of simple urbanity and calculated understatement, is to kick the whole model room, this-year's-home-fashion syndrome gently in the pants, and make the suave, professional trend-setters look like hopeless overreachers. I find myself studying these books, both for what is and isn't there, because they are full of subtle design excellences and a gentle, sensuous pleasure in places and things.

The first book is called "Made With Oak" (1975), the

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second "Living Places" (1976), and the third "Good Lives" (1977). All three are paperbacks, *with color pictures,* and all are photographed and authored, respectively, by Herbert H. Wise and Jeffrey Weiss, with an assist on the first by Andria Alberts.

Quick Fox is a division of Music Sales Corporation, and it seems to overlap two other publishing soubriquets that have produced books of an equally special vision, under the name of Flash Books and Links Books. "Street Art" (Links, 1975) by Robert Sommer, combines insights into art and psychology. "The English Sunrise" (Flash, 1972), which offers wordless, infinite variations on the sunburst motif from arty to homy (cookies, signs, radio

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grilles, birdcages, tea cozies, heaters, furniture, pottery and pavements, to name a few), has become an under ground classic.

Obviously, Quick Fox and Music Sales are not your ordinary trade book publisher, and these are certainly not your ordinary books on interior design. On second thought, they may even be subversive, in the perfectly respectivel sense of overturning conventional canons and standards, or revealing the weaknesses of a belief system. But again, I am not sure how much of this the authors really intend; whether they are being sneaky-smart or truly ingenious. In any event, the result is the same —an initiation into a kind of interior design that runs counter to much that is being preached, practiced and publicized by professionals and home publications, and that produces thoroughly delightful—to use the author's words—living places.

For one thing, I will wager that few of these interiors ever saw a designer or decorator, beyond the very considerable and often professional talents of the people who live in them. Many of the homes belong to people active in, or connected with, the arts. In fact, designers and decorators may be appalled by most of the examples. A number of my own favorites look like the "before" pictures in the glossy shelter journals that are subsequently shown in "after" views that have been slicked up and set to rights by professional advice.

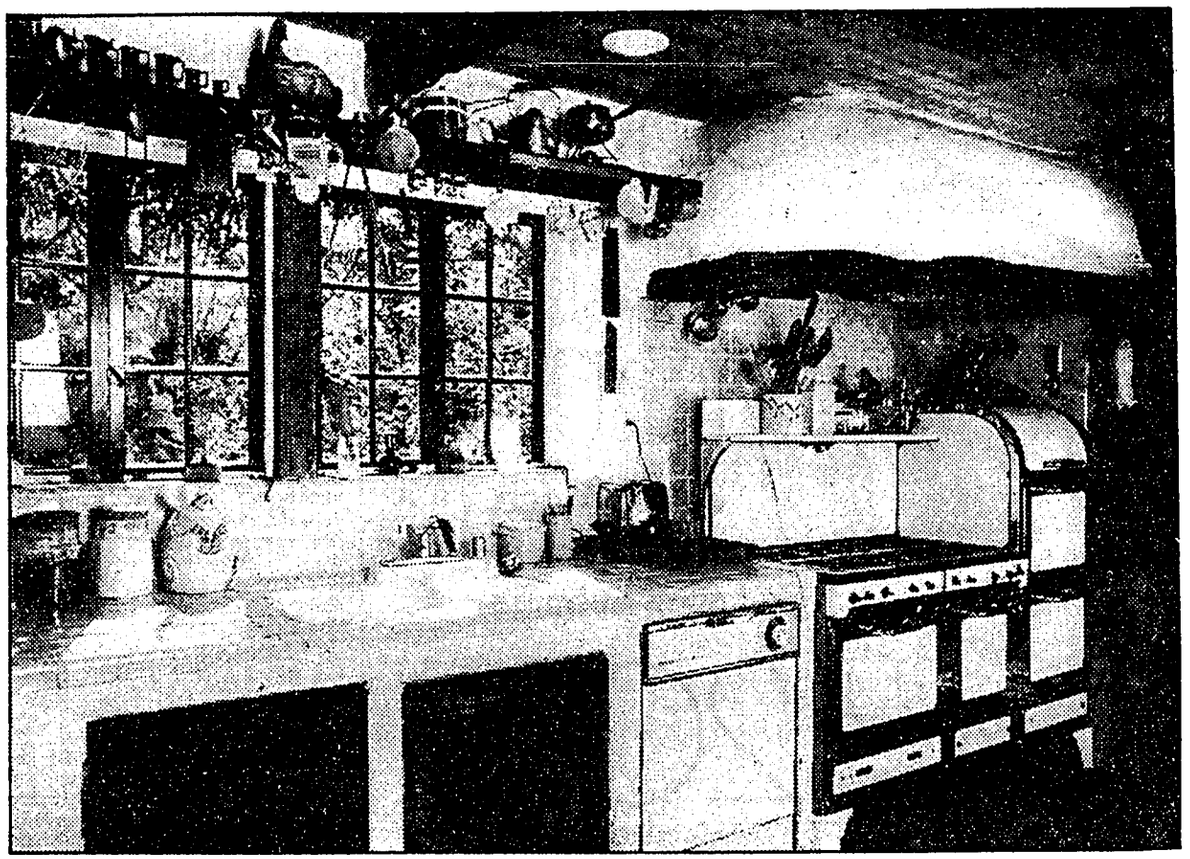
At first glance many of the rooms seem cranky or eccentric or casual to the point of not caring. But these are not unselfconscious places. Their owners care immensely; there is a great deal of design in these interiors, of the most knowledgeable and subtle kind.

These are all, in fact, extremely sophisticated and cultivated exercises in homemaking. They are completely self-assured, confidently individual, carefully esthetic, and clearly, very much loved. These homes are full of cherished things of quality as simple as a basket or a broom or as complex as specialized collections of art objects. But the preference seems to run, as it does in cosmopolitan and art-professional worlds, to plain walls, handmade quilts, simple fabrics, oriental rugs on bare floors, good paintings, pottery and plants and genuine furniture of less-than-popular periods, all mixed together with an assured hand. This is not the world of reproductions, chintzes, wallpaper, tented rooms and collections of glass obelisks and porcelain birds.

There is even a calculated innocence about how these sophisticated interiors are presented. Except for an introduction, there is no text, and the pictured rooms are anonymous. There is also a certain cheekiness in the way the books masquerade as simple "how to" volumes—how to buy and refinish old oaks in "Made With Oak," how to remodel, including tips on contractors, in "Living Places."

Only the last book, "Good Lives," fails to offer a formula for successful living. (I have some reservations about this one because I can't tell if the slightly marshmallowy prose about those happy achievers in their handsome homes is a leg-pull or not. I suspect not, but I like the books that boldly state their case on unnamed and unnumbered pages.)

Striking simplicity of settee, stairway and Victorian plant stand



A kitchen that is confidently individual, and clearly very much loved

"Made With Oak" is the only volume that connects in any way with a trend, but it does not jump on the revival bandwagon. It is a sensitive reappreciation of that most despised of 19th and turn-of-the-century furniture whose virtues were solidity, good wood and substantial gemutlichheit.

What the authors are actually doing, throughout, is delivering a carefully understated and deceptively offhand dissertation on good living, good design and good taste. The interiors they show are bound by no fashion, and no rules, or they blithely defy all professional dicta.

These houses are full of lumpy sofas in unlikely places (there is even one that flaunts an antimacassar), disorderly bookcases, funny lamps and everything from oak sock-stretchers to children's toys. Kitchens abound in old stoves and cabinets that kitchen specialists would banish, but they are also rich in the visual pleasure of useful things arranged both to delight the eye and serve ordinary household purposes. A view from a window may be framed in graters and salad spinners rather than curtains, each thing with its own elegant, utilitarian shape and style. You know that there is not a pot or a dish or a container that does not engage the senses.

There are places in these books that could be called modern, and places that lean to the past; in both, workmanship and form are essential elements. There are places that could not be called anything at all, but the mixture of furnishings adds up to comfort and esthetic satisfaction. There is no horror of a vacuum, of a naked electric outlet, or of the ordinary impedimenta of living.

If the owner feels like putting a boudoir vanity, an Art Deco settee, or a pot of tulips at the foot of the stairs, he or she does so. An old-fashioned white enamel bathtub is built into a raised wooden platform with storage underneath, reached by a small wedge of steps and graced by a fern. You may have a sense of outrage, or of delightful discovery,

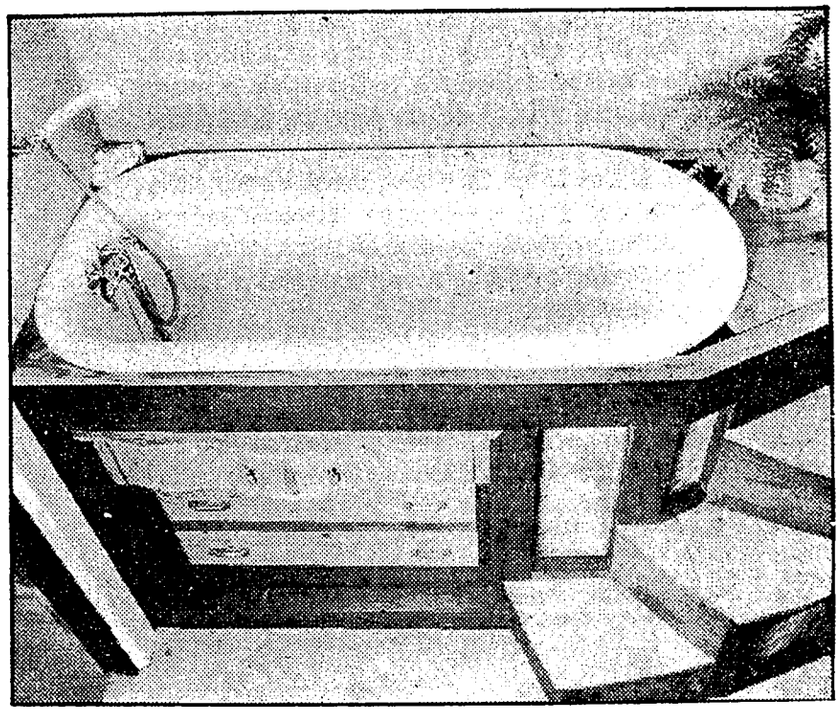
One has the feeling that these people are meticulously organized beneath their casual effects. Because if one looks closely, there is a carefully studied solution that puts everything in its place, whether it is display, storage, or the servicing of daily routines.

But it is something more important than an excellent eye that makes these rooms exceptional. Their greatest virtues are their basic sensibilities to space and style. There are two schools of interior design: one cuts up, disguises, and otherwise tortures space, as if its violation were a creative act. The other responds to the best of what exists, and builds on those assets.

These homeowners all respect and value the nature of architectural space; the shape of a room, the height of a ceiling, the dimension of an opening, the character of a material, the quality of light, are intrinsic to the final scheme. Essentially, the interiors deal sensitively and appreciatively in "givens"—chosen often for their particular architectural qualities—and in the pleasure of genuine things.

There are no games in which success is judged by how far the designer has gotten from the original conditions, or by the staginess of the results. Above all, there is no junk.

The people who own these houses and rooms are not spoilers. They know what is good, in space, surface, texture, form, light and color, and how to treat it with a periodless, personal taste. What they enjoy about life is there for everyone to see. But do not, for a minute, mistake this openness and simplicity for artlessness. The rooms shown in these books are artful to a high degree and there are all kinds of signals being given of the subtleties of status-through-design. In fact, this is the kind of high style that is easy to take for no style at all. And that is the ultimate chic.



Old-fashioned tub with eccentric but charming oak encasement.