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HOW TAXPAYERS
ARE GETTING
SCAMMED BY
STUDENT LOANS

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DESIGNER HOUSES

Be it ever so highbrow

BY BETSY STREISAND

You can spot the house junkies the minute they step into the foyer. Eyes wide and gears turning, they take in every detail from surface to ceiling, like master thieves casing the joint. Because they have come to steal.

Ideas. Joan Lundgren is one of them. If there's a designer show house within a day's drive of her Northridge, Calif., home, she's there. If an airplane is necessary, that's doable, too. "If a new design house opens, I just have to see it," says Lundgren, who has been known to take an ax to the roof over the patio in a fit of designer-house-inspired renovation. "I'll do anything to get there."

These days she's got more opportunities than ever. Although designer show houses have been around for years, they have never been as numerous, varied, or popular as they are today (www.infomart.com). It's not hard to understand why. The combination of the post-September 11 nesting frenzy, low-interest mortgages, and rising real-estate values has turned the home—be it a one-bedroom condo or a 10,000-square-foot mansion—into the ultimate fashion statement. Last year, homeowners sank \$500 billion into home improvements and repairs. And show houses have become the locations of choice both for designers and manufacturers who want to put their products in front of the public. "I've never seen anything quite like this," says Robert DeCarlo, project director for the 2003 *House Beautiful* Celebrity Showhouse in Bel Air, Calif., one of three major show houses to open this fall in the Los Angeles area alone. "It's a total shelter moment."

Lower crust. The audience for designer domiciles has changed as much in recent years as have decorating styles. Once the almost exclusive domain of ladies who lunch and the decorators who lunch with them, the show house crowd has grown younger, more male, and far less upper crusty.

And friskier, too. Designer William Georgis put together his bad-girl's bedroom for the just opened American Hospital of Paris Foundation In-



LIGHT SAVER. A glass circle filters rays at New York's International Designer Showhouse.

ternational Designer Showhouse at 59 E. 77th Street on New York's Upper East Side. More s&m sex cave than sleeping chamber, the room has black walls, black carpet, and a mirrored ceiling. A giant white crucifix hangs over the enormous bed, which is covered with a black rubber bedspread. On the wall there is a large photograph of the back of a naked man. On the flat screen: a video of lesbians kissing. "There's a lot of ambivalence about sexual desire," says Georgis.

Beds and mirrors. For the naughty boy, *Esquire* magazine has created a state-of-the-art bachelor pad in a \$17 million apartment atop Trump World Tower in Manhattan. The 5,425-square-foot apartment is a high-tech playboy's playground. There's a bed (or bed equivalent) in almost every room—and four Sony PlayStations in the bright blue pool and exercise room alone. A computer screen embedded into the bathroom mirror allows the bachelor to monitor his stocks while shaving (a clear danger during a down market). And the coat closet has been cleverly equipped with a video camera and TV screen, to see how your outfit will fare on *Entertainment Tonight*. Although the apartment is not open to the public, *Esquire.com* offers a virtual tour. The pad will host business and charity events, where *Esquire's* advertisers can put their goods in touch with those who can afford them.

In addition to getting "younger," many show houses are becoming more like real homes. The old formula of designing every room like a separate planet has given way to a sense of continuity and livability. The Assistance League of Southern California's Design 2000 Beaux Arts Mansion in Los Angeles, for example, requires its designers to work from the same color palette (in this case, lots of pale pinks, blues, and greens). "We want people to feel they could live in this house with their family," says DeCarlo. Of *House Beautiful's* traditional style Celebrity House (so called because many of its rooms are "inspired" by Hollywood stars). And livable it is. What could be easier than sinking into one of the couches in the outdoor living room and reading a book by the light of the giant fireplace (or the outdoor chandelier)? At the Tara Drive show house, in Norwell, Mass., that real-life feeling is accompanied by, well, real life—or snipets of it. The made-over 1960s mansion, the first of a series of show houses to be created and marketed by a Boston firm, ShowHouseMedia, holds cooking nights in the kitchen and discussions on such



HOME ON THE N.Y. RANGE. *Esquire's* bachelor kitchen boasts a carpet and cows (in a decorative screen). Designer Michael Shurby aims for a fine-art feel in the International Designer Showhouse hall.



topics as Oriental rugs and the principles of feng shui.

But livable is not necessarily affordable. Kitchen appliances in the up to \$10,000. And to house would be complete without a \$1,200 Personal Valet misting closet to remove wrinkles. As for the furniture, the finishes, and the artwork, most of it is well beyond the means of all but the most affluent homeowners. "I would like to see a place decorated without \$3,400 end tables," says Bill Kearney, examining a bedroom at the National Symphony Orchestra's Washington, D.C., show house.

That said, many of the appliances can be substituted with lesser models, and the de-