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The Art of Living

At Home

dialogue

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Sunday
Floridian
At Home
Travel

Monday
PG

Tuesday
Discovery

Wednesday
Connections

Thursday
Food

Friday
Landscape

Saturday
Days Off
Religion

A FLORIDIAN SECTION OF THE TIMES

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SUNDAY MAY 9, 1993 SECTION H

■ Tampa interior designer Paul Lewis takes American ideas to Germany as he furnishes model homes near Hannover.



FOREIGN CONCEPT:

Roman-style bath is a departure from the small, utilitarian bathrooms typical of German homes. Its size puzzled competing builders, who wondered why the developer was "wasting" so much space on a bath, said Mark Walters of Interhomes.

THE AMERICAN WAY



NEW, OLD IDEAS: The living room, above, is done in jewel tones of mustard, henna and purple — "colors I couldn't get by with in the States," designer Paul Lewis said. The darker, deeper colors are more familiar to German buyers. Elaborately decorated model homes are the exception rather than the rule in Germany, he said. Right, since houses in Germany tend to be smaller than those in America, effective use of space — like these built-in units in an entryway — is a hit with buyers, Lewis said.



By JUDY STARK
Times Homes Editor

Walk into a model home here and what do you see? Glamorous furniture, attractive wall coverings, the latest window treatments, lavish accessories.

Walk into a model home in Germany, and what do you see? Houses "built like bomb shelters," says Tampa interior designer Paul Lewis, with steel door jambs, concrete block walls, no closets. Maybe draperies and a little wallpaper, and that's it.

"They're very backward as far as marketing and merchandising," said Lewis, 34.

He has been giving German homebuyers a look at how Americans do it by furnishing and accessorizing model homes near Hannover for Interhomes, an international builder of residential real estate.

So what does a Florida-based designer, coming from the land of wide-open rooms, lots of glass and pastel colors, do with model homes in Germany?

Lewis surprises potential buyers with bright colors, built-ins and modern furniture.

The homes are small — rowhouses or townhomes, two or three stories high in groups of four or six. The smallest, 660 square feet, sold for the equivalent of \$120,000, Lewis said.

Lewis used inexpensive contemporary furniture from sources like Ikea, the knockdown furniture company that has outlets in the northeastern United States, and employed student workers to assemble it on the job site. He used European upholstery fabrics, because import duties are high. That also allowed him to use familiar colors that potential buyers would feel comfortable with, colors that would blend with things they might see in stores in Germa-

Please see **AMERICAN 3H**

American

from 1H

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But he imported wall coverings, draperies and accessories from the United States.

Germans are accustomed to heavy earth tones, and their fabrics tend to be heavier than those used in Florida homes: velvets, tapestries, Herculon. Their furnishings "are much more stoic than ours, much more simple and not as comfortable," Lewis said. Inexpensive traditional furniture in Germany, he said "looks like traditional furniture exposed to toxic waste — an over-exaggerated bun foot or huge wooden arms."

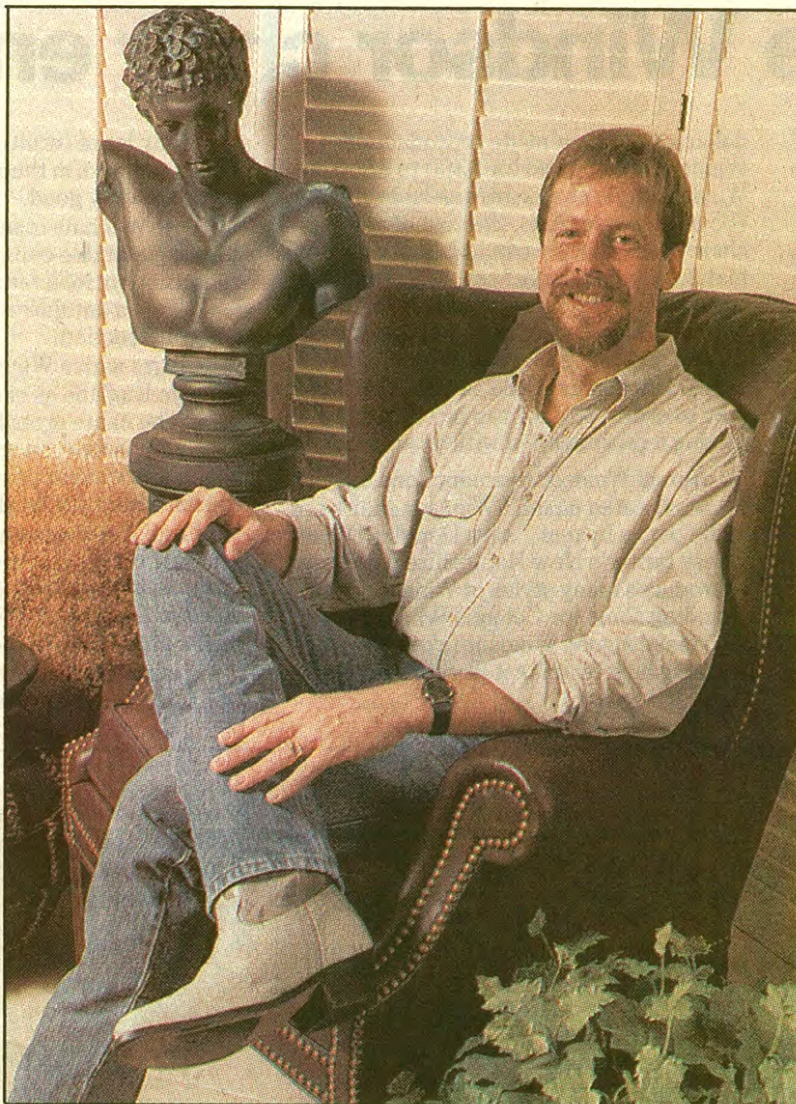
In a three-story townhouse 12 feet wide, he used white carpet and walls, then painted two walls bright turquoise to liven and expand the space. That model was supposed to be geared toward younger buyers, but has sold well to older couples, he said. In another home, he used "colors I couldn't get by with in the States" — jewel tones of deep henna with purple and mustard.

The models are believed to be the first furnished and decorated models in middle and northern Germany, Lewis said.

The Germans, he said, are practical: They tap on the walls to make sure they're solid. Homes are smaller, so built-ins, like shelves in a foyer, "just blow them away," Lewis said. The Germans are very tactile: As they walk through a model, they want to pick up and touch everything. They like real plants rather than the low-quality, obvious fakes available there, and were surprised at the high-quality silk plants Lewis brought over.

"I wasn't sure how the Germans would accept an American coming over to do design work," Lewis said, and there have been some adjustments. "I can't hang a picture" in those concrete walls "without drilling a hole and putting in an anchor first," he said. He needs to avoid electrical wiring that is routed into the walls. Carpets are thin. There are few electrical outlets in each room.

Construction practices are different, Lewis said. It takes about a year to build a home, compared to four months in the United States, a delay Lewis attributed to powerful



Times photo — VICTOR JUNCO

ADDED TOUCH: Designer Paul Lewis has been stocking up at local stores on accessories, lamps and towels to ship to Germany for his next group of model homes.

unions and government strictures. He wanted to substitute brass faucets for chrome in one house before its foundation slab was even poured, and was told, "No, it cannot be done."

Changing something in the course of construction — which could probably be worked out on the spot here — requires weeks of formal letter-writing back and forth with the contractor.

He sent over paint chips from American manufacturers, thinking the colors would be matched by computer, but found that instead, workers blended the colors he wanted the old-fashioned way: by eye.

Lewis became involved with Interhomes through Mark

Walters, an American he met when Walters was with Ryan Homes in Florida. Lewis had done interior design work on model homes for Ryan, Pulte, M/I Homes and other builders. Walters is director of marketing and sales for Interhomes.

The first four models Lewis did are in an Interhomes project called Haemeler Wald, about 20 miles from the city of Hannover, beside a sewage treatment plant and next to a public housing project. A typical home there has 1,100 square feet.

Because of the location and because Germany's economy is deep in recession, the company was concerned that the development might be a tough sell, so they made

conservative projections. They hoped to sell 19 homes in all of 1993. In April alone they sold 14, a record, Walters said. For the first four months of the year they sold 31 homes, the entire first phase — even though they've raised prices by about \$31,000 to \$200,000 — in the first four months.

Eventually the development will have 127 homes, he said.

"Paul's assistance helped us tremendously," Walters said in a telephone interview from Germany. The bulk of the customer traffic is generated by word of mouth rather than newspaper advertising, he said. "People have never seen anything like it. That's nothing but a compliment for Paul," Walters said.

Model centers in Germany typically are open Sunday afternoons only, Walters said. He surprised shoppers by opening the models seven days a week.

So far his competitors remain skeptical, Walters said. Other homebuilders haven't jumped on the decorating bandwagon, and they sniff at the spacious bathrooms, saying Interhomes wasted the space. "They didn't understand what we're trying to accomplish," he said. The company set a sales record in March of \$6.7-million and surpassed it in April.

"I'm flattered everyone likes my work so much, but I'm sort of hesitant, because there's nothing to compare it to," Lewis said.

On a recent morning, his Tampa townhouse was piled high with goods he has purchased to ship back to Germany — he leaves later this month — for his next project, townhouses near the city of Bremen. After a string of 16-hour shopping days in stores such as Pier One and Waccamaw, he had amassed piles of bright-colored towels, lamps, accessories, even a boogie board to decorate a boy's room. He has already shipped \$5,000 worth of wallcoverings to use in the models.

Lewis is learning a little German, but the bilingual Interhomes staff serves as interpreters and guides. In return he teaches the marketing staff his design techniques.

"It really is the Americanization of the company," he said, "and a chance for foreign exchange on the adult level."