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A photograph of Demi Moore standing on a modern balcony. She is wearing a blue t-shirt with a graphic and blue jeans. The balcony has a wooden railing with horizontal metal cables. The background is a lush green forest. The text 'Demi Moore & Ashton Kutcher at Home in Beverly Hills' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Demi Moore & Ashton Kutcher

at Home in
Beverly Hills

Charles Allem

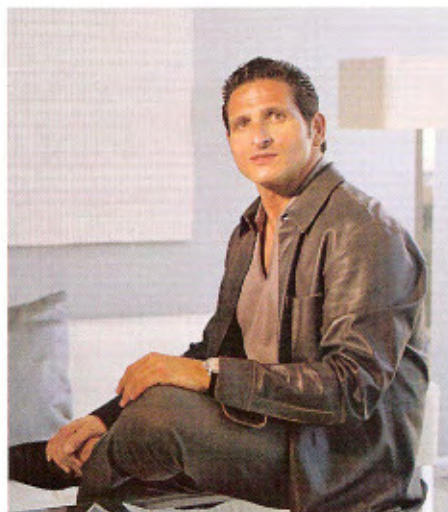
Combining a Passion for Hands-On Work and a Feeling for the Fabulous

By Nicholas von Hoffman

FROM THE VERY START, Charles Allem had no doubt about who he was and what he was meant to do: "I remember as a child saying that my true heart was to do design. So many people aren't happy or don't know what they want to do with their lives. It's something I'm grateful for."

Allem comes from South Africa. "My grandfather was Lebanese. He came to South Africa at the turn of the last century with £1.50 in his pocket. My father started with a little more, but he built his empire."

That empire included a large agricultural enterprise on which Allem's father raised maize, groundnuts and cattle.



"When I do my work, it's really not work for me—it's an extension of my being," says Charles Allem (above). **RIGHT:** He gave a bedroom in New York "a little edge" (see *Architectural Digest*, April 2003). **BELOW:** A spiral stair occupies the study of a Los Angeles house that the designer updated with a team of architects (*AD*, January 2005).



In the midst of this was the family home, which was anything but a farmer's abode. "We had a beautiful home, with large formal gardens and country gardens with ponds," Allem recalls. "My energy was very much focused on the house, on design." The house itself was "filled with extraordinary antiques from different periods—French and English."

The credit for furnishing the residence went to Allem's mother. All in all, his was "a very privileged family," in what was, he says, "the last of the colonial world." Allem, however, had set his sights elsewhere. When he was 13, he found himself in New York with two aunts on an around-the-world excursion.

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continued on page 90

continued from page 87

was *the Plaza*, and the Palm Court was *the Palm Court*." It was at the Top of the Sky restaurant in what was then the Pam Am building that Allem said, "I am going to be living in this town when I'm 21."

First, however, was the return to South Africa, which was in a state of political uncertainty. "In most families it was the dinner conversation for a very long period, and, obviously, there was an enormous fear factor," he says. "But that was overcome when we had this extraordinary man—Nelson Mandela." The boy's fate and that of his family might have been much different, but, he adds, "we were quite fortunate."

Allem was also fortunate in having a remarkable father who helped him realize his vocation. "He always believed in his children's dreams and facilitated them. He saw that I was very creative. A lot of parents would have said, 'Go and become a lawyer,' but he really cultivated it."

Thanks to his father, Allem found himself in the design and furniture business at age 18. Up

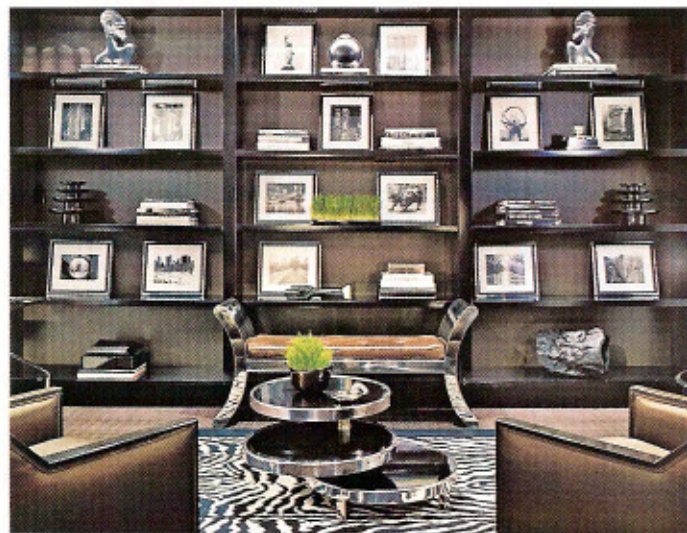


LEFT: For his own apartment in Miami Beach, the designer used "one palette to create a serene environment" (*AD*, September 2006). **BELOW:** On Hawaii's Kohala Coast, he designed interiors that emphasized comfort and featured his clients' artworks (*AD*, August 2005).

Charles Allem found himself in the design and furniture business at age 18. "It was what I'd been doing all my life."

to that point his experience in the field was confined to little more than helping David Hicks decorate his parents' home. Nevertheless, when the owners of Guild's, one of Johannesburg's leading interior design establishments, put it up for sale, Allem's father bought it for him.

The first day in his new business, the designer remembers, "was beyond ecstasy. It was what I'd been doing all my life on the farm—pushing furniture around and rehang-



ABOVE: In the library of the designer's New York City residence and elsewhere, black, white and chocolate tones are offset by mirrored surfaces and furnishings from throughout the 20th century (*AD*, September 2001). Based in Miami, the South African native takes on projects across the globe.

tures." He plunged in, traveling to furniture fairs in Milan and Paris until, as he puts it, "we were like a hub of fabulousness in South Africa."

Partially retail, partially selling to the trade, the store, he says, "had incredible lines. We had Anthony Redmile from London, who did those over-

the-top objects in malachite and ostrich eggs and horn and beautiful things infused with antiques. Guild's was really a force in South Africa."

But not for long. "That was my South African journey," Allem explains with a laugh. "Things seem to move very

continued on page 92

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The time had come for the designer to leave South Africa for New York via London, where he flew to interview for a job with the late William McCarty-Cooper. “I’d come from a world where I didn’t have to work for anyone.” But, Allem says, “I looked at it as the beginning of a new chapter in my life.”

With McCarty-Cooper, Allem saw how his profession was practiced at the apex of wealth with clients like Leopold de Rothschild. The job, he says, “took me to another level,” where he learned “how it

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all comes together, how powerful clients operate and how the design interacts with workrooms in London and Monte Carlo.”

Staying close to every aspect of the work is important to Allem. “I love going to the workroom because that’s where it all comes out. I like to see, feel, touch.”

After nearly five years, Allem left McCarty-Cooper. Then he worked with Robert Metzger in New York. “It was a brief moment,” he says. “The chemistry wasn’t right, or I was ready to start on my own. I decided, It’s time. Start the movie.”

Over the years Allem has had offices in New York and Los Angeles, but he’s currently based in Miami. He has a staff of 14 and explains, “We’re all part of the team. We’re all across the board.”

For large commissions, he adds employees, but, he emphasizes, “people come to me for fabulous. They come to me for extraordinary design, so I don’t want to be dealing with 200 staff because we’re doing 200 projects around the world. In my heart I want to stay where I am and select what we do.”

Nonetheless, the journey that led the designer from South Africa to Miami is far from over. “My dream would be to have an office in the Orient,” he says. “People are discussing the possibility of our working in China. I have a fascination with that part of the world. I think it’s their time.” And, it seems, Charles Allem’s as well. □

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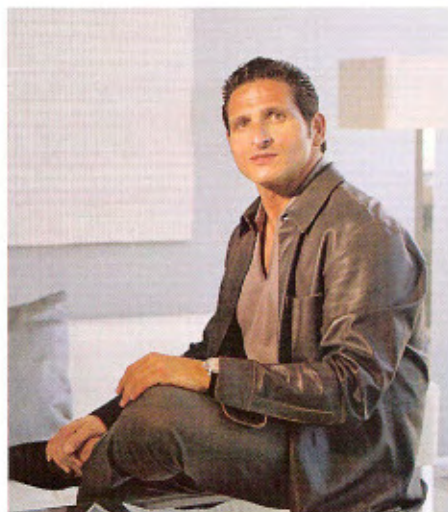
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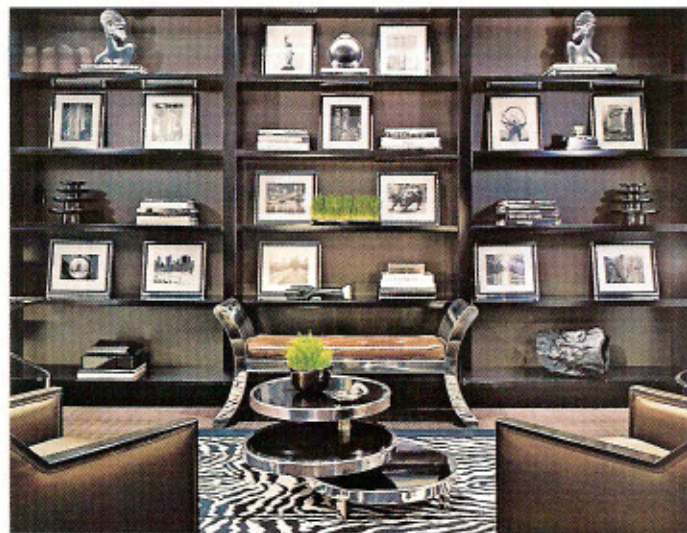


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