



Photography by Phillip Lewis

THE POWER OF Two

By Leanne French
Photography by Andrew French

Only two years since White Webb was founded, the multifaceted, bi-coastal design team is wowing the design world, the art scene and even the Great White Way.

Matthew White and Frank Webb could be labeled *The Odd Couple* of the design world. White hails from Amarillo, a small town in the Texas panhandle. Webb is a New Englander, born and bred in Massachusetts. White describes himself as the classicist who is inspired by antiquity and the Renaissance, whereas Webb loves the modern. White is a creative spirit who, before becoming an interior designer, followed his artistic impulses into earlier lives as a professional ballet dancer, a graphic designer and an antiques dealer. Webb, the self-described pragmatist, pursued a banking career before making his lifelong passion for design more than just a sideline. Both designers believe their yin yang chemistry is part of what makes their partnership so successful.

"It seems like I'm the right-brained guy and Frank is the left-brained guy, but it's really not that way," says White. "There is a very happy cohabitation of all of these opposites."

"We like to say that our talents dovetail," adds Webb. "We both bring something very different to each project."

In a way, White and Webb owe their kismet to Stanford White, or at least to one of the legendary architect's buildings on lower Park Avenue. The Italian Renaissance-style mansion, originally built by White for cotton tycoon J. Hampden Robb in 1889, is where the designers first met after buying and renovating apartments in the building at the same time. Matthew White, who already had a thriving design firm in California, was looking to expand his business and open an office in New York. Webb, who had

recently left a banking position at J.P. Morgan, wanted to start a new career, possibly in the non-profit world. Neither was looking for a business partner, but a chance meeting in the elevator changed their plans.

"We heard stories about each other's renovations," says Webb. "I said, 'Are you the new guy?' and he said, 'Yes, are you the new guy?' And we asked about how our renovations went and we both said 'hellish.' Right then we knew we got along."

Both visited each other's apartments and found a fascinating contrast between the original spaces and their renovation styles. White brought a classical elegance to his apartment, which was filled with original architectural details including a coffered ceiling, woodworking and fireplace. Webb transformed his space, basically white walls sans details, into a strikingly modern home with new woodworking added as a nod to Stanford White.

Despite their different tastes, White and Webb knew they had met kindred spirits and, after a period of about six months, they decided to form a business in February 2004. They opened an office in New York and maintained White's base in California. It's White Webb's opposing yet complementary perspectives and their ability to master both the traditional and the modern that lends a refreshing versatility to their work. This spring, the firm was named one of *House & Garden's* Top 50 New Tasse-makers, noted not only for their imaginative furniture collection *Intaglio* by White Webb, but for their critically acclaimed foray into the art world.



Photograph by Steven Millman



Photograph by Laser Artworks/COOCS



Photograph by Art Gray



Photograph by Casper Linnell

Previous spread, left-hand page: Matthew White (seated) and Frank Webb strike a pose in White's apartment in the landmark Stanford White building where they met. Right-hand page: For the 2005 Kips Bay Show House, White Webb made a small room feel more expansive with clean white linen walls and a mix of classical and contemporary touches including modern white lamps, an 18th-century gilded clock, strategically placed silver-leafed mirrors and writing desk they designed. White Webb's critically acclaimed art installation *Eminent Domain* (above, second from left) borrows a technique from their Intaglio furniture collection (mirror, above, left) where engravings are hyper-enlarged and then reproduced onto laser cut forms to create original pieces. The designers turned a new kitchen (above, second from right) into a classical gathering place filled with Old World craftsmanship, including a barrel-vaulted ceiling covered in hand-made tiles from Mexico. For a living/dining room in Tribeca (above, right), they captured the client's modern tastes in an open, Asian-inspired design.

In November, their installation *Eminent Domain* opened for a month at Rice Gallery in Houston. Gallery director and curator Kim Davenport contacted the designers after seeing their furniture collection, which is created using engravings from the 17th to 19th centuries that are hyper-enlarged with silkscreen technology and then reproduced onto laser-cut forms. "Kim saw our furniture and thought it would be incredible to create an entire environment with that technique," explains White.

The question for the designers was how to translate a furniture concept into a cohesive scheme for a gallery installation. "In creating the environment for the installation, we thought if we're enlarging the pieces to a really hyper dramatic scale and minimizing the human element, what are we saying?" explains Webb. "That's how we came up with the concept of 'eminent domain' — who is really in charge?"

The clever conceit is played out in a central pavilion with a stark white exterior that contrasts with an overly ornate interior embellished with homages to grand styles of the past. A butterfly collection with magnifying glass is a witty nod to the fanciful natural world the designers created outside of the pavilion with giant hand-tinted flowers and insects. "The pavilion is almost like a fortress trying to protect its inhabitants from nature encroaching on them," says Webb. "It seems very staid, but we tied it together flimsily to show that there is only so much you can do to fight back nature. There is still a question mark about who is really in control."

White Webb's witty "man versus nature" dialogue drew the gallery's highest attendance and received praise from the art and design worlds. Last fall, the designers were also applauded for their unexpected Broadway debut. After seeing how the duo made the most out of a space-challenged room at the 2005 Kips Bay Show House, a team of Broadway producers approached them to work their magic in the dressing room of stage legend Chita Rivera for the opening of her biographical musical *Chita Rivera: The Dancer's Life*. The designers flew out to San Diego to see a preview of the show and meet with Rivera about the design.

"I guess I thought Chita would be very show bizzy and dramatic, but she was very laid back and not the least bit demanding," remembers White.

"She said, 'You know I went to Liza's dressing room and it was Minelli red. There is no way I could live with that.' Basically she wanted her dressing room to be comfortable and soothing, really a home away from home."

Rivera loved the Deco-ish sanctuary the designers created using soft creams and warm golds accented by black. Furnishings included custom cabinetry and upholstery, a black lacquer vanity table to accommodate the star's personal shrine of mementos, and a chaise specially designed for the small space without compromising on comfort. Caspar, Rivera's dog, even received the star treatment with a custom-built cabinet for his bed.

For entertaining, there were no rooms large enough to receive Rivera's fans and friends, so the designers took the party onstage in a breakaway design incorporating a foldable screen, a rollable table and stackable Pantone chairs that could be packed away every night. "We designed the party space in red, black and white to be more glamorous in keeping with her public persona," says Webb.

The designers are currently busy at work on a number of new interior projects that are all over the map geographically and stylistically. Some of their new projects include a beautiful 1930s Spanish-style house for the mayor of Beverly Hills, a turn-of-the-century shingle house in New Jersey and a very modern new home in upstate New York. They are also in talks to design their first hotel project and are exploring more possibilities for showing in the art world, as well as developing ideas for textiles and wallpaper and expanding the Intaglio collection (available at Hollyhock in California).

And if that isn't enough to keep this design team busy, there is also a book about Italian-inspired life in America that White is shopping around, and the numerous non-profits to which they both donate time. White, for example, recently returned from a fundraiser he helped plan in Venice for Save Venice, an American organization that raises funds to restore art, monuments and buildings in the historic city. Wherever White Webb focuses their talents next, expect the unexpected from the imaginative minds of two designers who have their sights set on the design stratosphere and beyond.