

dispatches on design and architecture

intelligence



Aero Studios rocked the interior-design world, but just when things were at their peak

BILL ME

co-founder Bill Sofield decided to go solo. Now, with his own studio and the brief to revamp Gucci's

photographed by **Matthew Hranek**

global network of boutiques, Sofield is on fabulousity's fast-track. **Laura Begley** gets the exclusive

You see a lot of strange things in New York. But when you spot a six-foot-two man wearing huge black glasses and head-to-toe Gucci, strolling down Lafayette Street and balancing a precariously full pitcher of iced tea on a silver tray, it grabs your attention. These incongruities define interior designer Bill Sofield, whose gift for merging wildly different aesthetics has made him one of today's hottest talents. He's also the ultimate host, even for a low-key Saturday afternoon interview. After a quick tour of his half-completed studio in the Schermerhorn building, built by the architect behind the Plaza hotel and the Dakota apartments, Sofield grabs the tea and heads to the roof. There, he has set up a velvet-draped table and a Lucite ice-bucket with a bottle of champagne.

It's typical Sofield style. 'I'm obsessive about details,' he says. Friends are amazed when he whips up personalized gifts for everyone at his dinner parties (he throws about two a week) while still managing to juggle a scorching work and social schedule. In the six months after breaking with Aero Studios, the cutting-edge design firm he founded in 1992 with Thomas O'Brien, Sofield has taken on the interiors of New York's SoHo Grand hotel, six private residences and new Disney offices in California. 'I'm triple-booked these days,' he says. 'I'm loving it. Nothing is going as planned, because I have no plans. I'm very much a creature of the moment. I've never planned a career.'

But the project that is sure to send his career into hyperspace – and put his name on the lips of every fashion editor – is the international redesign of the Gucci stores. Gucci's Tom Ford hand-picked the 35-year-old designer. 'The thing that's great about Bill is that we grew



Sofield's dying to design...

* **a McDonald's** 'It's the great American restaurant. I love the stripes, the arches, the stainless steel. There's so much potential. But the architecture needs to be rethought: I would play on the golden arches.'

* **a primary school** 'So much of the visual sense is formed when you are young. There could be a lot done to make it more interesting and humane. Kids need to feel as if they have private space.'

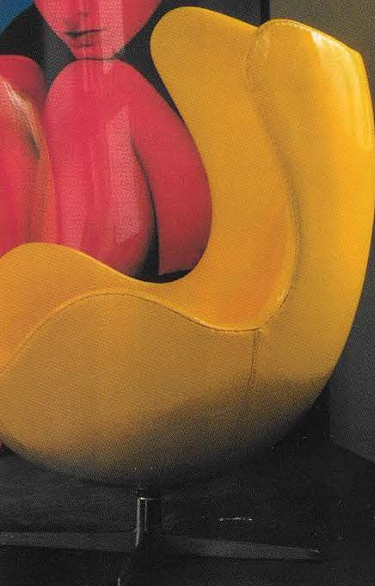
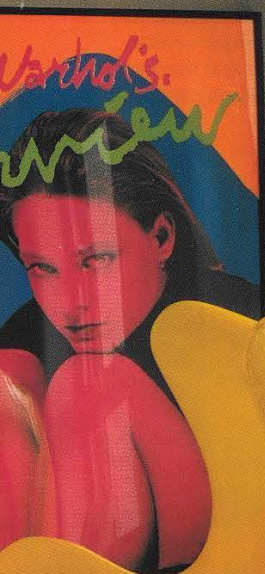
* **an airline** 'When airlines were created they were thinking about what the future would be like. Nobody's really looked at how people travel today. There's no graciousness about it. Security checks are a reality, you're in buildings that were designed ten to twenty years ago and then there are the gimmicks of gracious travel – like the hot towel. I hate being the victim of the flight attendant. It would be great to make people self-sufficient.'

* **a mall** 'I grew up near one of the first malls. Malls have become the town square. They fill an important function.'

'I hire based on personality.
Anyone can learn technique.
You can't learn **personality**'



SOFIELD, SO GOOD: Fostering style in an office at Studio Sofield. Far left: Aeron chairs by Herman Miller and drafting tables in the design area. Right: Artist Loring McAlpin's loft apartment, one of Sofield's residential projects



up in the same time. We're the same age, so we have the same cultural references: movies, TV, magazines. We like the same things,' Ford says. 'There's just this great understanding between us.' The venture is still under heavy wraps and Sofield is reluctant to say anything about his plans. 'I tend not to talk about any project until it's actually built,' he explains. 'I'm very emotional about it.'

Ford is almost as tight-lipped. He won't even reveal which store will open first (it's rumoured to be Sloane Street, Beverly Hills or New York,) but he will give one clue: 'I want the stores to be the architectural equivalent of my white dress from last season.' But however dramatic the design, Ford insists the clothes will be the focal point. 'Bill understands this. He's looking at how the light hits a handbag. He's concerned with details and function, not just that it looks pretty,' he continues. 'But at the same time there must be a rush when you walk into the store. It has to have drama.' His adoration stretches beyond the renovations – Ford recently hired Sofield to collaborate with Spanish architect Alberto Campo Baeza on his new house in Santa Fe. 'Bill has a great sense of style and luxury, but mixed with modernism. He has a streamlined, clean sensibility,' he enthuses. 'It's hard to be modern and luxurious at the same time but Bill manages to pull it off.'

Though Sofield denies having a signature style, he has a look that is uniquely his own, which springs from his fantastical ability to draw ideas from disparate sources and morph offbeat materials into design statements. A sturdy end-grain wooden warehouse floor appears elegantly in the restaurant of the SoHo Grand. A cymbal from a friend's drum kit pops up as a lampshade at Las Vegas' Hard Rock Hotel and Casino. 'OK, there is some consistency there,' Sofield concedes. 'But at the same time other projects of mine make the Hempel look baroque. I can do things that are dead minimal and others that are layered.'

Sofield's recently completed space for his new firm, Studio Sofield, combines industrial elements with works by architectural icons – and a few cultural ones. The infamous Herb Ritts bus poster of Madonna (one of only two in existence) towers over drafting tables. A blow-up of a Day-Glo Jodie Foster on the cover of *Interview* magazine is propped next to a 1957 yellow Egg chair by Arne Jacobsen. Beyond the whimsical touches the studio is sleek (galvanized steel door frames, putty-coloured walls, refinished maple floors) grey-on-grey, save for a lime-green waiting room.





TURNING THE TABLE: The conference area of Sofield's office is a mix of styles: rug by Vasarely, console by Frank Lloyd Wright, table, flea-market find

In Sofield's office the fusion is just as graceful. An 1890s A.H. Davenport partners desk and a pair of 20s pony hair-covered club chairs rest on an op-art Vasarely rug Sofield bought from Tom Ford. Serge Mouille lights hang on the wall above a Frank Lloyd Wright console, graced with a wooden Charles Eames splint and the much-coveted prototype for Sofield's tusk table legs. And while there are shelves of books on architecture, crafts and design, the most prominent is a paperback copy of the *Absolutely Fabulous* scripts tossed atop a Lloyd Wright end table. Blending divergent styles is part of his world. 'I was a pervert from the start,' he says, grinning.

Recently Sofield rediscovered some early influences at the Museum of Natural History, where he spent a lot of time on school day-trips. 'When I walked into the minerals display and then went through the pre-Columbian exhibit I realized how much of my design aesthetic was formed here. I was so flipped out,' he says. Sofield also found inspiration on New York's seedy Canal Street, where flea market vendors used to rent stalls above industrial supply shops on weekends. While at the Whitney Museum (after graduating from Princeton University with a degree in architecture and urban planning,) he would spend time nosing around the area. 'Maybe that had its effect ten years later: I try to look at high and low all the time.' His biggest influence, architect Eileen Gray, did the same. 'Her interiors juxtaposed the plain and simple with the incredible,' Sofield says. 'You see a rug with a nap that is four inches thick against something metal and sparse.'

You might expect a heavy-duty attitude from someone who hung out with Andy Warhol and Halston in high school ('Halston made me an omelette one night and I thought it was very glamorous,') cut his teeth at chic clubs like Studio 54 ('I wouldn't give up my evenings in the Mudd Club for anything in the world,') designs houses for the likes of Ralph Lauren and counts photographer Nan Goldin, novelist A.M. Homes and *Mirabella* magazine editor Amy Gross among his best friends. In fact Sofield is witty and warm, with a boisterous, almost goofy laugh and an outrageous sense of humour which pervades even his personal stationery. He has two sets, each engraved with one of his shoulder tattoos, an anchor and a banner.

Though some of his celebrated creations are clean and sometimes austere, he's a self-confessed slob. 'I have piles of Dr. Seuss books all over my apartment. For me out of sight means out of mind. I have to see everything or it doesn't exist,' he says.

His good nature spreads to his studio, where he has assembled a fifteen-person team that works collectively. 'We figure out what people can contribute, instead of the big boss saying, "If this drawing's not in by 5 o'clock..."' He also doesn't hire on technique alone. 'I hire based on personality. Anyone can learn technique. You can't learn personality.'

And in his free time he takes on charity projects and teaches undergraduate classes at Parsons School of Design. 'It's my deposit to the world karma bank,' he quips.

Obviously, those donations are paying off with interest. *

'Halston made me an omelette one night and I thought it was very glamorous'

Bill Sofield on...

* **gucci** 'I don't really love clothes, but I adore Gucci. It's like when you find something in a thrift shop and respond to it on the most immediate, physical level, no matter what the context. Of course I'm now responsible for the context of Gucci. Independent of what I'm going to do, I find wearing the clothes such a sensuous experience.'

* **hotels** 'Many of my dreams take place in hotels. They're fantasy spaces. There's something about occupying a space for a certain amount of time. It allows you to explore an alternate way of living so that you can make sure you like the one you have.'

* **eyeglasses** 'I'm so nearsighted I can see the atoms in a piece of paper. I've been wearing Persol forever. Everybody keeps saying "when are you going to get rid of those horrible glasses?" They're big and they're fun and they're great. It didn't start out as a statement. Whenever I want to be in disguise, I jump in a cab and take off my glasses.'

* **beanbag chairs** 'Five years ago I did great beanbag chairs in suede. But unless you're a pot smoker they're too close to the ground. I like to be higher up. I think the platform beanbag is the future.'

* **must-haves** 'Wedgwood basaltware, silver by Christopher Dresser, molded Plexiglas, early Tiffany metal and glass, especially items that refer to Japanese design.'

* **the future** 'I have this great image of an advert from the 50s with a woman in her living room that is tiled and has vinyl on all the furniture. The home of the future would be a shower stall: the draperies and the house plants and everything would be plastic. You wouldn't vacuum it, you'd hose it down. I don't think we have that same sense of optimism anymore.'