Mario Buatta

GREEN:  (inaudible) your voice. You’re the important one.

BUATTA:  Is it loud enough, though? OK. Hello? OK. It’s going right to the red line.

GREEN:  This is for the Fashion Institute of Technology archives in oral history on the distinguished designer Mario Buatta. It is spring 1987. The way we start these things, Mario, is with the vital statistics, so that we know, you know, where you were born, and who your parents were, and so forth. So will you start on all that for me?

BUATTA:  Yes, Robert. It’s nice to be here today in your studio. It really is a mess, isn’t it? Actually, Robert is in my studio, which is a nightmare. It sort of looks like Collyer’s other brother, or Ms. Havisham’s retreat.

GREEN:  [00:01:00] Excepting that it’s strangely marvelously organized, which may be a tip-off to your talent.

BUATTA:  Well, it’s called organized clutter. I don’t know about the talent, but it’s called organized clutter. It’s the only way that I can work. Otherwise, I go absolutely out of my mind because I can’t find anything.

GREEN:  But you know where everything is --

BUATTA:  I know exactly where everything is. I can put my hand on anything you want to know about. If there’s anything
I’m looking for, I know exactly where it is. I can put my hand right in the stack, and pull it right out.

GREEN: How long has it been as cluttered like this?

BUATTA: Most of my life. I think it’s because I was brought up in a very clean, sort of sterile, you know, art deco house that was just boring beyond belief. I mean, there wasn’t a fleck of dust anyplace. There wasn’t anything that was out of place. Everything was always organized, and nothing was ever used. It was fascinating.

GREEN: Where was this?

BUATTA: In Staten Island. My parents... I was born actually in New York, in Tudor City. And my dad was in show business. At that point, he was [Rooty Valley?]. He was the violinist with Rooty Valley. And then they went to California for three years, and lived in Hollywood, where they made [00:02:00] pictures with Alice Faye and everybody else you can think of. And then they came back to New York for a number of years. And they built a house on Staten Island, where most of my family is. And my dad continued to travel and stay in New York or whatever. And then in 1940, he retired and he started his own orchestra. And he used to be at the Savoy Plaza in New York, which is Fifty-ninth Street, where the General Motors building is now. And he played here, and he played for the Westchester
Country Club in the summertime, and here in the winter. And that was about it. And then he retired, about 25 years ago. And he opened up a piano shop, and I got involved in all the, you know, selling records and music and all that sort of thing for about four or five years. And then I quit, deciding it was better to do my own thing. And I had a great interest in architecture. My uncle was an architect, and he died when I was five. And it was my grandfather’s sort of dream to have his new grandson an architect, having lost his son [00:03:00] at an early age of 33. And so I started playing with all the sort of instruments, and thinking it would be sort of fun. And I didn’t know what I was doing, but I mean, I was always interested in houses. And having been brought up in a house that was very contemporary in those days, I think it was sort of, you know, art modern, art deco, that period, with sort of Hollywood overtones, if you know what I mean. You know, sort of typical of the way things looked in the films.

GREEN: What do you mean?

BUATTA: Well, everything was white. I remember the carpets, and some of them... My bedroom had a Mondrian carpet. You had a living room, had plush sort of fabric on chairs and sofas, piped in different colors. And it was all brown and
white and [chartres?] and sort of rust. I remember we had rust carpeting in the living room. And the curtains were fanned out on the floor. I remember you couldn’t go near the windows. You could never look out a window. You could step on the curtains. You couldn’t walk on the carpet. You’d make footprints. Couldn’t sit on the furniture. You’d make other prints. You couldn’t touch the tables. You’d make fingerprints, you know. It was a totally unlivable house. I mean --

GREEN: That’s terribly interesting, when you think that one of the crises in American culture at the moment is the so-called tyranny of the decorator. You know, the business of clients who become so tyrannized by their decorators they don’t dare move the ashtray, or don’t dare change anything.

BUATTA: Well, this was tyrannized by my mother. I mean, she wouldn’t allow us to do anything. I mean, you could barely walk in the living room, for example. You couldn’t walk into it. You’d make a mess. And she was always checking for fingerprints. She was sort of worse than Harriet Craig. You remember Craig’s wife.

GREEN: Of course. You realize you’re continuing the process. One can hardly walk into this apartment.

BUATTA: No, but that’s not the point. I’m not continuing (inaudible, phone rings). Hello? No, I think my problem
is that I live and work in the same place. And my problem is that there are things, furnishings, merchandise, whatever you want to call it, coming and going all the time. And a lot of it is waiting to go into these jobs, or else they’re things I bought three or four of because I happen to like them. And I used one on a job, and I bought three or four extra ones. And unfortunately at the moment, I’m out of warehouse space. But basically, I don’t live like this all the time. But I am a collector by nature. Ever since I was very young, I started, you know, I was collecting all kinds of things.

GREEN: Do you think this is sort of protest from your early background?

BUATTA: Oh, I think so, yeah.

GREEN: Because one gets that feeling as you’re talking.

BUATTA: My bedroom was, I think everything about our lives was that way. I think that basically, we tend to sort of rebel. I mean, you see youngsters today who are rebelling their parents, and their parents are my generation. And you’re sort of thinking, “My goodness. What is this all about?” But it’s true. And you think back to the, you know, fifties and sixties and what it was all about.

GREEN: When were you born?
BUATTA: Nineteen hundred and thirty-five. So that, and this is 1981. No, this is 1987. So I am 28 years old.

GREEN: Exactly. And you look 27.

BUATTA: No, I was born in 1935, and I’m 51 years old. And I remember when I left home when I was 23 years old, that I had more things in the house that my parents did. I mean, I collected so many things. My own room started to look like an antique shop at that point. But it started when I was 11. I started buying things. I was fascinated by things that were old and things that belonged to other people. Because everything in our house was new. Everything had been bought brand new. My father didn’t like old things. He thought of them as being second hand. And there are a lot of people like that, who think of old things as second hand. They don’t want somebody else’s junk, you know. And basically, when we furnish rooms today with old things, we’re borrowing things from the past and putting them together to make them look as though those people lived that way. And we give them a sort of heritage that a lot of them don’t have and have never had. But they sort of having a feeling for them, and they appreciate it. And it’s that appreciation and putting those things together the way you put them together that makes it your own. And it (inaudible) you from somebody else.
GREEN: Yeah, and I think that people who don’t have defined roots or roots that they can be proud of --

BUATTA: Well, a lot of us don’t. That’s the sad part of it. I mean, a lot of clients come to you today with the sort of nouveau riche man or woman or couple. And they have, everything that they’ve left behind there, they’re ashamed of. They don’t want to be reminded of their poverty, then when they didn’t have what they have today. And what they have today, unfortunately they don’t understand. They don’t understand how to live with it. They need the direction. And it’s very easy to say to somebody, “Well, this is what you should have.” And I find it fascinating with people who have not had a background, who want to be told what to do, I find it very difficult to tell them what they should do. I have a very difficult time with that, because I don’t think they’re being fair to themselves. They’re not being very honest about themselves. And if they’re not honest, how can they possibly live with what they’re living with? I mean, why give a man or a woman who wear dungarees all day, why give them a satin drawing room or living room, or anything, you know, a room that’s filled with satins and brocades? It doesn’t make any sense. Or filled with antiques that really have no relation to what
they’re all about. [00:08:00] It’s a very strange line
that sort of, you know, divides that --

GREEN: Well, what do you do about it?

BUATTA: Well, I think fortunately, I think you get to a point
in your life when you’re in this business, and you have to
decide, are you going to expand or are you not? And if you
expand, it means taking in practically every job that walks
in the door. And if you don’t expand, and you work on your
own, then you work for people that you can relate to, and
relate to you, and come to you because they like what you
do. Not because they’ve seen your name someplace and think
they should hire you, or a status symbol. It doesn’t work.
I mean, it just doesn’t work. Because you can be a
supply... I mean, I know lots of decorators who fill
houses with merchandise. They merchandise a house. They
can bring in tons of stuff. The client doesn’t know what
it’s all about. She hasn’t got a clue. She just looks at
it all and says, “Well, the decorator said I should have
this.” You know, is that a way to live? I live with
things that I like, because I love them. And I have a lot
of my clients are the same, or they’re people who are
willing to learn. They want to be [00:09:00] educated.
They want to know what it’s all about. Why would they have
a chair like this? Why would they have a sofa like that?
Why would they have a cabinet like this? And they appreciate it and love it and it means something to them.

GREEN: If you had a client, as you described, whose background, whose position currently was one that was essentially anachronistic to quality decoration, but you did have the feeling that, as you just expressed, that they had a desire to learn, how would you go about helping them learn?

BUATTA: Well, I think first of all, looking at the space that they’re going to live in. Decide what the space is going to be used for. Looking at the space. Looking over their house, their apartment, figuring out how they wanted to live there. And then working with what they have, if they have anything, first of all. I’m being slow on this thing. I’m sorry. I was trying to think of a certain client, and it didn’t work. But in figuring out what their space is like, [00:10:00] and figuring out what they have to work with, and then how the space is going to be used in the future and how they want to live, you make certain suggestions. And the first thing, obviously, one does with a space, or I do, is make architectural changes, so that the bones of the room become as right as you can get them. Then I do floor plans. And I sit down them with them, which a lot of decorators don’t do, or designers don’t do.
I sit down with the client, with a floor plan. Get some yellow tissue paper over the white plans, and I say, “You can have this arrangement, which I see in my head immediately. And I think that’s the one I think I would do if I lived in that room.” Then you do maybe two or three other arrangements, until they find something that they’re happy with. And usually, they come around to liking the one you like, because they see all the alternatives. And they see that this doesn’t work because, that doesn’t work because... But they might have two really good alternatives. And they have to decide themselves which, then, they want. And then I place on that plan all the upholstery pieces, so that we do groups. Like say, for example, we work in a living room, or a library, where you might have one or two groupings. So we’ll plan the large pieces of upholstery, the sofa, and then the chairs, and then tables. And then figure out, you know, I like to think about sofas talking to chairs, and chairs talking to sofas. So that all at once, these arrangements are comfortable. So that you don’t have to walk into a room and start pushing furniture around in order to make a happy, pleasant grouping, you know. Or seating arrangement. There’s nothing more awkward than walking into a room and finding that there’s no place to sit, and
you have to pull a chair in. And you sort of feel, “Gee, should I touch that, or shouldn’t I?” Or whatever. It should be comfortable all at once, so that all of that works. And then I put in the case pieces, you know, the wood pieces. The tables, cabinets, anything that’s important in that respect. And pull all that together. And then eventually, we do a color scheme, and we do a fabric scheme. And then we find a carpet, etc., etc. And let it all fall into place. I never think about whether they have a painting that’s going to match the walls, or the walls are going to... Unless they have something really important. Like if they had a Morris Louis picture, you might want to be sure, if it’s going to cover a whole wall. But I mean, little tiny, you know the small pictures, the paintings [00:12:00] don’t make any sense. I mean, they all fit into your life, and they should fit in your place. As long as you like them, they should look right.

GREEN: But you still haven’t answered the question that I asked, which is really not so much how you design the room, though I’m terribly interested in that as well. But picking up something that you said, that you resist doing work for a client who has no awareness or understanding of why it is that the room is being put together as it is. As
you said, the person who lives in jeans should not have a satin living room.

BUATTA:  Oh yeah. Yeah.

GREEN:   My concern is this, that part of the growth of people, in terms of their financial success, is that, OK. They reached the stage, whatever their motivation is, they found you, you know. And they respect that you have quality and you have talent, and therefore they now can afford you, and they are willing to pay for it. Let’s assume that you also get a feeling as you know them, as you work with them, that they are people who have some intellectual curiosity, that [00:13:00] they would like to fit into the room that you’re designing for them. They’d like to know more about it. My interest is, what can you, both as a decorator and as a human being, do to help them develop some knowledge? You certainly don’t have time to give them courses in taste, as it were.

BUATTA: Oh, I see. No, there’s no question. You don’t have the time to do that. But you have the time to take them around and show them the difference between A, B, and C, and why they should have this, and why they should have the other thing. And that’s part of the education. And the education also is living with things. Trying them out, sending them in to try them. They live with these things
for a few days, or a week or two, however long time you can get them away from a dealer, you know, that you can borrow them. And they get an idea of whether they’d like living with that or not. And I always tell them, “If you’re moving in and you’re not sure about things, let’s paint it all white, and we’ll do the color later. And let’s plan all the furniture. I had a client call this morning. And she’s typical of the situation, where she came out of a house with a lot of furniture, [00:14:00] moved into a smaller apartment, and didn’t know what to do with it. And I said, “Take it all with you. We’ll play with it when we get there. See what looks best. And then we’ll pull out what isn’t right.” And she called this morning. She said, “You know, it’s been there for two weeks.” And I said, “Are you sure you want to [settle?] on that? Because I’ve redone that room now four times, and you’re still not happy with it.” And she said, “Well no, now I think we’re going to cement it. This is going to be it.” And it’s made her happy to know that she didn’t... Because she was ahead of the game. She wasn’t behind. She had all the things, and she could pick and choose. It was a great sort of extravagance to be able to do that. A lot of people don’t have it. So you have to bring things in and show them how they’re going to look. And in that case, you have a
situation where it takes a lot of time. And unless they really are sure of who they are and know what they’re all about, they have no idea. And you could talk until you’re blue in the face, and they’re never going to get the point. So they have to be able to live with them. Once they do that, they get an idea. So it’s a lot easier.

GREEN: You expose them to books, or museums, or...?

BUATTA: Oh, no. I take them shopping. We go to antique shops. I show them photographs [00:15:00] in books or magazines. But I don’t let them do a lot of work on their own, because they can get totally confused. I mean, I get confused. You walk into the D&D building, and you see all those fabrics, and you can go, you know, pretty much out of your mind. I can’t pick one for myself that I really like more than, you know, 2000, 3000 others. It doesn’t make any sense. So that what you’ve got to do is you’ve got to say, for example, my office, as you see, is filled with many, many samples. And oftentimes, I’m tempted to throw a lot of them away. But I think that it’s better to have a lot of samples, so that when I put my hand on the wall and say, “I think this would be perfect for you,” they say, “Gee, that guy knows what he’s doing. Because he picked out the right fabric out of all those samples.” If I had 20 samples on the wall, and I picked out one, they’d say,
“Gee, aren’t there more? Couldn’t we go to see more things?” But this way, they see so much that they get confused. And they get tired. You know, they just think, “Oh my God.” The reason I’ve hired you in the first place is because they A can’t do it themselves, or B, they can and don’t have the time, and want you to do it. And they can afford to pay you to do it. And C, they’re not paying us anymore than they’d pay if they went to Bloomingdale’s and bought it, you know, through a salesman. But the point being that eventually, they start to develop a sort of taste for what you’re doing, and a feel for what’s happening. And I had one client a few years ago, about five or six years ago, a young couple. And she liked old things, and he liked new things. And they lived in a contemporary apartment. And I got working with them. And she said, “I really want our house to look a little bit older, sort of like it’s been there for a while.” We started bringing more things in. And each time her husband would come home, he’d look around. She’d say, “You notice anything different?” He’d say, “No.” And then he’d say, “Oh, I see that table is new.” And you know, after the apartment, which was somewhat, I say completed. Nothing is ever completed in our lifetime, you know. Decorating an apartment or houses is an ongoing thing. But he walked in,
and when he came to do the interview for Architectural Digest, he told the reporter, he said, “When I first married my wife, I used to look into her eyes, and I’d see love and romance.” He said, “Now I look in her eyes, and I see antiques [00:17:00] dancing.” He said, “It’s always, Can we have this? Can we have that?” And he said, “I don’t know where it all goes,” he said, “but it’s all here.” And he said, just, you know, “We always find a place for all these things that you love.” And he’s grown to love it, and that’s the important thing. And a lot of husbands, you know, will go on about these things. And they’ll say, “Well, I don’t want this. I don’t want.” They don’t want to know about anything. But when it’s finished, they take all the credit for it. They say, “Isn’t our apartment wonderful?” Although all the time, they rebelled that they didn’t like doing this or they didn’t like doing that, or why do we have to do X, Y, or Z. But when their friends say, “Gee, this is great,” they suddenly take all the credit. And they say, “Gee, you like it, huh? Well, yeah, we just did it.” It’s funny.

GREEN: I suppose that a conflict that exists between the husband and wife, or two men or two women, or two people who are sharing a space, could determine what direction
decoration would take. So that part of the skill, it seems to me, is that you have to be somewhat of a diplomat.

BUATTA: Well, you do. You have to be part psychiatrist, part lawyer, part actor, part everything, just to sort of make everything happen. And I say a psychiatrist, lawyer, and doctor, did I say doctor? [phone rings] What were we just saying?

GREEN: I’d asked about...

BUATTA: No no, I was just saying something. Oh, doctor. You have to be part psychiatrist, because you have to be able to know what they’re all about, and study. You’ve already, people all come in little shapes and sizes, and you put them in little pockets. Everybody isn’t the same, but you basically, you know what you’re dealing with when you’re dealing with it. I mean, you get a client who’s come here from, you know Brooklyn, who went to Great Neck, who went to Fifth Avenue. And that person, you know, the more money they make, the more unhappy they’re going to be. Because they’re never going to be able to have or expect to have, or know when they [00:19:00] have it. They don’t know when they have it. They don’t know when the room is good, when the room is bad. They just have more money than taste, more money than anything, more money than knowledge. And so you’ve got to sort of get into their psyche and figure
out what they’re all about. Then you’ve got to be a lawyer, because, well, the lawyer comes later. That’s when the bill comes. And you have to sort of settle the bill, and figure out when you should bill them, when is the right date to send the bill. When they’re in a good mood, and they like the job. If they didn’t like the job, don’t send the bill. They’ll be miserable. And you’ve got think about being an actor, because you’re constantly, you know, sort of saying, “This is going to be terrific. That’s going to be great.” You’ve got to make them feel good. You know. So you’re basically, constantly, you’re sort of, you know, doing all three things. You’re juggling, you know, and trying to work into their sort of mind what it’s all about.

GREEN: How do you marry the lifestyle of somebody whose world is so entirely different than the quality of the things that you bring into the room? How do you marry that to the judgment as to how they’re going to use the room?

BUATTA: It’s a very difficult thing, and that’s part of the thing that, when you’re doing a job with a client who isn’t aware, doesn’t have the feeling, and just has money and has nothing else. To me, I find it a very difficult thing to do, because I find it sad. It’s sad in a way, because they don’t know what it’s all about. And
secondly, it’s kind of a waste. They don’t know what they’re doing. They really don’t appreciate it. They don’t enjoy it as much. They just know that everything has a label, and everything has a price tag, and their friends are going to be impressed. And I try not to work for people like that, if I can help it. I try to work for people who have an understanding about all that.

GREEN: Who’s the ideal client?

BUATTA: Me. No. That’s a very difficult question. The ideal client is not the one that gives you carte blanche. It’s the one who has a very keen idea about what you’re all about and what your make-up is all about. And likes what you do, and appreciates it, and wants you to do your best for them. And accepts, you know, what you do. [00:21:00] They have a feeling that whatever you’re doing is the right thing, and they’re going to like it. And if you say it’s right, and you would have it for yourself, they like it. The ideal client is the one who comes in and wants your own apartment. I mean, they’re very easy. That’s typical. That’s the kind of person I’m talking about. And they come to you because they appreciate you for what you are. And they know that their house is going to look like them, that it’s not going to be your house, but there’s going to be a
great amount of you in it. You know, which is what makes them comfortable.

GREEN: What do you think they really think the decorator is?  
BUATT: Well the decorator, basically, is just a person who, between the man who sells it to you and getting it into your house. I mean, I think a lot of them, unfortunately, you know, think of us as being IBM machines, where you just press buttons and computers. You know, we just sort of, you know, everything just sort of pops out of our heads. They don’t realize that all this has to come to you over a period of time. It just doesn’t happen. And that things have to be fairly well-thought out. And it’s through experience and years and years of training that [00:22:00] this all seems to sort of work best.

GREEN: Because it seems to me there’s almost a pattern of people who hire a decorator. The work progresses. Eventually it’s finished. And they go from, “Please help me. I don’t know what to do with this space,” to the next plateau, which seems to be, “We’re having a wonderful time pulling this together,” to the next plateau, which is, “Oh, yes. Of course Mr. Buatta was my decorator. Yes, well actually, what he really did was to get me in to get the wholesale fabrics,” and so forth and so on. I’m seeing this time and time again with decorator friends. And even
with people of quality and people of background and people of professional status and education, and you look at them in absolute amazement, you know, when you take them through their new house and simply say, “Well, I really did it.” You know. And you think, What is that? Is that something that you’ve experienced?

BUATTA: Yeah, I think that happens a lot. I’m not [00:23:00] there when they say it, unfortunately, but I think a lot of them do that. And I think they take credit for it. And I think it has to do with the fact that they’re embarrassed, because a lot of people, a lot of Europeans especially, don’t use a designer. They know what they want, and they just call a craftsman in and tell him to do this, that, or the other thing. And they give him the job. But here, so many people, New York being such a melting pot. America but New York especially being a melting pot of people who come from all walks of life and are trying to impress most of their friends with whatever they have. They’re embarrassed, and they want to take credit. They want to be given the credit for it. And there are a lot of women like that, that never give a decorator credit. Never. They never say, you know, so and so did whatever. And you find that you never get any jobs from that particular client. You wonder why, but it’s because they’ve never... And then
they’ll say to you, “Oh, we had a party last night, and everybody raved about your room.” But she didn’t say that it was Mario that did the room. She’d say that she did it, you know. But that’s an insecurity, too. It’s part insecurity. A lot of insecurity.

GREEN:  It has to be thought of as part of the territory for the decorator. You know, that a certain percentage of the clients --

BUATTIA:  Yeah, it’s part of the business. And I think there are a lot of people who do want you to be in the background. And I respect that. I mean, I don’t have that (inaudible). As long as they pay the bills and they’re happy, that’s the most important thing. We’re kind of that, as I said, that liaison between the manufacturer and the client, you know, the customer. And it’s for us to sort of help them buy it, because they don’t have entry into a lot of places. So we show them a lot of things that they normally wouldn’t get to see, things that aren’t available to the general public. And so they’re able to have a lot of these things. On the other hand, it’s the way we put them together that makes them look the way they look. I mean, every designer has his or her own way of putting things together. And you can give the same designer 10 objects, and I bet every one of those rooms
would come out different. Every one of those spaces would be different. Nobody would see it the same way. None of us would, you know. And that’s the good thing about it.

GREEN: Let’s go back, because we jumped into [00:25:00] your position at the present time, and part of the function of an oral history is to see how you got to where you are. OK. You were in the new house in Staten Island, and you were reacting to --

BUATTA: Well, I was only five years old when the house was built.

GREEN: You grow up in that environment. Did you have siblings?

BUATTA: I had a brother who’s five years younger. He was born the year the house was built. And he never really was interested in decoration or anything of the sort. He’s very much like my father, sort of as most men are, blind to the sort of [home?] where they’re living. They don’t think about it. But I spent a great deal of time at my aunt’s. I had an aunt, my mother’s sister, who was a very creative woman. And she was forever decorating. I mean, it was a constant kind of a thing, every year in and year out. You know. And she lived in the same style house that we lived in. We lived in an English style typical, you know, English suburban, you know, Tudor house. And [00:26:00]
her house was filled with things that were English. And she had a decorator. Actually Sloane’s. And I used to go shopping with her all the time. And so I learned a great deal about things that were English. And my feeling for her house, and for other friends whose houses I’d seen, was that I’d prefer the sort of coziness of an English house. And the things that I liked mostly about them were the fact that they were mixed up with objects and furnishings from all over. And that the English lived, which I learned much later when I was first in England, as a student with Parsons School. As a student later on, with Stanley Barrows, that the English houses, and most European houses, were filled with things that they’d collected for many, many years. And the houses had been lived in by maybe seven or eight generations, and filled with objects and collections from all those times. Whereas in America, the average person moves maybe seven or eight times. So they leave [00:27:00] a lot behind, or they forget about it, and they don’t, you know, really have a lot to say. And their houses are kind of blah. Sort of of the current decorating style, which my aunt was a great deal of that. Because although she was always antiquing, or not that many things in the house that belonged to our family, because our family was fairly new in this country. My grandfather was
born in Italy. And although their house was furnished in a traditional way and it was a typical colonial [center hole?] house, when they died, my aunt grabbed up all the best stuff. My mother didn’t want any of it, because she didn’t like the idea of having anything old. And my other aunts and uncles, you know, took whatever was left. So that I was forever with this modern thing, that I was living with this contemporary. So I spent a great deal of time with her. And I used to go shopping with her. And I started collecting when I was 11 years old, and I bought a little lap box that was a Sheridan eighteenth century box for $12. Fifty cents a week on a layaway plan. And I brought it home. And my father said, “What are you going to do with that?” And I said, “I’m going to take it to my room.” And he said, “Oh no, you’re not.” He said, “It’s going to the [00:28:00] garage.” He said, “It’s full of vermin.” And I said, “Vermin?” And he said, “Yeah. You don’t know where that thing has been. You’ve got to spray it.” He said, “It might have bugs or, you know, mice in it.” This little tiny thing, about 12 by 18 by six inches high. But it was filled with all these compartments, and I was fascinated with this sort of sense of a history and the mystery of what it was all about. And who had used it, and all [the blah?] and everything. It was incredible, a
wonderful box. And then I started collecting blue and white delft, all sort of botanical plates, and early American cheese boxes, and all kinds of things. Kerosene lamps, and I had them hanging in my bedroom. My room started to look like a real antique shop. It was funny. And when I was 16, I had a chance to redecorate it. Up until that time, it had had a Mondrian design carpet in browns and tans. And I had a fake fireplace, which was really something else. Would you like a fake fireplace in your bedroom? And maple furniture. You know, typical boys room. Pale blue walls, [00:29:00] cold, icy. It was awful. And so I decided, when the painter was there, I wanted to have it painted dark brown. And he looked at me like I was absolutely crazy. And my mother thought I was, too. And she said, “Why do you want that?” And I said, “I like the inside of being in a barn.” I said, “I want the room to look dark, and I have all this light furniture.” I had to live with my maple furniture. I couldn’t give it up. And I collected, I remember I had a cherry table I used as a desk, and my student lamp on that. We did green, dark green, hunter green, wall-to-wall carpeting, and the dark brown walls. And the inside of my closet was painted red, which really got my mother. She didn’t understand that at all. But I had a red interior of
the closet. And she had curtains made up for me, of green and red and brown plaid. I remember the corduroy plaid, in those days, cafe curtains on brass rugs. You know, the tops were plaid, and the bottoms were red. And the bedspreads were made of the same thing. But anyway, I camouflaged everything. I brought more and more stuff in. It just got to be a joke. And what I couldn’t fit into my room, I put in the attic [00:30:00] or the basement. Eventually, by the time I was 23, I had more furniture stored in our house than they had in their whole house. It was sort of crazy. But it was a feeling that I had always had for old things. And I was just always fascinated with them. And I used to invest all my allowance. Rather than going out on a date on Saturday night, I’d say, “Oh, I can buy an antique with that.” You know. It sounds sort of nutty, but that’s what I did. And I did. I really enjoyed it. I loved it. I still get a great joy out of things that are old, and the fact that no matter whether they’re 10, or 50 years, or 100 years, whatever it’s just something about them. And if I like them...

GREEN: Did you have any friends at that time that shared your hobbies at work?

BUATTA: No, I was always sort of made fun of by a lot of friends who thought I was kind of weird, that I liked to go
window shopping in antique shops and look at all... Go to museums and do sort of odd things like that. They always thought it was kind of funny. But I thought it was kind of funny the things they did. Sort of... [00:31:00] You know, I think all children, I think the fact that we all have different interests and come from the same sort of area doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that... I mean, you can come out of the mold, so to speak, living in a neighborhood where everybody’s the same. And there are a lot of kids like that that I went to school with that, to this day, are the same as they were when they were young. But there are many of them that have gone into other things, which has fascinated me. And I didn’t know they had it in their heads to do that. And I don’t think they knew I had it in my head to do what I’m doing.

GREEN: Was there anybody in the school system that respected the kind of person you were?

BUATTA: Oh, I wasn’t strange in that respect. I mean, I wasn’t a, you know, a weird kid. But my hobby sort of was to go out collecting, and go antiquing. And I would do that all the time. It was sort of fun. Because I remember Melvin Dwork was the guest of a friend of mine on Staten Island once when I was about, oh I must have been 18 or 20 or so. And we were talking about the [00:32:00] antique
shops. And he’d come out for the weekend. And he said, “You call those antique shops?” Well they were kind of, you know, sort of shops that were kind of, you know, an older woman who’s absolutely charming and wonderful, she looked like Shirley Booth. And she used to go out and buy it from people’s attics, you know. And she brought, sometimes, you know. I bought a pair of eighteenth century [delft jars?] from her that you’d find on Madison Avenue today for, you know, a hundred times what I’d pay for them. But times have changed, certainly. But even in those days, it was a bargain, because she didn’t know what she was selling. I’d said to her, “What are these?” She said, “Well, they’re a pair of jars.” I said, “But they’re not a pair. They both have the seams are going the same way.” They were part of a delft grouping of a, you know, mantelpiece decoration. There were five of them. What do you call that? I can’t think of what you call that. Slipped my mind. But in any case, it was funny because she had no idea what she was selling. And I had no idea what I was buying, but I knew I liked it. There was something about it, that I was attracted to the quality of it, or whatever. And if something had a chip, she’d say, [00:33:00] “Well, you can have that for less money.” And if you’d see a frame with a picture in it, you’d buy it
for, you know, five dollars. But if it didn’t have the picture, you said you were going to put a mirror in it, she’d sell it to you for $25. I mean, it was sort of like, it didn’t make any sense. But I mean, that was the mentality of this woman. And I learned a great deal from her. And there were other shops. And then as I got older and was able to come to New York, I learned a lot more. But going with my aunt shopping all those years, I learned a great deal about furniture. And it was the first time I remember going out and seeing a Chippendale chair with that sort of leg, and, you know, the club on, and clawed foot. And you know, she had all kinds of wonderful things in her house. She had summer chintzes, winter chintzes. You know, she had slipcovers. And she had all these always changing, always doing something. Wonderful [Dakota?] valance, I remember, in the dining room, sort of looked like a crown.

GREEN: Were you exposed to a lot of chintzes (inaudible)?

BUATTA: Yes, I was. Yeah. Yeah, she had a black background chintz with flowers -- I’ll never forget it -- in her living room, and in the summertime, it was all slipcover with the white chintz with flowers. And I remember, you know, the stripes and the plaids and [00:34:00] all the different textures. I mean, it just so... I remember, she
had two lounge chairs in front of the fireplace, and each of them, they were covered in stripes in the wintertime. Or the summertime. And I just remember that, you know, how the changes were. In fact, when she did her room over in 1957, she did it over in sort of typical [Auntie May?] Japanese style, with the low-slung bunkette wrapped around a corner, and shows you screens and all these doors. I mean, it was just a nightmare. I mean, I thought this decorator had really gone out of his mind. But it was her. She just liked change, you know. And she still had retained a lot of her sort of oriental furnishings that she had that worked very well with English furniture. But she got rid of all the English furniture, and I got it all put in the back of my car and took it home. And I had these huge valances. I remember we couldn’t even get it into our attic, because there were so many turns to get it upstairs. And I had this, I was crying because I couldn’t keep it. It was so funny. It’s just a piece of wood, you know. But I just loved it. In fact, my brother has the house down at, it’s still in the attic. [00:35:00] Not that one, but another one. One that I did lift up and we had to take through the window. It was very funny. But it was a humpback settee that I was determined to have, and I finally got that in. I hooked up like three or four.. But
it’s so funny. You see, you hold onto these things. I think it’s just by nature the way we are, that a lot of us want to hold onto old things. Some don’t care. And I find it’s funny that people go, this pendulum sort of swings back and forth. And I find so many people that were brought up in houses that were filled with wonderful things, when their parents died, they just either sold it or gave it away. They didn’t want any part of it. And they lived in modern houses. And now, little by little, these old things are creeping back into their lives. They’re buying all... And they really love the idea of living in a traditional way. And I think today, we’re going through this in the late eighties. We’re going through a whole revival of people wanting to live in traditional houses and fill it with things that are sort of, you know...

GREEN: Well, there’s something extraordinarily comforting about things that have lasted for a long time. It reassures people that there is a continuum and, I suspect, that they do feel themselves that if they have those things, that perhaps they’ll continue along with them than they might otherwise.

BUATTA: I think they also got tired of the sort of glass and steel and chrome sort of thing of... These things don’t
age terribly well. Plastics don’t age well. As they get older, the patina is not exactly what you’d call a rewarding one. It’s one that looks as though it’s had lots of wear and tear. And the scratches show, and the dents show. And the studs really don’t look like anything much. Whereas, with an old wooden table that has stains on it and dents and scratches, a little polish and it looks terrific, you know. And it has character. It’s like a face. The older the face gets, the more character you get. You know.

GREEN: Thank God.

BUATTA: Thank goodness. Exactly, yeah. We all need a little character.

GREEN: What was the schooling part of the professional relationship?

BUATTA: For myself? Basically, a lot of it was self-taught. It was just keeping my eyes open, and always going to people’s houses, and rearranging furniture in my brain. And I remember coming home from [00:37:00] various, I say WASP sort of friends, because they were. And I’d come home and I’d say to my mother, “Why doesn’t our house look like this?” You know, “Why is our living room dead?” I used to call it the dead room. And I said, “Why don’t we have newspapers around it?” She said, “What do you want?” “Well, why don’t you have some newspapers or magazines
around, some plants, and just things. Growing and things happening, you know. Chairs looking as though they were just sat in.” She said, “Oh no no no no no.” She was always expecting guests. And I said, “Who wants to come to your house? They’re afraid to walk in the door. They’re afraid to sit on anything or touch anything.” It was true. It really was true. To live that way, it’s a terrible thing.

GREEN: Some of that was cultural, because people regarded the living room as something that you used for parties and funerals.

BUATTA: Oh yeah, yeah. That’s a great part of it. But my aunt’s house was always used. The rooms were all lived in. And my grandfather’s house, I remember it was that way. But my mother had a thing about it. And I think, being in show business as they were. And they were very much a part of that whole 1930s [00:38:00] sort of contemporary scene of what was going on. I mean, when you look at any of those films of Fred Astaire or any of those people, that’s what they looked like. And there were rooms that were sort of, they looked as if they were for formal entertaining. I mean, you might have a cocktail party. He might dance on your table if you were lucky. But the table always had to be spotless and shiny, you know. It was funny. But it was
a lot of learning on my own. And it wasn’t until... I never thought really much about being a decorator, because I frankly thought of decorators as people who were just interested in sort of pushing furniture or buying furniture, and sort of, you know, making pretty curtains and things like that. I never really thought a great deal about it. And it wasn’t until I was much older that I got serious about it, and realized it was a heck of a lot more than just going out and picking out a few things. It was a lot more work and a lot more thinking had to go into it.

And it was when I was 18, I went to a liberal arts college. And I knew I’d hate it. I didn’t like it at all. And then I [00:39:00] started taking courses, for some strange reason, in interior decorating and design at Pratt at night. And then I remember, I went to a furniture store out in Brooklyn one day. They were having a big sale or something. It was this horrendous place. They used to advertise in The New York Times on Sundays. And I thought, “Gee, what a terrible place.” And I got to talking with a man out there. And I got a job there, for two weeks, pushing all this junk around. It was awful. And they said, “Well, why don’t you think about going to a department store?” And so I did. I went to Altman’s. And I got a job with the decorating department at Altman’s.
And prior to that, they said, “If you’re interested, you ought to go to school,” or whatever. And I thought, “Oh, no. I’m taking some night courses I [don’t?] really like. I couldn’t go to a design school every day. I wouldn’t like it.” My father was against it anyway. And so I went to Cooper Union, where I had two uncles. The one who was the architect, and I had another uncle who was a woodcarver, a wood sculptor. [00:40:00] And I stayed there nine months. I hated it. I absolutely hated it. I didn’t mind the school. I hated the idea of architecture and what it was all about, because one of the first projects that they gave us to do was to draw up our own house, the house we were born in. And our house was the typical English house. It was decorated on two sides. It was on a corner, so two sides of it were decorated. And the one side, and the back, were perfectly flat. But that was typical. I mean, that’s the way they designed things in those days. They still do. You know, they build a house, and one side is very elaborate, and the other side is very plain. And I remember the professor just ripped the place to shreds. And I sat there practically crying. And I thought, son of a gun, he probably lives in an apartment someplace. You know, what does he know about it? But he was just trying to teach us a lesson in what it was all about. But a lot
of us in the class didn’t like, get it. We sort of felt it was a personal attack, that our parents tastes sort of were from Hungary. And basically, I think they were trying to teach us to do things more modern, more, sort of...

[00:41:00] You know, it was at that point in the fifties, after the war, and they were trying to teach that obviously, that whole school of thought of the 1930s and 1940s was out the window. That today, you had to build things that were more, sort of like a, you know, factory or whatever. You know, sort of, certainly more usable space, and less thinking about --

GREEN: How old were you when you did this? What year?

BUATTA: My mother was still alive, so... She died when I was 23, so I was about 21, 22 at that point.

GREEN: Like ’56? Nineteen hundred and fifty-six?

BUATTA: Nineteen hundred and fifty-three, ’4, ’5, yeah, 1956. Fifty-seven, because she did in ’58. So I was there ’57, ’58. And I knew I didn’t like that. So then my mother died. And at that point, I’d gotten a job at Altman’s. From Detroit Furniture to Altman’s. Remember Detroit Furniture in Brooklyn, yeah. Remember that place? I can’t think of the man’s name that I worked for. He was a very nice guy. [00:42:00] But they took it so serious, all the stuff. And they used to sell these, you know, suites of
furniture when people came in. Anyway, I got that through an agency, through one of those, you know, agencies where they... There used to be one or two agencies in New York where they just work with people who wanted to work in the decorating field. Anyway, so from there, I went to Altman’s. And Altman’s, I was an assistant, and I liked it very much, but I was bored with the kind of work they were doing. It was nothing really very exciting about it. And I never really... It was very difficult to sort of find my place and find what I was all about. And I wasn’t’ really that much interested in all that kind of new stuff that they were selling, and sort of bored the tears out of me. So eventually, somebody suggested that I should go to the Parsons School, meet Stanley Barrows. It was Albert Hadley. He used to come to us during our lunch hour. We would have to sub for the receptionist in the decorating department, and during that time, people would come in and look at antiques that were in the [00:43:00] decorating department. We’d have to sort of show the antiques. And so one day, Albert Hadley came in, and another day George [Schreyer?] came in. And each of those people had a great deal to do that sort of helped to mold my future. Because George was working, at that point for, I can’t remember. But he eventually worked for Keith Irvine, who was to
become my next boss. And Albert was with McMillan. And they both said that I should go on the study program with Stanley Barrows. And so they introduced me to Stanley, and I went down to Parsons. And he said, “Yes.” He said, you know, they accepted a few students from out of the school, and I went along that particular year. That was 1961.

GREEN: Describe the study program.

BUATTA: Oh, the study program was wonderful. We obviously, we didn’t fly. We took the ship. In those days, you go by ship. And we took the last voyage of the Liberty. It was absolutely wonderful. And the kids, we had a great time. [00:44:00] And it was a total awakening. You know, it was a rude awakening, in the middle of your life, to realize that there was something out there besides what you were thinking all that time, as far as decoration was concerned. Our first stop was England. We arrived in Southampton. We went into someplace in the countryside. I think we were in Salisbury. And the first English country house we walked into, I thought, “Oh.” I said, “This is it. I love it.” And what it was about it was that it was a lot of what my aunt’s house was all about, but it was on a much grander scale, a much more grander scale. But it was also a very sensible, very lived-in, very comfortable, very cozy. It was just a very welcoming kind of house that I knew at that
point, that I’d found myself. But that’s what I really liked doing the best, that I loved the English house. It just sort of happened. And we went through the English countryside. We spent six weeks in England, two of those weeks in London. We went to lots of museums. We went to churches. [00:45:00] Public buildings, you know, public buildings, and a lot of private houses that were either open to the public or opened especially for Parsons students. And Stanley was wonderful, because he would go on about things. He’d just tell and tell all kinds of tales. You know what he’s like. He’s a very funny man. But he would always tell you the sort of funny things that happened in the house. I mean, funny little doorways where, we were in France, where Marie Antoinette, her lover would come up. Or the stairs, or Louis Hooey would have whatever. And then we spent, I think it was about six weeks in France, and a part of that time in Paris. And we had a week in Germany, and some time in Austria. And six weeks in Italy. It was a four-month summer. It was really terrific. And then, I ended up staying for the rest of the year, so I spent about nine months over there. I’d sort of retract a lot of my stops. And then I spent some time in Spain, which wasn’t part of the trip. And I spent some time in Portugal, which was nice. So that was [00:46:00] a
nice roundup. And I came back by boat. And then, that was 1961. In ’62, I came back, and I worked for Elizabeth Draper. And Mrs. Draper was the second decorating Mrs. Draper. The first Mrs. George Draper was Dorothy Draper, and the second Mrs. George Draper was Elizabeth. And Elizabeth Draper was sort of a social decorator, sort of typed. When I say social, she was socially very well-connected with lots of people in Long Island and New York. And she worked for people like the [Holtons?], the Glass people, the [Okenclauses?]. You know, Jacqueline Kennedy’s mother and father, and she worked for a lot of older families, and was not that well-known in the press as Dorothy Draper was, who did a lot of more commercial work, and was famous for doing a lot of hotels and lobbies and things like the, what is that spa down in the south? Homestead, and whatever. Are you cold?

GREEN: [00:47:00] No.

BUATTA: Are you sure? And I worked for her for about four months. It was a record, as it is working for me. She wasn’t difficult. It’s just that she was very demanding, and she was a perfectionist. I had a great deal of respect for her. But I still hadn’t found myself in terms of being happy with what was going on. It was about that time that George Schreyer called and said, “We have an opening with a
firm that I’m associated with,” which is Keith Irvine at that point. It was called Keith Irvine Limited, or whatever. And he said, “I’d like you to meet Mr. Irvine, and he’d like to meet you.” Is this still going? It hasn’t stopped. I guess it is. Will the light stop when...?

GREEN: Yes, No, you’ll hear it click. It’s still going.

BUATTA: OK.

END OF AUDIO FILE

BUATTA: Mr. Irvine. It was sort of immediately that I walked into that office, and I knew that this is what I liked more than anything. I’d never seen anything quite like it, and I was absolutely stymied by it all.

GREEN: What was it that you reacted to?

BUATTA: It was in a brownstone, and the ceilings were about 12 feet. The room was about 20 by 20, and it was filled with furnishings from all over the world. I mean, it was just like a French screen, an English sofa, you know, English fabrics, Italian side table. It was just a mixture of things. And it was the way they were put together. And they just looked as if they had been that way forever. It was like some cousins that I had. I remember they had an
old Victorian house on Staten Island that was this funny old brick Victorian house that was... I used to think of it as being sort of a spook house. But the magic of it was the romance of it. There was a very romantic kind of a house. And it had wonderful sort of big, enormous, ugly, you know, plants all over the place, and big flower arrangements, and sort of funny old furniture. And you know, all that sort of stuff. And it was fascinating. But Keith’s, of course, was nothing like that. But it had that same interest for me, that I loved those rooms that looked as though they’d been lived in. I knew it had all been put together recently, but it looked as though it had been there forever. And that was what I liked about it. It was a nice sort of feeling. It just made me feel very comfortable all at once. And on subsequent visits, I didn’t get the job, because he felt that at the time, I was making $130 a week from Mrs. Draper. In 1962, that was a lot of money for an assistant to be making. And so he said that he didn’t think I should take the job, that it would be unfair, because he could only afford to pay me $90 a week. And I said, well, that’s, you know, $90 a week in those days was not a lot of money either, but it was more money than you think of it today. It’s probably, it’s peanuts, you know.
But it went a heck of a lot further than it does today. And so I ended up spending a lot of time there. I’d go back and forth, and I’d visit, you know, lunch hour or whatever. And I was just fascinated by the whole thing. And of course, knowing George, it was very easy to be able to go back. My excuse was to see George. Then I’d go there, and of course think more and more about the way this looked. And about that same time, I got fired a couple of weeks later. I was told that my services weren’t needed any longer, which I was very happy about, because I wasn’t really enjoying the job. And although I loved Mrs. Draper. In fact, I still do. To this day, I still see her. She’s a wonderful woman. And she hasn’t changed one iota. She’s amazing. She’s 85 years old, and she’s just amazing, what she does. But at that point, too, Mr. Irvine’s new assistant happened to be a young lady who had no training, was going [00:03:00] to be married. And he said, “She’s going to be away for six weeks. Would you like to come in to sort of help out?” And so I said, “Yes, I’d like to.” So I went in for six weeks. I worked. And it worked out very, very well. And then his partner, Tom Fleming, was going on his vacation. He was taking a month off. And he said, “Would you like to continue to work, you know, on this basis?” I said, “Sure, I’d love to.” So I worked a
month. And when he came back, Mr. Irvine decided he was going to hire me as his assistant. And Mr. Fleming, who had been the assistant, was going to do the office work and handle the business. And he didn’t like that very much, but he accepted it. And I started working for Mr. Irvine. And then it got to be rather complicated, because then he said, “Well, I’ll give you half the jobs, and I’ll give Tom half the jobs. Keep you both happy.” In any case, I was there just a little bit over a year. But during that year, I probably learned more than I would have learned in 10 years. And I was very aware. I loved what he was doing. I fell right into it. And we had a good time. And at that point, he wasn’t married to his [00:04:00] present wife. But she was there quite a lot, too. And we just all had a great rapport. We had a lot of fun together. It was sort of like being at school. I was learning. I was working. I was having a terrific time. And then, I was let go about a year later. And having realized then that that’s what I really liked to do, with the more sort of English look or whatever. And then George Schreyer, his associate who had originally brought me into the firm, died, about two months later. And I started my own business at that point, just before George died. I had some clients that I’d had from Altman’s when I was there that called me and said, “Would
you help me?” And I was helping some friends of friends or whatever. And George died, and then his mother called and said, “Would you do a little work for me and some friends of George’s?” You know, that he was doing things, and finish up. And I did, and that’s how my business really got off the ground. And also, at the same time, [Albert Houety?], [00:05:00] he was a friend of George’s, and I knew he’d called, and said, “A few of my friends would like you to continue working and finishing up what George did.” So that’s how I started my business. And that was in 1963. And I started with, my first big job was the offices of the World’s Fair through one of these same clients that George had. And I did the offices of the... He was chief of protocol for it, and I did his offices, and all the reception rooms or whatever. And then I did residential [mansion?] in 1966. Through that same connection, I got to do the office of the Metropolitan Opera House. And from that point on, I’ve continued to grow, in a small way. I have a very small business. I just have two assistants. I like it that way. And do mostly residential work.

GREEN: People think of you as a society decorator. Is that a valid description?
BUATTA: Society decorator. I would say yes, in respect to the kind of people I work for, if that’s what you mean. I mean, it has nothing to do with, it’s no different than decorating for anybody else. But I mean, they’re just people who are more established and are “society.” I mean, it doesn’t mean that they’re all in the blue book, or the social register, or whatever. But they’re the kind of people who are, you know, seen. They’re present. You’re aware of their presence, a lot of them. Not all of them. A lot of them are very quiet, older types, you know.

GREEN: Did this just evolve? You didn’t set yourself out to be a society decorator.

BUATTA: No, evolved. I think it came from having worked for Mr. Irvine, and from having worked with George’s clients. And then eventually, doing the kind of work that they like, which is basically, a lot of these clients basically have been brought up in a lot of these things. And a lot of the things that they have, they like. And they’ve added to it, or subtracted. And along the way, I’ve attracted other types of clients who wouldn’t be so-called society clients. But they’re people who have a feeling for what I do, or what they like that they’ve seen in pictures in magazines. And they like the sort of look. Or I’ve met them at parties, you know, of clients, or they’ve, you
know, seen something I’ve done and they said, “I’ll call you,” or whatever. But the kind of work I do basically attracts them because it is a look that has a feeling of having been there for a long time. And I don’t think of myself as being an innovative designer or decorator. I think of myself as basically helping people to be comfortable and to live using what they have to sort of make it all look attractive. Does that make sense?

GREEN: Yes. Well, it’s a perfectly good definition of how you see yourself. There are you being called a Prince of Chintz, you know, there are all kinds of (inaudible).

BUATTA: Well, the [00:08:00] Prince of Chintz comes from using a lot of chintz. All my decorating years, and even before that, I always liked chintz. And I always had used it, you know, in my room. I lived with it. I loved it. Sort of my colleagues around town have always laughed at me, and I think one of the ways that I built my business up, and I think I tell this to students all the time, or other designers, when I give talks to the ASID or groups out of, you know, in town or out of town, or at schools. And I always say to them, “The most important thing that you have is your last job. The fact that the job you did is seen by people who will then call you in, because they like what they saw. And just picking up the yellow pages and picking
out a decorator, you can close your eyes and pick out a
dozen decorators, and never find one that you’re really
happy with. It’s got to be one that you’ve seen his work,
and you relate to it, and maybe it’s for a friend. Or
maybe it’s something that you’ve seen in a magazine, or
maybe [00:09:00] you’ve met the decorator. But that, along
with doing decorator show houses, it’s the thing that
really helped me more than anything else. Because I was
able to, and you can be able to, as a young person starting
out, decorator room from scratch. From A to Z, and do it
exactly the way you see it. And not have somebody holding
your arm back, saying, you know, (inaudible) to paint a
picture, if you’re an artist. No, don’t put it in pink. I
don’t like yellow. Don’t do green. Don’t do red. Don’t
do a tree. Don’t do this. You can do exactly what you
want, and when the job is completed, that room is
completed, as no house you ever do for a client is, you
have a product that they can associate with.” And so I
used to go out and do these rooms, that basically I’d take
all the furniture from my apartment, and I’d decorate. And
each room I did, I used different fabrics, different wall
treatments, different everything. But eventually, you
know, this all got to be sort of a joke. People would say,
“My God, that’s the same chair again,” you know, “That’s
the same sofa,” you know. But it made a name for me, [00:10:00] because I was out there doing my chintzes. And I was hanging my pictures with sashes and bows, which are purely decorative. And they would all laugh at them, you know, and ruffle pillows and all that sort of thing. But eventually, it sort of caught on. And as everything does catch on eventually if you stick with something long enough, you’re bound to hit it. Because the pendulum goes back and forth, and somewhere along in there, they’re going to find you, you know. And if they don’t find you, you know, it’s like people who have been doing... Who can you think of in fashion that do a certain kind of a look, and suddenly they’re in style, you know. Because basically, eventually, this sort of, their time comes. And the English romantic sort of look has been done for years and years. There’s nothing new about it. I haven’t done anything new ever since I began. I hope I’ve improved what I’ve done, but I don’t think I’ve done anything new. But there are many, many decorators who’ve worked in this style. I mean, Mrs. [DuParish?] for one, who’s always done the same kind of thing. Comfortable, attractive rooms that have never gone out of fashion, rooms that you can’t put a date on, rooms that have a timeless quality about them, which makes them, you know, more now and [00:11:00] more
today than anything. I mean, that’s what it’s all about. And it’s fascinating, when I’ve done those show houses, to get the reaction of people. And the people that come to you come to you because they like what you do. And they can relate to it. And the look has been copied by many, many people, and it never looks like I did it. And I have lots of assistants that have passed through these doors that are out on their own, that are very successful. And I’ve been very happy for them. I think it’s terrific. But none of them do it the way I do it. They all do it their own way. And that’s the good thing about it. I think that’s the whole point of being a decorator, that you go out and you’re inspired by so many things. And you pick up all these odds and ends, and put them all together in your own way. It becomes you.

GREEN: Did you go back to England after the...?

BUATTA: I used to go back to England about three times a year. It was one of the nicest things that ever happened to me. And I think it was a great turning point in my life, was after I worked for Mr. Irvine, and I didn’t realize, but before I worked for him, I had bought a book called [00:12:00] *English House and Garden Book of Interior Decoration*. And in it was the photograph of a house, or actually an apartment in London that belonged to Nancy
Lancaster. Nancy Lancaster was a [transborder?] Virginian, who went to England many years before that and married a man by the name of Ronny Tree, who was an American. And she had been married before that, but the connections were the Astors and all kinds of people. And she bought into a business called Colefax and Fowler. And it was Sibyl Colefax and John Fowler. Mrs. Colefax died in the early fifties, and Mr. Fowler continued to keep the business, but he needed partners to keep it going. And so he sold part of it to Mrs. Lancaster. And she was a great lady with great taste, and a great feeling knowing where things should be, how they should be. I mean, [she’d always put up?] all these things, and she knew what a house should look like, and how it should function. And it was her sort of look, this American look that she had, and the English look, melting those two styles together, that, [00:13:00]I think, has made the English country house look, as we know it today, to be very popular. It’s got a great deal of American know-how, and it’s got a lot of that sort of English charm, you know, that makes it all work. And when I was about a year into my own business, it was about 1964, I took my first trip back to England. And I happened to just sort of retrace a lot of the steps that I had taken in 1961 with Mr. Barrows and the Parsons School. And I
remember going to see Claridge’s Hotel, and on the way back
towards Bond Street, I passed by a shop and looked in the
windows and thought, “Boy, this is something I love. Do I
love this place.” I don’t know what it was, but I knew it
was... Everything in the window I loved. I just loved
everything about it. But fabrics, the way their curtains
were treated, this, that, and the other thing. And I
suddenly looked up and I thought, “Oh my God. It’s Colefax
and Fowler.” And so I went to the door, and it was locked.
So I knocked. And it happened to be about 10 minutes to
two, and they [00:14:00] closed for lunch between one and
two. And the caretaker, the man who takes care of the
building, came out. He said, “Can I help you?” I said,
“Yes.” I said, “I just would like, wanted to come in.”
And he said, “Oh, we’re closed. We’ll be open in a few
minutes. You might as well come in.” And so he said, “Can
I do anything special?” And I said, “No.” I said, “My
ex-boss used to work here.” And I said, “I’d just like to
look around.” He said, “Who’s that?” And I said, “Keith
Irvine.” And he said, “Oh, I remember Mr. Irvine.” He
said, (inaudible, phone rings).

GREEN: Talking about entering Colefax and Fowler, and...
BUATTA: Oh, so the fellow who was there said to me, said,

“Would you like to meet Mr. Fowler?” And I said, “I’d
love to.” So he called Mr. Fowler, who was having his lunch, and he said, “Son, tell the boy.” [I asked him to come around?] for a drink. It’s six. And so he says, “Well, can you go out at six?” I said, “Yes, I can.” So I went by at six for a drink. And I walked in, and I was a nervous wreck. And Mr. Fowler was a sort of jolly looking fellow. He was, at that point in his early sixties. And he...

GREEN: [00:15:00] And you were how old?

BUATTA: I was 28. And I looked around his office, which looks not unlike this one, but it wasn’t as organized as this. It was a little messier, if you can appreciate that. But there was one rack that was, oh, about 20 feet long, that was a long rack filled with what looked like pieces of fabric. There were pieces of fabric, attached, you know, with little clips. But just sort of piles of... I mean, it must have been 10 fabrics deep. And it was just every color of the rainbow. And they were all different cloths. And of course, in those days, they dyed everything special. If you needed a yard of something, you had it died. You know, he wouldn’t think of picking a color out of the book. He’d take a little clipping off his wall, out of something he’d dyed before, and say, “Dye it this color.” And he had his own special color palette, which were these wonderful
colors that you think of as being great English colors. You know, the sort of wonderful corals, and wonderful lemon yellows, sort of pink and orange corals, and wonderful sort of pale sky blues that were... I mean, just each one of them very pretty and special, because they were obviously specially designed. That’s the only way you can achieve that kind of a look. Anyway, it’s sort of like looking at the rainbow on that wall of all the fabrics, the way they’re put together. But it’s that idea. And I sat there, and he was at his desk. And I sat facing him, the other side. And he was asking what I was planning to do, and what I did, and talking about different things. And the fact that I’d worked for Keith. And then he said, “What are you going to do when you’re here?” And I had a list and I brought it out. And I said, “Well, I want to see Cecil Hicks and David [Beaton?] and Nancy [Lancaster?]. And I was so nervous. I was saying all these names, and I really (inaudible, laughter). I got it all mixed up. And he sat there, like, “You are just laughing at me.” I thought, what have I said? What’s the matter with this guy? And I wasn’t drinking, and he wasn’t drinking. He was having a glass of bitters or whatever they drink. And I was having, you know, I was having a (inaudible).
GREEN: Why do you think you were so nervous?

BUATTA: Oh, because I mean, he was Mr. Fowler. And I mean, I didn’t know that much about him, but I knew that what he had done, I mean, I knew that those rooms that he had done for Nancy Lancaster. And I really thought more about Nancy Lancaster. I didn’t know much about him than I did about Nancy, that Nancy was... But I’d seen a lot of pictures of his work at that place. I’d seen what he’d done for the [Hindses?] and the [Mies?] House in London, and I’d seen lots of other houses that were in these English books. And so, you know, he’s very amusing. He’s like, “Oh, you want to meet Ms. Lancaster?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well,” he said, “tomorrow night, it’s her birthday, and I’m taking her out to dinner.” He said, “Why don’t you come around again at six,” he said, “and I’ll take you by for a drink before we leave?” And I said, “That would be very nice.” And so the next [night?] I [walked?] by, and we entered her apartment, which you could enter through the shop. It was a part of this building. Originally, it was [Wide Bill’s?] studio, where [00:18:00] she had her drawing room. And he was the architect. And we arrived about 6:30, 7, whatever. He had a bottle of champagne. I’ll never forget. And we arrived, and she received us in her bedroom. She was having the vapors, and so she said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m
not going out tonight. I’m staying in.” So John brought the champagne in, and we sat and talked. And she was a rather imperious woman, little tiny thing, rather imperious and very amusing. And she went on about, you know, all these Americans coming through. And the month before that, she had something like 57 sheets that had to be sent to the laundry. And she said, “Can you believe all these bloody Americans coming in? It’s like falling leaves from trees,” you know. And her, of course, she being American rather, and living in England, I turned to Mr. Fowler and I said, “What did you say this lady’s name was?” you know, sort of kidding around. And of course, he yanked by the ear, pulled me out of the room. He said, “How dare you speak to Ms. Lancaster like that, [00:19:00] to a lady like that,” you know. And I said, “What did I say? I didn’t say anything.” I said, you know, “I was just kidding.” I said... Well, he was getting a great kick out of it, because they had sort of a love and hate relationship. And they were rather, you know, she was rather amused by the fact that I had said that to her. I was sort of saved by the bell, because the telephone rang at the point, so she couldn’t play. Whereupon her secretary then came out and said, “What’s happened? What happened?” And he said, “This young man is so rude. He’s just said to her, how
dare she knock Americans, and she’s American.” And whatever. He was laughing, and she was laughing. And they all thought it was very funny. And then he took me to see the famous butter yellow living room, the drawing room, as it was in those days. And it was absolutely wonderful. This is my idea of a dream room. This is the room. I love it. It’s a room that’s 46 feet long by about 24 feet wide, with three exposures onto the garden, and a wonderful sort of vaulted ceiling. And it had been painted. The walls were glazed a very deep, [00:20:00] deep sort of lemon peel yellow. Very shiny. All the woodwork was picked out in tones of white. The ceiling had sort of things painted on. It was marbleized moldings. It was a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful room. Yellow curtains that were on lined taffeta, and two different types of curtains. I mean, it was just, the whole thing was... I mean, all the furniture in the room, when you picked it out piece by piece, you would think they were nothing. But together, they said something. It’s just this sort of magic that she had. She had the sense of making rooms come to life, and just looking as if it had sort of always been that way. And so we went back to say goodnight to her, and she told a few more funny stories or whatever. And then we left. And that weekend, he invited me out to the country. He said,
"Would you like to see the house in the country?" He had this wonderful hunting lodge. And he said, "If you’re a good fellow," he said, "if you behave yourself," he said, "I’ll take you to meet with Mrs. Lancaster at her house."

And so that Friday afternoon, I rented a car and [00:21:00] I offered to drive him out, because he usually had a driver who today, he didn’t drive. So I said, "I’ll drive you."

He said, "Fine." We went out, and we went to see Mrs. Lancaster. And when we arrived, I’d already sent her a box of chocolates, because I knew she liked chocolates or whatever. And this was, like, a Monday. This was already, like Friday night. And we arrived, and I heard this voice say, "How dare you bring that dreadful man here? How dare you bring that terrible man to our house?" Well, what she was doing was hugging him and winking at me, and saying how dare I bring him to the house. Because I was afraid to get out of the car. So I finally got out, and she gave us a tour of the house. The whole place was just incredible. I mean, just knocked out. Haseley Court, which was the house, and it was the last house she lived in. She still lives in part of the Mews House. [And he?] lives in the cottages. But it was the last house that she’d decorated. She’d had many houses before that. Kelmarsh, Ditchley, (inaudible), you know, many others. Several others. And
she’d lived in and done up. And it was the most wonderful, most comfortable house. And we stayed for hours, just hours and hours and hours. And I just remember it seemed, when she took us through the garden, and then the box garden, and then the this and that. And she’s just an amazing woman. And the feeling of it all was something that, you know, you just had to see in person to sort of really understand what it was all about. And it was just a great sort of love of that house, and the whole... Every room was sort of something different, something special. And it all had her touch. And you just knew that she loved that house and loved everything about it. And that doesn’t come through with a lot of people’s houses. You know, you can always tell when a house is loved, or if there’s love in a house. It’s fascinating. And then we drove back to Mr. Fowler’s cottage, where he had to get back, because he had three houseguests for the weekend. I’ll never forget, on the way, I ran out of petrol, as they call it in England. And fortunately, too, because 10 minutes up the road, there had been a terrible accident. It might have been us. There were like five or six cars involved. And he got so angry. He practically didn’t speak to me for the rest of the weekend, because I was such an idiot that I’d ran out of gas. And I got him home in
time for his guests. And we had a wonderful time. It was a wonderful weekend. And as time went on, I would go back. In those days, you’d go out for a 21-day excursion, which would leave you with three weekends, possibly, if you were lucky. And I would go over maybe three times. Well, I did go three times a year for a long time. But maybe some years I’d, you know, go four if I could.

GREEN: Did you buy things?

BUATTI A: I used to buy things, yeah. And John was wonderful, because he would say to me... And they had things for sale in the shop. And he used to point out certain things in the shop. And he said, “You ought to have that. You ought to have this.” And whatever. I didn’t understand what I was looking at or what I was buying, but I started buying them. And I’m really glad I did. But I knew I liked them. But otherwise, I wouldn’t have bought them. But there are other things he’d say, “You ought to buy that,” but [00:24:00] they weren’t things that I really liked or wanted. So I didn’t buy them, and I bought only things that I liked, that I eventually would go over and have shipments go back, you know, of things. And it was 1966, I guess, when I moved into my apartment on 62nd Street. And at that point, I’d collected enough things over the years to make up what was, at that point, one floor of a
brownstone. I had the parlor floor. And I did my first sort of room that you could call an English country house, derivative of an English country house. And it had yellow glazed walls, and chintz curtains on the windows. [Now?] at that point, I’d had moved three times, so they were pieced together, you know. And you could see where the old curtains and new curtains... It had a wonderful sort of patchwork. The whole room had a wonderful patchwork quality of things that I liked. And it was an apartment that was very much a collector’s apartment. It was very much the apartment of somebody who liked a lot of things. Didn’t know what he wanted, but it worked very well, being done in an English way. Because that’s the way those English houses look. And it was then that it was photographed, in 1969, for *House and Garden*. And it was this... They sort of talked about this new English country house look, and the glazed walls, and the blue and white porcelain, and the chintz, and putting all those elements together. It was from that point on that I started also to do show houses. And it was my first show house was in 1969 in Greenwich, for the Vassar Club, And I did a yellow lacquered room with a coral canopy bed, with a tree of life design, and painted floors with a sort of leaf design. And all my junk brought in. And then the next year, I did a
room in New York for the first show house here for Kip’s Bay. And I did a plum-colored room. And I brought all my furniture in from that apartment, and left it just the way it was, and just put up some new curtains on the windows, and bleached floors. And that sort of started to develop my sort of name and business for doing that kind of thing, that sort of English feeling. And it all derived, you know, from knowing John, and from seeing Nancy Lancaster’s house, and also collecting pictures of all those things over the years. And not knowing what I was looking at, because I’d cut out all those pictures, but I didn’t know what they were. I didn’t know who John Fowler was. I didn’t know who Nancy Lancaster was. But it was when I went and saw Colefax and Fowler. And yet, I remember Keith telling me about John Fowler, the man for whom he had worked, but I never put two and two together. Because I was more involved with the present than I was with the past, at that time.

GREEN: It’s so interesting to realize that, you know, you talk about Colefax and Fowler, and Sibyl Colefax, because she was part of that whole world of [Cerie Marm?] and the whole impact of decorators that were society ladies. That for one reason or another, had developed a level of taste, and a judgment, and a point of view that
they were able to project very strongly. There was no denying that you could recognize a Cerie Marm room at the time that she was working. How did you feel about the fact that she painted what we consider major pieces white, such as Chippendale pieces?

BUATTA: Well, I think it was just as much a horror, the fact that she would paint up your old antiques, as it is somebody who stripped furniture, who continues to do that today. I mean, there are people who strip old furniture to make it look like new. For example, all those stripped pine pieces, those wonderful painted pieces that people had in England. And they’ve taken all the paint off the tables or off the chairs. I mean, it’s the same idea. It’s kind of a horror that they go in and... On the other hand, she did things with a great deal of style, and the way [00:28:00] she put them together made them look like no other house, or no other time. And maybe she did, maybe she wasn’t... She also had a lot of stuff made up by her workroom, so there are a lot of reproductions around of her things, that are being sold as old furniture today, which fascinates me, too.

GREEN: Well, I was fascinated by her. And I remember asking her about this business of painting, you know, master works, just covering them with paint. And I said, “Doesn’t
that shock you? Doesn’t that offend you? If you had a Louis [Kans?] piece, would you just spray it?" You know, I was offended by her, and I must tell you, her answer was, it was absolutely fascinating. She looked at me and she said, “Robert L, you don’t seem to understand.” She said, “When I was doing that, you could buy Chippendale pieces all over Portobello Road for five dollars, three dollars, two dollars. Would it occur to you not to use a piece that you could pick up for three or two dollars, and use it as a form of decoration that [00:29:00] allowed it to…” She said, “I always thought of rooms as stage sets. I mean, the people arrived, moved in the rooms, and performed.”

BUATTA: Well, that’s what we do as decorators. We’re basically designing the sets for them to act their lives out on. I mean, that’s what they do. We decorate a house, and they come in and they act out their life. And that’s why it has to be right for them. No, but I think what she did was fascinating. And I think that today, the same thing is being done in a different kind of a way. But I think we have more today of an appreciation for things that are old, and more of an appreciation for things that have age and show age. I think that our whole attitude has changed. But she was doing something in the thirties, in a period when all of those ladies, like many ladies are
today, decorators. I mean, they’re just social women who decide to become decorators. Unfortunately, probably I don’t know how many hundreds or thousands or how many in those days were decorators. But there are very few that have really survived. And I think it’s the same thing today. I think there are many, [00:30:00] many women out there who are decorating, but there are very few of them who have a special knack or special flair, or anything special, that they’re going to leave a mark that they’ll be remembered for, or by. I think, when you think about the great decorators in this country, Rose Cumming certainly was a mentor of mine in very early days, before knowing John Fowler. And I worked for Rose on Saturdays at her house. And she used to pay us a $10 bill after we rearranged her furniture. And you know, cleaned up and whatever. And I learned a great deal that way. And she was an incredible woman. She was a woman. She had an eye for fantasy, and an eye for color that very few people have today. And those people made their mark, and they’ve left their mark. I mean, Eleanor Brown, McMillan, Ruby Ross Wood, Billy Baldwin’s former boss. There are many, many that you can think of, like [Tatum Hall?], you can think of Mrs. [Jessup?], [Fedlow?]. I mean, there are many, many of those women. But [00:31:00] they were all doing the same
kind of thing. They weren’t really peculiar in what they were doing, if you know what I mean. They don’t really stand out in your mind.

GREEN: Or that individual.

BUATTA: Or that individual. They were running with the tide, and I think that’s the difference, you know. And that’s why I say that I don’t think of myself as an innovative designer or decorator. I think of myself as doing something a certain way. I put it together my own way. Whether in 20 years or 30 years it’s going to hold up and somebody can say, “Hey, that guy was the guy who was an innovative guy,” or whatever. I don’t, you know, one doesn’t know. You don’t know where you’re going to be in 20 years, or where your reputation, you know. Twenty years, they may say, “Hey, that was just a funny period, you know, we went through.”

GREEN: Do you care?

BUATTA: Oh, I care. I care from the point of view of yes, I want to do things that people will remember as being special. But I also am smart enough to know that everything can’t be special. Because when you’re working in this business, and it’s a service business, you have to service the client, and you have to give them what they want. And it’s only the times when you’re able
to do something special. And if it gets publicized, that’s
great. And that’s why I think show houses for young people
are terrific, because it does give them the chance to go
out and express themselves. And I think that, in those
days, people will hear about, you know, all these ladies
would hear about Cerie Marm. And they’d say, “Oh, I’ve got
to get her to do a room for me.” And there are lots of
American woman who let Cerie Marm do rooms for them, or
houses for them. But it was purely a social sort of status
thing, to have that person do something for you. I don’t
think today that people think so much of... They think
about status, and they think of position, etc. But I don’t
think that today, outside of the new money people, there
are that many of us who are that individual, that
everybody’s clamoring to have that one person. Because I
think today, people think more in line with what is right
for them, or what they like. And there’s a great freedom
of choice today. It’s the same in fashion. [00:33:00]
Years ago, I remember as a child, if the skirts went up, my
mother was having all of the dresses shortened. And if the
skirts were down, she’d have them all lengthened if she
possibly could. Today, people don’t care about whether
skirts are up or down, and they don’t care about whether
red is in or blue is in, or English is in, or French is in.
They decorate and they dress the way they want to. And it’s a great freedom. It’s a wonderful way to think, to be able to do what you want to do and not have to worry about it. Because basically, you’re wearing a dress or a suit that looks well on you, and it’s not because it’s in style that you wear it. And secondly... And you develop a style of your own, which is nice. There’s more individuality this way. And yet, there’s still a lot of people who are following the leader. They’re still marching with Ralph Lauren or anybody else. And in one sense, they’ve upgraded. At least instead of wearing dungarees, they might be wearing dungarees, but they’re wearing fashionable dungarees, you know. But with decorating, I don’t think people think very much about whether I have to have this, or I have to have that. There’s a certain group of people who do, but I think generally speaking, there’s no one style that everybody’s living with. [00:34:00] There’s no great turn. I mean, the twenties and thirties, they were coming away from all that heavy Victorian clutter. And they were bringing in a whole new lifestyle. And Billy Baldwin was one of those people who will always be remembered for that. I mean, I always think of Billy as being a minimalist. But he’s a minimalist to the point of everything around was suitable, functional, and it was all
being used. It was all there because it had a reason to be there. And it was not in excess. Nothing was in excess. Today, when you think about... When I decorate, certainly everything is excess. I mean, you don’t need half of the stuff that’s in the room that I do. But it’s part of that whole sort of look of the whole sort of comfortable sort of creature comforts and being sort of romantic and historical.

GREEN: My reaction to the rooms that I’ve seen that you done has always been that, part of it is that one gets the feeling [00:35:00] that whether it’s valid or not, that these things have been part of these people’s lives for a long time.

BUATTA: Well, that’s the point.

GREEN: I mean, part of the continuum that operates, for instance, from the Victorian period, when everybody was so excited about the fact that they could travel on a train, or travel eventually in an automobile. And if they went to Atlantic City, they brought back the pillows that said, “I’ve been in Atlantic City.” And that became something they put in their parlor. Because everything represented their new status, what their position was. And I think we will always have the motivation of status, and new positions have developed. I think the difference is that
we don’t have, you know, it’s not the grand rapids, mass-manufactured look that everybody wishes to have. Which was true at a given period in this country. And I think that someone like Billy, you know, and I always thought he was not only a minimalist, but he was a petitist. [00:36:00] I mean, everything looked, you know... He was so petitist.

BUATTA: Well, things were [scaled?] to him. It’s the same way with John Saladino, who’s a colleague of mine, has the same thing. I mean, everything John does is sort of smaller than he is. He sort of sees himself as being small. It fascinates me. But Billy’s furnishings were, if scaled properly to the rooms, I mean, there’s no question about it. But he had a great sort of thing about, it’s a great style, that whole feeling of the thirties, of that simplicity. And just a wiggle here and a wiggle there that made everything just work so well. And his rooms hold up today. They have a timeless quality about them. They look very well today.

GREEN: Now I don’t know whether you said it. Did you say that the secret of design is the play of pattern on pattern, that play is everything, and if you doubt that, look at nature?

BUATTA: I said it. I say it because [00:37:00] oftentimes, people... I remember in the sixties, we went through that
whole period of pattern on pattern on pattern. And there were some rooms that I remember. Seymour (inaudible), who was a brilliant young fellow who designed a lot of fabrics, and eventually did a lot of things with Angelo Donghia, or vice versa. He did a room that had so many more patterns than you could ever think of. And yet if you closed your eyes and just thought, you remember the last time you were in Central Park, or you were in a garden, or you were in the country, that nature itself, the pattern on pattern of nature is just stupendous. I mean, it’s just, what planting a garden. I mean, you always learn. I remember when I was young and I was always involved with working around the garden, around the house. And I’d plant things. We’d put things in our... I remember one of the first things I learned from the nurserymen was that you play one texture against another. And if you look in the woods, that’s what you see. And nature has done it all by itself. And some are more exciting than others, and some are not. But in decorating a room, you have the alternative to place things properly. Whereas looking in the countryside, you don’t. So that you get a large pattern against a small pattern against a medium pattern against... It’s that play, and that balance that’s very important in putting a room together. And I used to like
to think about the way the Duke of Windsor dressed. And I think he always just like a room might be, or a decorator might be, in the sense that he’d wear a plaid shirt and a striped tie and a polka dot handkerchief. And it would be a [Glen Clad?] suit, and he’d have stockings or socks would be, you know, another pattern. And he’d have, you know whatever. I mean, everything was just pattern on pattern on pattern. It was wonderful. It was a wonderful lesson in pattern on pattern play. And --

GREEN: It’s interesting that you use him as an example, because in a funny way, I think it justifies why yours always work as effectively. Because you use a lot of pattern.

BUATTA: Well I do use a lot of pattern. [00:39:00] I think it’s important.

GREEN: The Duke of Windsor’s dress was supported by unquestioned authority and taste. I mean, nobody ever questioned that the Prince of Wales, and eventually the King of England, eventually the Duke of Windsor, had anything but perfect taste. It was also helped by the fact that he happened to be a beautiful young man, and a rather handsome man, and even as he got very old. It was interesting that he personally projected this kind of individual style, because I think that his attitude was
noblesse oblige. If I say it’s good, it’s good. And who’s going to question it? And it worked. It absolutely worked.

BUATTA: Yeah, he had good direction, too. I mean, he had the best tailors. I mean, he was shown only the best. And I’m sure that, you know, it’s sort of like a little boy who wants everything and puts it all on his plate. I mean, it’s the same with him. It looked like he had one of everything, and he wore it all. But he wore [00:40:00] it all, and it worked very well.

GREEN: It’s also interesting. I once had a long session with Fred Astaire, who was telling me about his early days in London. And of course, he and the Prince of Wales became great friends. And he said that one of the things that was fascinating, that Astaire had always worn both suspenders and a belt, his theory being that the suspenders balanced the (inaudible), and the belt was an interesting thing that you could see, if you opened up your jacket. And so he kept the suspenders always attached to his pants. In other words, his valet would hang up his trousers, and there would be the suspenders. And the Prince of Wales visited him once in his dressing room, and there were half a dozen, not only his stage clothes, but also the clothes that he would wear after a matinee or to go out for the evening.
And the Prince of Wales was totally fascinated by the fact that he had both the belt and suspenders, [00:41:00] and then proceeded from that day on to wear both a belt and suspenders. Which made me realize that, of course, if you have an eye that, when you see something good, something that works, and you absorb it, it becomes your own. You know, you make it your own. And I suspect that when you talked before about people that have worked with you, or have been exposed to your talent, going out and succeeding on their own, but not doing it the same way. Because I think that what everybody forgets about really good decorators is that they’re also artists. And they are painting with real objects, as opposed to paints themselves. And I think it’s very valid, and I think the really good ones are the people who are good painters. I mean, just as there are many mediocre painters, and it’s perfectly pleasant to have a mediocre painting. I mean, it’s a pleasant experience. It isn’t something that is going to haunt you, nor is it going to tempt you, nor is it going to [00:42:00] stimulate you, nor is it going to excite you. But it’s pleasant. And I think there are a lot of rooms that are done by perfectly mediocre decorators, all these lady decorators that have [cards?], and that do rooms. And they’re OK, you know. But they’re
usually... It seems to me that they have less style and more taste. The taste isn’t necessarily good. Sometimes --

BUATTA: Well, taste is often copied, too. It’s often copied from a magazine, a picture they’ve seen --

GREEN: Absolutely. And it’s defined. You know, it’s defined for them.

BUATTA: And they’re very predictable, those rooms.

GREEN: You resent them?

BUATTA: No. I think there’s a place for all those people. But I don’t think it’s fair for a client who hires someone like that to expect anything more than they’re getting. And unfortunately, a lot of them think they’re going to get a lot more than they do. But they hire them for --

GREEN: I suppose it’s for, some of them get whatever they get, and they don’t even know what they’re getting.

BUATTA: Well, exactly, Exactly. But a lot of these young people that have gone off on their own, I think, have done some [00:43:00] wonderful things that have worked for me, and certainly for other decorators. Very few of them have the drive or have the need that I had, or that a lot of other professionals, or people that I’ve admired... I mean, when you think of Elsie de Wolfe, I understand she was not a very pretty lady. And she was very short. And
she’s always strived to be very tall. She wanted to be tall and big, and she always wanted great beauty around her, because she didn’t see herself as being beautiful. I mean, that’s a need right there. I mean, my problem... I think Billy Baldwin was always one who wanted to be taller. He wanted to be tall. He always... I remember that famous photograph of him standing next to a doorway to make himself appear tall. It was a low doorway, as a matter of fact, that made him look very tall. And I think there are other neurotic, you know, problems that we all... I mean, I know mine was being brought up in a house that was not just comfortable. And I’ve always strived to have something comfortable, and wanted something more English than the English, in a sense. And yet, I don’t pretend to be English. I mean, this whole title of Prince of Chintz comes from having used so much chintz over the years that one day, Chauncey Howell, who’s a television commentator reporter on channel four, pronounced me the Prince of Chintz on the last decorator’s show house, because I’d always used so much chintz, and he thought it was very funny. And the title sort of stuck. I mean, I’m not really a prince, obviously. I’m really a baron. No, but the point is that it’s something that sort of has stuck. And it’s sort of amusing. People get a kick out of
it. And I don’t care. It doesn’t bother me. Better than being called a lot of other things, so Prince of Chintz is OK.

GREEN: Well, you have a flair for publicity, too.

BUATTA: Well, it’s a flair for publicity. It’s also something that comes to you naturally in the sense of how you react to people in the field. I mean, let’s face it. I mean, you get a call from a reporter, and she wants to know what color is in. And I remember when I was first in business, and occasionally I’d get a call after doing one of the decorator’s show houses. And I’d get a girl call and say, “They want to know what color is in for next year.” And I’d sit there laughing at them. What color is in? Whatever color you like, you know. But a lot of my colleagues, don’t return the phone call. When they get on the phone, they give them a smart aleck answer and say, “What do you know about anything?” And they hang up. And I’ve heard this from so many people. You know, they say, “I called so and so, and boy does he have attitude. Does she have attitude.” I think the whole thing in our business is that these people are there to help you, and you’re there to help them. I mean, they need you. People who are in the press need you as much as you need them. They need to have advice. They need information. Or
occasionally, you can give them advice about somebody else is doing something. And it doesn’t help, but eventually it helps you, because they come back to you because they think you’re a nice guy. But I think it also has to do with the fact that you’re doing something different. And I think, from a very beginning when I did my first show house, and I first got some publicity in Women’s Wear. It all had to do with the fact that I was doing something that nobody else was doing at that point, was doing a lot of chintz and ruffles and bows. And that’s what I did. And it got [00:46:00] written up in a nice big spread in Women’s Wear, and I remember that. And I think it has to do with the fact that they think of you for doing that kind of thing. And the fact that you’re also very vocal. I think Angelo is very vocal. I think somebody like Albert Hadley, who is, sorry, this is going on tape. But I mean, Albert Hadley’s one of my mentors. He’s an incredible designer. But Albert is not somebody who really comes across to the press. [His appearance?] is the same. I mean, it depends. And I think it’s a part of coming across, and your personality, that how it all happens. And there are a lot of brilliant people around this city that you never hear about, that do brilliant work. But they just are not very
vocal, you know. It has a lot to do with it. Don’t you think so?

GREEN:  Well, I think it’s not a question of being vocal. I think it’s a question of what they themselves want to achieve. I think, you know Albert Hadley defeats a public relations role for himself, because [00:47:00] perhaps he’s not comfortable talking to people who have to do their job, you know. In other words, most reporters are simply that. People forget they’re not ultimate authorities. They’re simply reporters. And therefore, they’re asking a question. They don’t necessarily know anything about the field.

BUATTA:  Yeah, they know nothing about it half the time. They’re thrown into that job, and they haven’t got a clue what they’re doing. No, I think Albert, basically Albert’s very good with people. Albert’s terrific about, he’s a great teacher. And he’s very willing to discuss with you things like that. But I don’t think that, I’m not just going to pick on Albert at the moment. But there are other personalities like Albert’s. So when you say, “How does one get more publicity than another? Why are you in this, or why…”

END OF AUDIO FILE
BUATTA: Side three?

GREEN: Yeah, you were talking about --

BUATTA: Buatta versus green, green versus Buatta. Green --

GREEN: Well, I prefer to not think in versus. I think --

BUATTA: No, green and Buatta. No kidding. No, we are versus. We’re looking at each other. You’re there and I’m here.

I’ve never had a PR firm, and I’ve considered it once or twice. But I don’t think, without having the wits about you to do what you do and to perform, then no matter how much PR, you know, you have behind you, if you don’t perform, forget it. It doesn’t matter. So it really, it’s something that builds up. It snowballs. It’s something that happens over a period of time. And back in 1966, my first apartment, or my second apartment or third apartment, it was published in [00:01:00] a sort of little tiny magazine called New Ideas For Decorating. I’ll never forget that. And then I had a few odds and ends published in trade books and publications. Home Furnishings Daily, Interior Design, and Interiors. But it wasn’t until 1969 that I did the show that I had my first national publicity in House and Garden. And from that point on, they sort of feel as though they’ve discovered you. And they asked me to do different projects, and different things got
published. And everything that got published wasn’t exactly the best work or best nature, and a lot of things that might have been called “Yes, the best,” were fine, but a lot of things don’t get published. Because a lot of clients don’t allow you to photograph things. And so a lot of your best work, for example, a house a did for Henry Ford has never been shown. And that’s one of the best things I’ve ever done. But that’s something you live with, you know. I have no record of it. But he’s happy, and that’s important. And the fact that I’ve done it is nice. But I think, for young people, publicity today, show has it the best.

GREEN: Tell me what you feel about the elitism of, say, Architectural Digest.

BUATTA: [00:02:00] I think, well there’s also House and Garden today, which I think has a very elitist attitude, too. Probably more so than Architectural Digest. I think Architectural Digest was a great thing when it came along, because it was the voyeur’s notebook. I mean, it was something that he could look into, or she could look into every month, and feel that she or he, he or she has actually been in the house of these people. And they took you to places that you never knew existed before. And although a lot of them have a horrific sameness about them
-- they all look alike -- they also have something in the sense that oftentimes, they’re celebrities. People who are in film, or do theatre, or a related field. Whatever, you know. They could be political celebrities, or just social celebrities, whatever. But the point is, they’re people whose names you’ve heard and read about. And you want to see the way they live. And you otherwise would never have entry to their house. Suddenly, *Architectural Digest* is bringing you into these houses, and you’re able to see the way other people live. [00:03:00] Unfortunately, you find there’s an awful lot of sameness about things, because the editor of each of these magazines has a point of view. And their point of view is what you see on the pages of the book. And that sometimes is sort of stymying, and sort of holds back any creative, you know, juices that people have, or would have, find that they had if they saw something different. I think *House and Garden* has now come along, and they’re doing the same thing. But they work pretty much from the format of a small circle of social friends that they have that photograph each other’s houses. You know, that you get this sort of New York, sort of Mortimer’s scene, or the, you know, the kind of people that hang out at Mortimer’s and the sort of... Which is good, too. I mean, it’s a whole other point of view. But each
of the magazines -- and *House Beautiful* another one, which has become more of a how to magazine, but on a higher standard and level than it was before, although *House Beautiful*, years back when Sarah Lee was there, achieved [00:04:00] great heights of sophistication and design. You know, during the period that she was the editor of the magazine, it was the best magazine in its day. And I think the competition of these two books is great. I don’t find ever that a magazine -- whether it be the high end or the low end -- ever be a detriment to your way of thinking. Remember when you’re decorating, I think the point is that you get something good out of everything that you see. And as long as you’re seeing good things, your mind can only expand. And I think the fact that, if you’re looking at a magazine on the pages of *House and Garden* or *Architectural Digest*, and you’re looking at somebody’s house. And you’ll know that you’ll never afford to live that way, and you’ll never be able to achieve that sort of whatever it is that they have, with their sophistication, or whatever. But whatever the quality is, the fact that you learn something from it, and you can apply some of the things that you see to your own home, so that you learn a lot of lessons. I think it’s great. I think [00:05:00] there were two decorators who are still very much in evidence, and
colleagues of mine, [Sajak?] and Callahan, who, during the sixties, had 23 covers out of 24 of House and Garden. It was 11 out of 23, I think it was. Do you remember that? They had cover after cover after cover. And they did pattern and pattern and pattern. Every one of those pictures of everything they did, there were so many lessons in that room of things that you’d learn, that you would apply to your own house. And that’s the sort of thing that I think is important, that you see different ways of doing things. And that you take all those elements and put them together, and make up your own look, you know.

GREEN: I always had the feeling that if one looks at Architectural Digest making the assumption that this is a mark of approval and judgment, is a mistake. In other words, I think the responsibility of a magazine of that nature is reportage. I mean, here are certain things that are being done. Here are certain houses that have been done. One can’t make the assumption that they’re saying, [00:06:00] “Everything that appears in that magazine is recommended as the perfect taste.”

BUATTA: Oh no, no. Because it couldn’t be. Because first of all, taste is something that, I mean, the definition of good taste. What is good taste? It’s basically the best that you have in you to do. And whether it appeals to
everybody or not, whether it’s universally acceptable, you’re only kidding yourself. If I sat here and said to you that every time I do a room, that room has to be liked by everybody, there’s no such thing. Because a lot of people don’t like what I do. They can’t relate to it. And I work for a very small percentage of a population. And I relate to a very small percentage. As I get older and more developed in my business, obviously, I want to relate to more people, because I’ve now developed a line of chintzes, so that I feel that they have to relate to people in a wider range than the ones I work for. And, what was the [other?] [00:07:00] question? I’m sorry, I’m confused. He’s laughing. Why are you laughing? It’s true. I was just thinking about Albert Hadley. I felt badly that we said what we... Bringing Albert’s name into it. Because I can think of a slew of other decorators who are equally shy and, you know, bashful before a camera, before a microphone, or before somebody in the press. I mean, Michael Taylor was one that didn’t say a lot. And he was a brilliant man. Angelo was very good at it. It takes a certain knack, I think. Because I always remember, when I was first interviewed when that show house was done, and I remember being interviewed by Monica (inaudible). And it was one I remembered. Town and Country, I think. Is this
what you want to hear? Is that right? Am I saying the right thing? I was very insecure and very unsure. And I still am to a point, because you don’t know, half the time, where these people are coming from, or what they want, or what they envisioned to put on their pages. A lot of times, they don’t have a clue. They’re looking for something to grasp.

GREEN: I think what often happens -- where I’ve certainly been on both sides of the fence -- is that there are people, and you’re one of them, who have a knack. Mostly, I think, because they have a sense of humor, and have a sense of slight irreverence, and are not afraid to make a statement that is quotable.

BUATTA: You have to be quotable.

GREEN: I think what happens, and I have no [intention?] to dismiss Albert Hadley, who was major talent.

BUATTA: No, no. Listen, Albert’s one of my teachers. I’ve learned more from Albert than from a lot of other people.

GREEN: But I do think with Albert, you get a lecture. And of course, lectures do not work as quotable material for reporters. But reporters are looking for that thing that grabs the reader. And when they deal with worlds that they’re not too familiar with themselves, that’s why when they say, “What is next year’s color?” It is because that
becomes a news item. [00:09:00] If you can say, you know, “Pay attention. Orange and yellow are in.” You know, because there are loads of people who buy magazines because of the authority. In other words, they want someone to tell them exactly what is in or out, or whatever it be. The success of in and out lists is just utterly ridiculous, you know. The self-proclaimed authority says, “You’re in. You’re out.” That kind of thing. And I know people who take them perfectly seriously.

BUATTA: I know they do. I know. I’d rather be not in a period than to be in it. Don’t include me, thank you very much.

GREEN: Well, but I think also that one has, you see, you have one quality which is coming through in this tape, and that is that you settled on a point of view which may have been, how you say, solidified by the Colefax Fowler experience, and then going on from there. [00:10:00] But really, what started with your aunt, and started with a whole sense that there was a contrast between the anonymous quality of the new things in your own house, and this tyranny of living in a house where one could not use this, that, or the other thing. And a point of view that was not unusual. In other words, the point of view of your mother and your father was very typical of many, many thousands, hundreds, millions of
people in this country and in the world. The rare quality of a designer who is able to, out of that, select what works for him, what appeals to him. And I think that your authority has become unquestioned because you know what it is that you believe in. And you’re not threatened by the fact that it is not... I mean, there are people who think it’s old-fashioned. There are people who think it’s dated. There are people who say it’s for old ladies. It has nothing to do with young couples. So forth and so on. Well, I’ve been on the position of being on panels where this sort of thing has been discussed, and I’ve always said a very simple thing. You cannot genderize these things. This has nothing to do with just women. There are men who would like to live in an English country house. And there are young people who are happiest when they are in settled surroundings. Everybody is not Avant-garde, and everybody does not want dramatic excitement. There are people who really are much more comfortable with the sense of the familiar. And I have also maintained that when you... Often people who don’t have defined taste, by virtue of the fact that they’ve not had time or the experience, often with new money, because they’ve been busy earning the new money. But they have enough smarts to recognize it when they see it. They can’t find it.
[00:12:00] They can’t do it. They can’t define it. But they recognize it. You know, you take people, and I mean, all you have to do is take somebody into an absolutely marvelous gentleman’s club, you know, where there’s unquestioned taste. There isn’t a lot of style, but there is unquestioned taste, you know. And you will see people respond by lowering their voice, straightening their posture, remembering their manners. Because the nature of the physical surrounding and the aura of it all creates an office to them, direction. This is the way you behave in this kind of situation. And there are people who want rooms like that. You know, they absolutely want rooms like that. And I remember Tom Fallon saying he wanted an English clubman’s room, and the only thing I could say was, “Well, get yourself a beat-up leather couch.” I mean, you know, I’ve never seen one with a new one, you know. It has to look as if it’s been sat on for 150 years. [00:13:00] And then that’s the beginning. That’s something that you start with.

BUATTA: Maybe he was an Englishman in his former life. Like you see, I was a dog in my former life. I was a King Charles spaniel.

GREEN: And you always wanted to have a bow.
BUATTA: And I always wanted to have a bow. So now I’ve got bows all over my pictures.

GREEN: I have great respect and admiration for what you do, and I think the more we talk, the more I realize that much of it comes from a singular awareness that you have a point of view. You don’t deny other points of view. You are not arrogant about it. You simply say, “This is what I represent. And if you like what I represent, it is conceivable that together, we can create something that will be quite marvelous for both of us.

BUATTA: I would say that most of my work, I mean, as my apartment looks like, it might be, you know, a part of an English house. Or I think it is. The feeling of what an English house [00:14:00] is all about. Basically, most of my clients do not live the way I happen to live myself. I live in a very... I live with collections, things that have meant something to me. I mean, most of my clients live in... It’s certainly an American version of an English country house. But most of my clients live in much more thought out, clearly defined sort of spaces that sometimes even border on being contemporary. And yet, it’s the same feel. It’s that history, and the knowledge that I have in my short life, being only 30 years old. Only kidding. But in my life that basically, that I bring with
me to a job, and apply to that particular job. Each job is
different, and each job basically ends up having to be
something that’s lived in and comfortable, and something
that they can feel happy about. So basically, you have to
have the knowledge. I don’t think you can decorate a
contemporary house without having first the knowledge of
what a traditional house was all about. And I
think that’s a mistake that a lot of students have that go
through today. They feel that, “Oh, I don’t want to learn
about Louis Hooey and all those people, because it doesn’t
mean anything.” But they need to learn what furniture was
all about, or why a thing was here, or why a bracket is
there, or whatever. Because that will help you in making
yourself ready for today. And that’s very important. I
think that’s why the Italians today, in fashion and design,
are where they are. Because I think their history, they’re
so deep, and steeped, and, you know, rich, you know,
traditional sort of sense of what it was all about. And
now today, they’re right up on top because they basically
have all that to fall back on. And they live with it all
their lives, and they just, it’s there, you know. I mean,
don’t you think, when you think of Italian, when you think
of design in Italy, and you think of England. When I think
of England, I think of Italy immediately. And
you think of what Indigo Jones and (inaudible) and all those people have everything they brought back from that part of the world. It’s amazing. And I’m not saying that it’s the only way, or certainly, Egyptians had their way, and every other culture had their way. But I think the Italian sort of sense of design has been very copied by the English, and certainly by other countries.

GREEN: I also think that there’s a connection that we can’t deny in this country, between ourselves and England. You know, in the sense that we are, many, many people feel very strong Anglophile identification, because they think of the best of taste being the English. I mean, if we are educated in this country, whether we like it or not, we begin to sound like English people, because you’ve gone to a private school where there have been English tutors, professors. [00:17:00] And we do identify with that. Our adoration of the British royal family is a great example of it. You know, we really are into it, and feel very strongly about it. But I don’t think that’s a bad thing, excepting that it’s so interesting in England, at the present time, that there really are again two classes. There’s the rich and the poor. And the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer.

BUATTA: In England too, you think.

BUATTA: Certainly in New York that’s happened. The middle class has suffered.

GREEN: It’s certainly true in England. And it’s a little scary, and I wonder, you know, what... Some of it relates one’s mind to the sense that the English have always had the attitude that they don’t buy things. They have them. You know. I mean, I remember saying [00:18:00] to Edouard Molinaro, you know, years and years ago, when I was a very young man in a visit to his country house in a weekend, which adored. I’m passing some actual nuts. It’s not Mr. Buatta calling me a nut. And I remember, you know, thinking at the time how extraordinary it was that everything looked as if it had been inherited. And of course, you can’t believe that everyone you meet has lineage that goes back to the Magna Carta, you know, and Charlemagne, and so forth and so on. I mean, you just can’t believe that.

BUATTA: You’re led to believe it by a lot of people, aren’t you?

GREEN: Yes, and by the rooms that they live in, and the things that they surround themselves. It’s also interesting, when you think that that kind of firm [00:19:00] resistance to change, because a part of it is a
resistance to change, is also affecting the fact that they don’t seem to be able to face what’s happening economically in their own country. They are no longer, I mean, they’re about a nineteenth position in world countries now. I mean, you know, you’re talking about somebody that once was the British Empire. And within my lifetime, you know, I mean, I’ve seen all this happen. Which does give pause, you know, to thinking that maybe the eclecticism that we seem to identify with in this country, which is to use everything, bits and pieces of whatever it may be, does that have any relationship to what you think of as the American English country house?

BUATTA: I do, because I think basically what you’re talking about is a very civilized existence. I think the fact that they do live in rooms and houses that are filled with things and objects. They are island people, and they traveled a great deal. And they [00:20:00] brought back artifacts and furnishings from all different parts of the world. Especially they went to China. They went to Italy. They went all over. And you can see that in their culture. I mean, everything’s been borrowed from every part of the world, and that’s what makes it really interesting. I think that’s great about New York City. It’s a melting pot of many, many people, as is America. It’s a melting pot.
And I think that’s what makes Americans interesting. But no two of us look alike in the same room, but you can have a room full of people, and you have people from all parts of the world. You could have an international party just by snapping your fingers, you know. And it’s the same in any small town across America. You have pockets in Staten Island, where I was brought up. We had, I remember one area that was German. Another area was Irish. We had Italian areas. We had Slavic areas, Polish. I mean, it was incredible. That’s what makes it interesting. I think that’s what makes English houses interesting. And the fact that they are very civilized people by nature. And they love dogs, and they love animals. [00:21:00] The thing of bringing the outdoors in. Combination of all that. And it’s very attractive to Americans, because they like that. Basically, we’re very much Anglicized. And there’s lots of English people living in this country. But it has always been, from way, way back, the most civilized place to sort of emulate. I mean, England has always been very much a civilized place.

GREEN: You know, you certainly see it in terms of what we consider the best-dressed people, in terms of men. I mean, men who are, I mean, think of Ralph Lauren, who has become an enormous force in this country in relationship to men’s
clothes. And all that is is just, I said that joking. Thinks he’s the only legitimate son of the Duke of Windsor. And everything that he does, you know, is patterned after that kind of quality, direction, in gentlemen’s clothes.

BUATTA: But he did it, didn’t he? He had the sense to see that. And to [00:22:00] do it. And to realize that that’s what people wanted.

GREEN: And it’s interesting because it was also his fantasy. His fantasy for himself.

BUATTA: Sure it’s a fantasy. Sure. This is a fantasy for me, too. That’s what it’s all about. It’s living out your fantasy.

GREEN: If you’re advising students, if you were advising somebody who came to you and said, “I want to be a decorator,” what would you suggest?

BUATA: Well, it’s funny, because I think just sitting around here and talking to you today, I think that I’ve been trying to think what made me do what I do. And in the conversations that I have with my father every Sunday. And today being a Sunday, and today having had a conversation with him, in which he says to me every time we speak, is that if it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be here. You know, I continually get that from him. But he forgets that if it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be here. Because I’m only
doing what I do because I hated the way I was brought up. I hated the house I lived in. I hated everything [00:23:00] about it. And the fact that I’m now doing it 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year for the last 25 years that I’ve been in business. I’m celebrating my twenty-fifth anniversary this year in this wonderful business. And I think about it, and I think, well, the only reason I’ve done all this is basically because... But now, of course, I’m doing it on a larger scale because now I’m doing it for other people. I’m not just doing it for myself. And it’s a business. It’s a full-fledged business. And one has to think of it as being a serious profession. And to keep my sanity, obviously I do decorate the way I do because it’s what I like doing best, and I work within that framework. And now I see these young students that come out of school today that don’t have any training beyond, you know, a mies chair and a modern fabric that they’ve seen at Boris Kroll or whatever, or Jack [Laurenson?]. And I think, well, how are they ever going to be ready to do what they [00:24:00] have to do? Because everybody out there doesn’t want a mies chair. And if you’re... Certainly today, we’re living in a world of specialization. There’s a special doctor for everything. You go to a specialist. Every time you go to
a doctor, he says, “Oh, I’m going to send you to somebody who’s a specialist.” Well, it’s the same way with decoration and everything else. I think you eventually find the style you like best, and you work within that framework. And a lot of these kids don’t understand that. And it’s very difficult to explain to them. They also come from backgrounds where they don’t realize what they’re going to have to deal with when they get out into the world. And they can’t fathom the fact that somebody has, or wants to have, X, Y, or Z. Why would you want that? You know, they have pre-conceived ideas about what it’s all about, and how they’re going to go out and decorate a room the way it looks on the plan. And the client’s going to accept it down to the last ashtray. And it doesn’t work that way. You have to be very flexible. And you have to be able to sort of bend a great deal. Because now you’re in business, and you’re doing it [00:25:00] as a business. And you need to make a living and pay your expenses. And suddenly, you start to realize that that chair that you thought they should have that they don’t like, they’re not going to buy it. You’re not going to make your expenses. So you’ve got to do something else. And young people today have a very, sort of very unflexible, I find. A lot of them think it’s all sort of fun. You just pick out a lot
of fabrics and furniture and put it all together. They
don’t realize how serious it is that today, when people are
furnishing their houses, they’re talking about a major
investment. It’s not just a little sort of working... I
mean, I don’t care what your budget is. It’s a major
investment. You could spend half a million dollars on a
room, and you could spend $50,000. You could spend $5000
on a room, and it’s still a major investment to most
people.

GREEN: I think, also, that I’d be interested in your reaction
to the sense that I have, that one’s knowledge of
furniture, fabrics, [00:26:00] space, etc., isn’t the only
thing it’s all about. I think one has to have a knowledge
of culture, of literature, of the theatre, of music, of
language, of being able to articulate what it is that you
feel. I tried to say to a student recently, who really
talked with that jargon that you find, which has to do
with, OK, man, you know, you see that I feel, man, that
it’s just, man, I mean, you know, all this sort of musical.
And I said, “You think someone’s going to give you a budget
of any amount of money when you can’t even communicate what
it is that you wish to demonstrate that you understand
[00:27:00] what they want, or what they feel, or what their
needs are, or your point of view?” I said, you know, “It
doesn’t work that way. You really have to learn words, and you really have to be able to not only learn the words, but you have to sound like somebody who is to be respected.” I said, you know, “The finest piece of poetry can be defeated by the wrong accent.” I mean, you know, accents that are jokes, like the Brooklyn accent, do not work when people are trusting that taste and beauty is going to come out. And if you know that, if your background is such that you have that accent, then one of your first things you’re going to have to work on is learning to speak better, differently.

BUATTA: I think all that is a cosmetic thing that comes across with a job. I mean, one has to be able to relate. I mean, just because you have certain setbacks -- the way you look or the way you dress -- doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re not able to put something together and do a better job than somebody else. But unfortunately, appearances are very important. And I’m always amused, because I don’t think I look like, in a person’s mind, what a typical Italian would look like. In this day and age, here I am, 51 years old. I gave a talk the other day in Palm Beach, and I can’t tell you how many people came up to me and said, “Oh, you don’t look anything
like what I expected.” I mean, what were they expecting to find? I mean, I don’t know.

GREEN: Something swarthy and dark and black.

BUATTA: Well unfortunately, we live in a time when we typecast everybody. And who would ever think that Robert L. Green would look like he does? You know, Robert L. Green, you think would be a tall, slender bean-like (laughs). No, I’m teasing. With the point [00:29:00] being that appearance, in this business, is very important. And I think part of what you should learn in decorating school or design school is getting ready for the job. And I think there’s not enough of that. I don’t think students today get any practical experience in school. I think they need to be out. Part of their three-year or four-year training period should be four to six months in a firm, where they actually apprentice and work with and see what the reality of what it’s all about. Because they come here, and they’re flustered. They come out of school, and they think it’s all going to be a dream. They don’t realize all they have to go through. And appearance is very important. I happen to have an assistant at present who just is a shock to me. Clients look at him, and I see them looking over his clothes. His clothes are perfectly nice. They’re clean. They just happen to be very punkish for somebody who’s
dealing with the kinds of clients that I deal with. They’re basically straight-lace, sort of traditional.

GREEN: It’s very understandable, [00:30:00] I think. I’ve tried to communicate to students that you are a performer, and you are also selling. Because the nature of service businesses is that you have to sell your service. And if you throw your talent as a salesperson off by virtue of the fact that the image that you project is offensive, or anachronistic. It doesn’t connect with the, because somebody who has fabulous punk style might do very well dealing with new wave music, and selling that. But they’re not going to logically deal effectively with old English homes, you know, that kind of thing, unless they’re very, very charming and talented.

BUATTA: No, I think appearance has a lot to do with it. And I think that it’s something that, we’re very spoiled. And I think children today [00:31:00] are very spoiled by their parents, and they’re very spoiled in the sense of... I think they’re getting better. I think Ralph Lauren has probably helped more than anybody. I mean, this whole thing of going back to wearing jackets and ties and shirts at school, you know, whereas before, they went in wearing just any old thing. I think a lot of that has to do... And I think a lot of the discipline was ease in
the sixties and seventies by so many people, parents, that they let their kids wear dungarees at school, or levis, or whatever they call those things. And I think there was a whole sort of breaking down. And that’s part of the breaking down of a class system, too. Although we are not to be thought of as having a class system, we do have a class system. It works in the sense of who has more money, you know. The more money you have, the higher up on the ladder you go, you know. I mean, that’s what it’s all about. It has nothing to do with, a lot of times, achievement. But achievement has a great deal to do with it, too. So we’re very much a country, being a young country, and also basing people’s status on how much they earn and what they do, whereas in England, you’re based on your lineage. I mean, where you come from, and that’s the important factor there. And I think it’s more exciting in this country to know that you have a chance. Because I think that those people are totally frustrated. And they get into the little role models and they stay that way for the rest of their lives. And they become totally, you know, unable to really expand themselves. Because they know that they’re going to always be in that position and never be anything but middle class. Whereas in this country, you can be upper class. Just go out and make a
lot of money or achieve something, and you’re upper class, you know.

GREEN: Money or celebrity.

BUATTA: Yeah, money or celebrity is the definition. Yeah.

GREEN: One can’t leave you without calling attention to the part of the thing that you are increasingly famous for, is your identification with the [00:33:00] antique show. Talk about that. When did you get into it, and why do you do it? What does it mean?

BUATTA: Well, I’ve always been interested in antiques, and, no, I was going to say something else, but you’re going to chop this thing up or something.

GREEN: Yeah, don’t worry about it.

BUATTA: Basically, you have to remember that I come from a, you said something earlier about publicity or whatever. I was thinking about how I basically come from a show business background. And my father. Basically, there’s a certain amount of, when I was a child growing up, that my father was in the limelight. And he was pretty much of a celebrity in his time. He wasn’t Tommy Dorsey, and he wasn’t Peter Duchin. But he was somewhere, [00:34:00] you know, around some place in between someplace. And people remember him. I mean, people to this day say, “I remember your father.” (inaudible). He played t dances or
whatever. And he was called [Phil Berton?], by the way. His name wasn’t Buatta. There was a certain amount of that, as a child, that I was always put down by my father. Which he doesn’t understand. To this day, he still does it. He told me this morning, he said to me, “If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be there.” You know. In a nice way, but he always makes me remember that I came from him. You see, it’s very funny. And it was very funny. In 1969, when he did the first show house, and he said to me, “What are you doing this?” Because I work seven days a week, and at least 18 hours a day. And I even consider work when I have to go to a dinner party. You know, that’s work. And [00:35:00] it’s something that all my life, I’ve had to sort of stand up next to him and be as tall as he is. (inaudible, phone rings) But I was always standing up to my father. And to this day, I still have that problem. And I remember back about 10, 12 years ago. It was about 12, 13 years ago when he married his present wife. And they were on their honeymoon. They went on a cruise in the Caribbean. And it was a man and his wife that they met. He said, “Hey, you spell your name like that famous decorator Buatta. Mario Buatta.” My father said, “That’s my son.” And suddenly, it was my son, the decorator, you know. Because up until that time, he’d heard about me, and
people had told him about me. But suddenly then, he realized, you know, “Gee, this is a branch of me.” But it’s very difficult for fathers, oftentimes, to sort of accept the fact that their son can do anything on his own. And I think that was my father. My father always thinks of me as being a little boy. I guess a lot of parents do. But there are a lot of parents I know, a lot of my clients who think of their children as being terrific, you know. My father did not think of me as being terrific. He always thought of me as being sort of, you know, not exactly odd, but, you know, he never understood me. Never. And to this day, he doesn’t understand me. He doesn’t know why I’m doing what I do. He has no clue. But as far as the angle, and that itself lends itself to a lot of... I’m chewing away here. It’s terrible. A lot of, the reason of publicity, and what makes you more successful than other people. And the fact that maybe you seek out publicity. And obviously I do seek it out to a point. I mean, there’s great satisfaction in knowing that what you’ve done is being publicized. You’re well-liked by somebody. And a lot of that is important to your business. You know, and it’s what makes the machinery work. Because there’s a lot of talented people in this field that might have a very good business, but they’d have
more business if they got more publicity. But it takes a lot of hard work. And it’s all part of my background, I think, with my father, of his being in show business and being a sort of celebrity of sorts. And I think that certainly, the antique show has, in one sense, helped me a great deal in being more well-known, because of doing the show. On the other hand, one of the reasons I got involved was I was asked by Louis Bowen and [Johnathan?] Fitzgibbons, John being the chairman during that period asked me to help decorate the party, very much the way I right now ask people from Seventh Avenue to decorate the same party. And, as you know, the party shows ran every year. Sorry. As you know, [00:38:00] the winter I teach was an annual thing in New York, and it happens every January. It’s the most prestigious show in the country. And when John was running it, it was very much geared towards the collector and dealers. And when I took over, it was two years. It was a year and a half, I think, after he died, that I was asked to be chairman by the committee. And I decided to change the whole feeling of it, and turn it into a more social evening. And it’s become one of the most important social events of the winter season. And we swelled from 700 people. We swelled up to 2700 people who attended the opening night party. And we also swelled the
coffer from $30,000 to $530,000 last year. And hopefully this year, we’ve made about $630,000. And it’s also my way of not only working on the show which I enjoy, because I love antiques. But I also orchestrate basically [00:39:00] opening night party, and the overall look of the show. It’s not always an enormous success, from that point of view, because it’s very difficult working with a lot of egos, and working with small budgets. But it’s also a nice way of working and doing something for the poor that I’ve always wanted to do. And at one point, I did go to Harlem, and I got involved with some sort of a class up there, where you taught decorating. How to make your home a better place to live. And I found it very frustrating, because it was very difficult to try to put across your ideas. And I find now, that working with East Side House Settlement, that I’ve been able to do a great deal more in raising money for the programs. And you get a great deal of satisfaction out of it. And why I’m still there, it’s only because I’ve done a good job. And they continue to ask me to be the chairman. We have the same committee. It never really has changed. And we never invite anybody new to do anything, simply because it’s a lot easier to work with the people that have always done their job. And the job gets done. It’s only a 10-day thing every year, and it works
out very well. [00:40:00] I’m not going to be able to do it for the rest of my life, but I’m certainly, I always say another year or two. It’s fine, and then I’ll quit, you know. But who knows.

GREEN: Well, I think as long as it succeeds under your helm, why shouldn’t you continue to do it, you know.

BUATTA: I guess so. I enjoy it. I certainly enjoy it. And it’s easy to do now. I mean, it’s worked out. One works on it every month of the year, because you have to continually find new dealers and new resources for doing the decorating. A new celebrity from Seventh Avenue. I’ve had Oscar De La Renta, Bill Blass, Mary McFadden. I started out with Lee (inaudible) at the beginning. And then I started doing decorators, and I found that didn’t work, because it didn’t bring in the Seventh Avenue contingent, which is what I really wanted. And by doing Seventh Avenue, having a politician as one of the honorary chairmen. Having decorators do panel discussions, and things of that sort. [00:41:00] And you know, you brought in different facets, different phases of society around New York, and it was good, because it made it a more well-rounded evening. It brought a lot of people together from different worlds.
GREEN: Well also, we have to realize that, you know, we live in a world in which we have created our own kind of royalty in fashion. The greats of a fashion world are a form of royalty in our current society. And it’s much more so than decorators. One of the reasons for that, of course, is that if you make clothes, and they’re successful, you are advertised every single day, or certainly every weekend in every paper across this country. That is not true of decorators. Decorators have an insular territorial relationship to the reasonably small area that they work in, or relatively small group of people. And it’s been very hard for decorators to understand the difference, say, [00:42:00] in licensing and franchising and so forth, between the fashion world, which deals with these enormous amounts of money, you know. Ralph Lauren’s income is extraordinary. You know, you’re talking about incomes of 10, 20, 30 million dollars a year, you know, just. It’s true. Calvin or anything of that nature. Because the country is that large. And now that, I mean, Ralph has pioneered the business of opening up in Europe, and in Paris, London.

BUATTA: I know he’s opening those stores all over the country, too.

GREEN: Yeah, it will all happen.
BUATTA: Sure. It’s amazing. But you see, I think the whole trouble of licensing for decorators, I think it’s been successful for a whole lot of people. Angelo, John Saladino, myself now with my fabrics and few other smaller things that I’ve done. And it’s going to, hopefully I’m going to continue doing it. Now Jay Spectre’s done a whole thing at Bloomingdale’s. The problem is that working as we do as interior designers, and working for that small, private sector of the community, of the nation, we work in that small, maybe upper one percent of the population. And maybe that one percent is more like half of one percent of the population, of who can really afford to buy and live, and who really want, and who have really an interest in living with things that they really like, and that maybe the average person can’t afford to buy, or whatever. The point being that our names aren’t as well known, because obviously the fashion people are out there selling. As you said, they’re out there being publicized all the time. And a woman goes into a shop in Des Moines, and she sees Bill Blass sheets. Well, she knows Bill Blass dresses, and they must be [great?] sheets, because Bill Blass did them. If she saw Mario Buatta sheets, she’d say, “Who? Who’s that? I don’t know who that is. I haven’t got a clue.” And the same with a lot of other
interior designers. But the point is that it’s unfortunately a weakness in our business that we have not really stood up for what we really believe in. And we’ve always sort of bowed to the other professional. For example, the interior designer who’s always bowed to the architect. The architect is given credit for a building for as long as the building stands. A decorator does a space, and it’s forgotten about after it’s been redone over six years or three years or whatever. And it’s totally forgotten. You get a fashion person today in the Midwest. He can sell china. He can sell rugs. He can sell practically anything. Unfortunately, or I should say fortunately for the interior designer, I don’t think the strength of the fashion designer is as powerful as it was five years ago. I think they have lost their hold, because a lot of people really don’t care about these designers. They don’t care about what they have to say or what they don’t have to say. And they’re not [00:45:00] people who are decorating all the time, or dictating to you the way they should live. And I think people today are more aware of the interior designer. However, we do live in an age of specialization, and we live in a situation where decorating, primarily -- although most of my work is out of New York, around the country -- most designers or most
decorators in other cities work within the framework of that city. So they aren’t as well known. And I go out. I give a lot of talks. I mean, Angelo did that as well. Saladino does it, too. Jay Spectre does it. And we’re out there all the time, in all different parts of the country, speaking to people. Whether they be at antique shows, whether they be at ASID conventions, whether they be for women’s groups. Sort of spreading yourself, getting yourself out there is one way of being known. And of course, it’s always going to be with an upper income group, because those are the people who are attracted to you. The next thing, of course, is the fact that the nice thing that’s happened to me with the fabrics, which I had never expected to do, but Jay Yang approached me three years ago and said, asked me if I would like to do it. And the fabrics, I’m now on my third collection, and they’re two years ahead of time. We’ve sold almost, well, over 750,000 yards of fabric, which is a lot of fabric, and it’s pretty successful. And I never thought it would happen. I laughed when he asked me to do it. And I thought it was a big joke. But I think that’s the future. I think that’s where the future is for the designer, for an interior designer. Because I think that he has to, she has to expand her horizons. And I think it’s great to be an
elitist and say, “Well, I’m only going to work for certain kinds of people, and this is all I’m going to do.” That’s great, if that’s what you want to do. Sure, that’s fine. I don’t happen to want to do that. I mean, I’ve been working since I was 13. And I think it’s sort of time. I mean, self-imposed. I mean, I really have put myself in a position where I’ve created a monstrous business, but I [00:47:00] enjoy it. And I resent the fact that I [only?] have a Saturday or Sunday to myself. But on the other hand, I like what I’m doing, and I get great pleasure out of the results. And a lot of people can’t say that. You know, they really don’t apply themselves. They’re really not that interested. And they really want to have more free time. And free time to me is sort of a bore. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself. Free time to me is going antiquing. I mean, that’s what I do. The minute I have some free time, I go out and I shop. So it’s something that’s in my blood. It’s in my, you know, neurotic makeup. I mean, I’m obviously a very neurotic, deranged person.

GREEN: But intelligent, talented, and charming.

BUATT: One hopes some of those things, right? A part of them. But I think that there are a lot of designers who
will never go the commercial route. But I think that
that’s where the future is, because I think people --

END OF AUDIO FILE

BUATTA: There are a lot of people. I think, not only do we
owe it to society. We owe it to civilization to sort of
leave something behind. And I think it’s all well and good
to design for a few people who can afford to have the best,
but I think it’s also nice to be able to leave something
for people, or to be able to produce something for people
who can’t afford to have you do their house. And that they
can buy a yard of my chintz, or a yard of Angelo Donghia or
something, or Steven, a Jay Spectre chair or a John
Saladino sofa. And know that they have a bit of that
person. Why shouldn’t they have it? Why shouldn’t they,
you know, have what’s available? If they can’t afford to
have you do all the house, they can have a few things that
you have your name on. And I think it’s very valid,
because I think when you think of Mr. Chippendale and Mr.
[Addam?], or Mr. Anybody, whose designs we’re still living
within this time, but they’ve been bastardized by so many
manufacturers who have designers who say, “Well, I’ll do
the chair, but I’m going to do it my own [00:01:00] way,”
you know. And they put out a taller back, or they put a Louis [Sais?] leg on an English chair. I mean, the whole thing is so, it gets to be horrendous. So that if someone is known for doing something and can develop what they have learned and what they have been able to apply to their rich clients, why not have them make things for the mass market that will sell? You know, if there’s a need for it. And certainly the exciting thing with fabrics, to me, has been that it’s happened. I laughed. I thought it was a joke. And when I saw the figures coming in. But what they told me that I’d get the first year as part of my compensation for doing it, I’ve practically tripled each year. So that was the excitement of that. That part, that’s the succeeding, too. I mean, that’s part of why your success is part of what you’re remunerated.

GREEN: Oh, absolutely.

BUATTA: Remunerations are like aluminum.

GREEN: If you had your choice of the next [00:02:00] franchise, the next design that you would do for the mass-market level after the chintzes, the fabrics, what would it be?

BUATTA: Well, I know wallpapers are coming out in December. I signed up for that already. That’s a natural. And I’ve been talking to bed linen people and china people until I’m
blue in the face on my own for the last couple of years. And I’ve decided to hire a... I think we talked about this. Remember I told you, I asked you, and I said what did... And I decided I’m going to go with one of these guys, and just have them handle it. I can’t cope with it. I just can’t cope.

GREEN: I think you’re wise to do that. I really do.

BUATTA: Listen, it’s there. Whatever they can get for me, it’s going to be something I couldn’t get myself. I didn’t have the... They certainly earn their living. But I need someone who can direct me and who can, you know, take me. Because I don’t have the time to do all this. This is a drag. It’s a very time-consuming situation. But I think probably [00:03:00] bed linens, if it works, next. And china, about the same time. And I’ve let a whole year slip by, because I’ve talked to these people, and I just don’t have the time to follow through. But once it’s a definite thing, I can fit it into my schedule. I’ll do it.

GREEN: Well, of course, the time element has operated positively for you, because of the success of the chintz. You know, if the fabrics didn’t succeed, then nobody else would be --

BUATTA: Nobody would think about it. I think the fact that the fabrics have been so successful has made other people
interested in doing things with me. Otherwise, it could be a disaster. I mean, there have been so many programs and so many things that have gone out there that don’t work. And I could have lots of failures too. Listen, a lot of those fashion people have had many, many failures. Many failures. I was talking to one the other night, and the assistant of one very well-known designer. And she said that for every successful one they have, they have 20 that are not successful. But that also has to do with the fact that [00:04:00] an educated consumer is not going to buy an appliance designed by, you know, Joe Schmo, because he’s a fabulous fashion designer. She’s not going to say, “Hey, Joe Schmo designed it. This is terrific.” You know. He may be good at doing dresses, but that doesn’t make any sense.

GREEN: Yeah, I think there’s a growing sophistication, also, amongst the consumer public, which is that when you have a name that is on so many different things, even their common sense tells them that it would be impossible for that designer to design those things. And often, the level of footballing the name means that the taste level and the quality level of some of the signed name, designer, whatever, products are not very good. And very quickly they learn that. I think that you’re wise in moving
slowly, I think. You know, in terms of building it so that it is quality, and it does reflect what you wish to have developed for you. [00:05:00] Well, you’ve been very generous with your time and with your knowledge and with your awareness. And as an old friend, I’m delighted to have had this experience with you. And I learned some things about you. I learned some things generally, which is always gratifying to me. I find that one does these things, and hopes that they stretch oneself. And this has been a very gratifying experience. I think, on behalf of the Fashion Institute of Technology, I offer my gratitude.

BUATTA: Well, I offer my thanks for your being here. I’ve enjoyed it enormously. I feel as though there a lot of things we haven’t touched on, but unfortunately, one can’t touch on everything, I know, in a short period such as this.

GREEN: Well, what things? What things, for instance?

BUATTA: Well, nothing comes to mind at the moment. I mean, specifically, try to get me in hot water. I think there are a lot of things that I could have talked about that basically one takes for granted. [00:06:00] I mean, thinking of all the people, for example, over the years that have helped for me to develop myself and develop my... I don’t mean to be, you know... I think there are things
we probably haven’t touched on that we could have. Someone might say, “Hey, what about…” If you want to do this again, we can do it again. I don’t care.

GREEN: I can take more time now, if you want.

BUATTA: No, I’m just thinking about things that, for example, developing a decorator’s, you know, sort of, viewpoint, his brain… We touched on all that. But I think when you think about the amount of people whose work that I’ve looked at over the years that have helped me to develop my own taste, I mean, it just wasn’t three or four decorators or designers. It was maybe 300 or 400, you know, that I’ve seen. You know, everything is a learning process. And I always think, I always tell these kids that they, they come to work for you, and they feel they’re not learning anything. I say, “Every day, you’re learning something new. Every day, you’re learning something different. You’re absorbing everything. And eventually it will all come together. And you develop yourself.” And a lot of people just never allow themselves that, you know, time and that sort of… I mean, when I think about George Stacey, who was such a brilliant guy. And you think of, each one of them had something to offer. You know, you. And have something to offer. All of us. We all have something to offer everybody. We all learn from
everything. I mean, I look at you. The way you dress. And I’ve learned things from seeing you over the years. You have a great flair, about you, you know. And I see the way somebody else dresses. The Duke of [Windsor?], you see. And then you end up putting yourself together. Maybe it doesn’t come across as any of those people, but you’ve learned something from them. And that’s the important thing. The idea is to learn. It’s to always be receptive. Always have your eyes open and your ears open. And absorb what you can. And try not to look at the bad things so much as you do at the good. There’s always something good in every bad, because there’s a lesson to be learned. But if you look at too many bad things, you end up [00:08:00] applying them to, you know, your work. I used to say that, it’s funny. I used to not ever want to look at rooms that I didn’t like, because I thought, “Oh my God, if I look at this enough, I’ll absorb too much of it.” It’s true. I mean, you know, we’re very much the victim of our surroundings, you know. And it’s that rebellious nature, that attitude that makes us go out and do what we really do best, if we have it in us to do it, you know.

GREEN: I think, of course, that all of us are the product of all the experiences, not only those that are conscious as well as unconscious. But I have a firm belief that there
are typal images. In other words, the things that... All of Italy adds something to your particular talent and your particular growth and development. Because there are much that we don’t know about how these things are passed on to us from generation to generation to generation. And [00:09:00] there are qualities that... I mean, it’s fascinating that you have an understanding of the show business quality of what you’re doing. And of course it’s connected to your family role and your father’s role. And I think these things are very real. I don’t think that this is unusual at all. I think that they are... And much of what young people do is revolting against the previous generation. Everybody wants to declare, “I know more than you do, and you don’t know anything at all.” And we carry the aches and the hurts and the pains, I think, are offered to us, because we are sensitive people. And because we are the artists and the creative people of our society. And that sensitivity is what allows for new expressions, breaking down of new boundaries. Because you do rebel against the... [Not only?] the bad, but even the good of what you’ve been exposed to, if it’s tied up to the parental world. [00:10:00] And I’m not so sure that one has to think of it in terms of neurosis as much as it is just a different level of growth. Within families, it’s
always remarkable that there’s one person who is the artist and the sensitive, creative person. Somebody else is enormously good with their hands and has a whole ability to do complex things that they do with as much gratification, as much ability, and as much directness as you do with your creative work. And it is, you know, as much as one would like to be able to mention everybody who’s educated our eyes, every trip, every experience, every room, every... I mean, I think, I encourage students to go to the theatre, because the theatre is the crystallization of lighting, of design, of solutions to problems. To how do you put on [00:11:00] stage something that’s supposed to represent the Mississippi River? You know, you go to see Big River as a show. The set that gives you the sense that they’re coming down the river is an enormous experience, if you allow your eye to accept that. I grew up with all the drawing room comedies of Rachel [Cravers?], [S.M. Burman?], the stars like Gertrude Lawrence, Ina Claire, all of whom had, because it was the nature of what made those rooms work and those plays work, was that they were about people of great manner and great style. And so they wore the clothes of great manner and style. Their diction had great manner and style. These were not people who were born to this. Most of, you scratch the backgrounds and the surface of these
people, and you are dealing, as no coward with Gertrude Lawrence, with, you know, at best lower middle class.

That’s the best [00:12:00] we know. And Ina Claire --

BUATTA: They had a need to do that. It was like, Elsie, what was the same, the same sort of thing.

GREEN: Oh, absolutely. You see, Elsie --

BUATTA: She had a terrific need for that, a great, neurotic desire.

GREEN: Well, she also had, you know, she had one quality which everybody forgets. That she started out as an actress. Now, she was not a good actress. What she was was exactly what we think of as a dress extra. What she did have was a great flair for clothes. And like a lot of unattractive women who are unattractive in traditional terms, in other words, what’s the acceptable level of beauty? I’ve always maintained the French don’t know about ugliness. The French have no ugly women. Their attitude is everybody has [their eccentric]?]. They’re amusing. They’re interesting. You could see a French woman with a very large nose and with a long chin, and she has personality, and she makes... Puts a feather in her head and moves with an [00:13:00] exciting manner. And she selects clothes that are a little flamboyant and a little exciting and a little dramatic. And you adore her. You
think she’s absolutely wonderful. And an American woman, placed with the same level of deformity, would be defeated completely and rejected by everyone, because she can’t do that. Because the culture doesn’t allow her to do it. Less of that is happening today, because more and more of the individual needs of people, and the fact that we now have a respect for style that we didn’t have before. And individuality allows people to do those things. But Elsie, you know, I’ve always maintained that out of her ability to clean herself up, in terms of her wardrobe and her clothes and her manner, allowed her to clean rooms up. You know, in other words, she wanted the spotlight. She wanted the sun in. She wanted light, because all of that allowed you to be recognized. [00:14:00] And she had an all-consuming need. And it was interesting that the woman she became closely associated with in the most intimate fashion was somebody who became the first great agent in terms of the theatre, you see. So who obviously was also attracted to her because she recognized that she was dealing with a theatrical personality. Now, it was all done within levels of taste that we find extraordinarily polite and acceptable today, but not so if you compared it to what other people were doing at the time. And I think the... I guess if I make any plea to students at all, is don’t ignore those
things. Learn from those people. And apply it to your own world. Go to the theatre. Go to the movies. Think about everything. And I send students of mine just to walk around the block, and look for architectural details that can be translated and transposed into other areas of design. You know, find me some cuff links. Give me [00:15:00] a design for a necktie. It’s there. It’s all there. It’s just, if your eyes see it in that particular way. If you don’t see it, then you’ll --

BUATTA: You see, I never studied under you, but I think of Stanley, and Stanley was the same way. It was the same thing of bringing the best out in a person. Stanley had an incredible... Because I was very insecure about everything. Stanley just said, “Do it. You know what you’re doing. Do it. If you like that, do it.” And he would make me do it. And he’d say, “Do it. You’ll see. Do it.” You know. He always said that I was the most inquisitive student he ever had in one of those tours. It was very funny. He said, “You ask more questions than anybody else.” Because I was. I was interested in what was going on. And I was fascinated, too, because I think a lot of students today come out of these schools. And they come out. They’re typecast. They come out as though they’re in a mold. And I think that one of the dangerous
things is, for example... I keep seeing things move from this side. Isn’t that weird? It’s a reflection of the... It’s fascinating, because I remember when I went to the Parsons thing, [00:16:00] that summer of 1961. And so many of those students all did the same kind of thing. They all came out of school. They all thought they were going to be big stars. And they were all doing the same kind of things. Skirted tables, St. Thomas sofa, a wooden table, Parsons table, you know. Two armless chairs, two French open armchairs. They all do the same thing. And it’s fascinating to me, because, out of all those years and all those schools, how many people came out that are really well known? I remember there was one year at Parsons when you had Angelo Donghia, Tom Britt, (inaudible) Callahan, Joe Braswell, and one or two others, all in one year. And they’re all stars. I mean, they were all well known. They were all very talented in their own right. And they all had a certain amount of style about them. They applied it to their work. You have years that you go through those schools and nobody comes out. Nobody. Nobody. And you can’t blame it on the school. You can’t blame it on [00:17:00] the person. You can only blame it on what they have submitted themselves to over their lifetime. That they have not really allowed themselves to express
themselves, or to even absorb all the things about them. Many of these people came from nothing backgrounds. They came from a background that was perfectly plain, perfectly boring beyond belief. But they apply themselves. They went out and they did see the, as you said, they went out and they absorbed all the culture that was around that they could then redefine for themselves and make something, you know. But I think we’re living in great times. Aren’t we? We’re living in great times of kind of sameness. I mean, everybody dresses alike. They all, there are very few people that really stand out in a crowd today. I mean, I go out. Last night, I was in the nightclub, what you call a nightclub. Michael’s Pub. And there was one table with one group, and they were just so stylish. It was incredible. And the rest of, everybody looked alike in the whole room. I mean, there’s a thing in fashion that everybody dresses the way they want to dress. But the way they ultimately look [00:18:00] is basically plain and simple and nothing. It’s almost --

GREEN: Well, I think it goes back to that whole period which we talked about. Do your own thing, the new freedom. And I maintained at the time that everybody was quite willing to do their own thing. They just simply wanted someone to tell them what to do. (inaudible) --
BUATTA: Oh, you’re right. You’re absolutely right. They like being dictated. They like being told the way they should dress, the way they should live, the way they should do things.

GREEN: Well, I think it also is inevitable that, I mean, you talk about a nightclub room, and there’s one table.

BUATTA: There weren’t a lot of young people there, you see that. They’re all old people. It was the only table of young people, and that was the funny thing. And they were very stylish types. And I don’t go to places like gins or whatever they call those nightclubs, those discos es and things like that.

GREEN: [Knelves?].

BUATTA: Knelves. Yeah. And I’m sure that if I were to go there, I’d see a small percentage of people who did have great style.

GREEN: Oh, I think that more than --

BUATTA: Yeah, I’d probably, a larger percentage, yeah. But you don’t see it in typical [00:19:00] public places, where they’re middle sort of aged people. They’re all those people who came out of the mold in the sixties, and fifties and sixties, that all are very much alike.

GREEN: Well, I also think that the other part of it is that as you age, your role in society changes, and the risks. You see, one has to remember that style is very risky.
Taste is not. And because taste, by its nature, is a proven force -- in other words, something is finally accepted as being tasteful -- it’s gone through all kinds of minor adjustments and acceptance levels and so forth and so on. Whereas style is absolutely marvelous when it succeeds. I think there’s nothing as incredible as a woman of style who really makes it work, or a man of style that makes it work. But for every person who makes an attempt to express their individual style that succeeds, there are hundreds of bombs. You know, people who put combinations together. It’s a little like talking about nature. Nature never fails in terms of color. I mean, I’m an old gardener, and you cannot defeat flowers. I mean, they... But nature understands that. We don’t. I mean, we mix paints and we combine them together. Or somebody puts their clothes on together, and they can have offensive colors that, you know, you really think, “Oh, do take that off. It hurts my eyes.” You know, that kind of thing. Now, I think that... I mean, one can go on with this, and philosophically, it’s a fascinating area of discussion. I just think that we are living in a society which is more interested... It’s less interested in beauty and conformity and taste than it is in individual statement for the young. As you get older and your position changes,
because you move into your business or your profession or you are a role model for your own children. And one of the realities [00:21:00] is to recognize that there’s nothing as sad as an aging hippie, you know. I mean, in physical quality, you know. I mean, I saw a woman walking as I was coming over to your house here, down the street, because the weather was very warm outside, who was a grandmother with a [pock?]. But her legs were good, and she was wearing, you know, leotards. And everybody was staring at her, because obviously she was thinking, in her mind, that I look fabulous. She’s seeing her legs, you know, you stand in front of a mirror. You don’t see your pock on the side, and all of that. Or it may have been, of course, that she was a little more neurotic than I wish to accept. But the point is that as people age, things that worked effectively for them as great statements of style when they were young, do not work. And there’s a cultural change that occurs. Often, it’s dictated by the fact that you have to earn your living, and you have [00:22:00] this, that, and the other thing.

BUATTA: They want to fit into the background, too. And I think today, a lot of people of my generation don’t want to be too obvious. They don’t want to be pointed out. They want to be --
GREEN: That’s true. Crime on the streets has affected a lot of us. I’d much rather walk around with a zip up jacket than I would a fur lined coat, you know, for fear that somebody’s going to yank it off my back. All of these things are very part of it. But I think it’s also been logical, probably, all through the history of time. I think, you know, that whoever was wearing a toga with a slight interesting little flip back, once they became part of the Caesar cabinet, they all dressed the same. You know, just as we do in corporations. But I think every generation is prepared to respond to the younger generation with a certain amount of question, a certain amount of doubt, a certain amount of humor, even condescension, patronization. [00:23:00] It is inevitable. I mean, there’s never been a father that doesn’t listen to his 16-year-old son pontificating him upon the problems of the world. Because one of the things that’s marvelous about each age, as it develops, is that everything’s a new discovery. I mean, I listen to students, and they think they’ve discovered all the social problems in the world. They don’t think that we ever had any experience with any of these things. And now, of course, each generation does face new problems. I mean, we are living in a society which is facing with something which is potentially as damaging
as the Great Black Plague of the fourteenth century. The existence of AIDS, which is affecting all sorts of patterns, which affects sexual patterns, social patterns, mores, changes in relationships. Forces people back into monogamy. Creates a new level of romanticism. People are beginning to talk to one another again, because [00:24:00] if you can’t just hop from person to person to person in promiscuous sex, then your needs for attention, your needs for solving loneliness, your needs for all kinds of things, need to be touched, need for affection, I think manifest themselves in a new level of relationship. Because you’ve got to zero in on people who are not just physically attractive to you, but who are attractive because they’re interesting intellectually, socially. They have character. Whatever appeals to you. And I think that will affect design of rooms, because if compensation becomes far more important than conversation, our areas become more important. I keep saying to students, “Go and see Les Miserables. Go and see it because of the lighting.” The lighting is extraordinary in the show. And if you learn something from that, if you learn how to bathe and create [00:25:00] an illusion of eighteenth century candlelight with spots, you’ve learned something terribly important.
Then you begin to understand. This is my [deal?]. We can go on with this forever.

BUATTA: You can go on with it. What was it we were discussing, in any case? I don’t remember.

GREEN: Well, we were talking, you know, we were talking about, I mean, you first pointed out that there were so many people that had, so many rooms that you had seen. So many people that had encouraged you, added to your development, added to your growth. And out of that, we were just talking about the difference between current generations in terms of individuality. We were talking about the conformity that most people seem to manifest themselves in. And some of that has to do with, I mean, just as the fact that one rarely gets a client, as a decorator, who is very, very young. Because they don’t have the money, you know, to do it. Or they’re very busy moving around. They haven’t settled where they want to live, or how they want to live, or how they want to earn their money, who they wish to marry, or whatever it may be. And I think [00:26:00] that the desire for roots, the desire for status and continuum, doesn’t even occur to young people.

BUATTA: I think you’re right. I think this is very confusing. And I think, after being in this business for 25 years,
maybe I should think about something different. Maybe I should go into computer technology. Maybe I’ll take an aptitude test. I think I’ll do that from now on. I think that will be my future. I’m only kidding, but it’s funny, because one thinks about this business, and I think they think it’s such an easy job. They think that all we do is select a few fabrics, draw up a floor plan, and buy some furniture, and put it all together. And they think you’re making a fortune. First of all, we’re the most underpaid people of any profession. Decorators are the most underpaid. Number two, the most overworked. Nobody understands what it’s all about. And basically, as you say and as we’ve discussed, it’s a great art. It has a great deal to do with the people you’re working with. I mean, you’re molding their lives. You’re [00:27:000] molding their future. I mean, what you’re setting up for them, the stage that you are decorating or designing for them, they’re going to live their life on, has a great deal to do with whether their life is going to be successful or not, socially and in every other which way. You know, you might just give them the wrong kind of bedding, or you might put the bed in the wrong place, so the headboard might not be on the north wall. Like a lot of people are superstitious about sleeping only with their head to the north. I sleep
with my head to the north, because I’ve heard it from so many clients that I say, “Oh my God. I should be sleeping with my head to the North Pole, you know.” Who knows? I mean, I don’t know. It’s very fascinating. And you couldn’t do it on a computer. There’d be no way that it would ever work. It’s very, very difficult, but very enjoyable. I get a great deal of satisfaction, and if I didn’t, I wouldn’t be in it. I get a great thrill out of seeing all the elements that I’ve put together for over a period of maybe six months or a year with a client, and seeing it all together and seeing it completed. And seeing them go in and sort of mess it up and make it their own house, which ultimately gives them, [00:28:00] you know, their own setting, which is important.

GREEN: Yeah, I think that’s, you know, one doesn’t want to live in somebody else’s house. And I think that’s what conceivably can happen.

BUATTA: No way, no way.

GREEN: Well, Mario, we could go on for a long time, but I think that this is reaching the stage now where we’re both enjoying it to the point we’re not sure we want it to end. But like all good things, it has to come to an end. So once again, I say, on behalf of the Fashion Institute of Technology, my deepest gratitude and thanks.
BUATTA: Wasn’t that something we didn’t mention, Robert?
GREEN: Yes, it’s over.

END OF AUDIO FILE