

Contrasting styles and textures create striking juxtapositions, such as a country Chinese table set against a cinderblock wall, in an Avenue Lofts living room. Applegreen, pink and purple accents — along with a zebra-print ottoman — generate what designer Nani Vinken calls the “urban funk factor.”

LOFTY HEIGHTS

Designer Nani Vinken elevates South Florida loft décor.





BY ELIZABETH RAHE
PHOTOGRAPHER JIM FAIRMAN

“‘Never do something’ doesn’t apply to me. If put in the right context everything absolutely has the right to exist.”

A cloud of Indian saris hanging from the ceiling. A rolling library ladder stretching to an unreachable alcove. A glass walkway bridging living spaces high overhead. A parked Hummer masquerading as a design element. Nani Vinken’s Caprese salad hasn’t even made it to Caffe Blu’s Las Olas patio, and she’s already ticked off a fantastical list of ideas for loft-style decor. The Fort Lauderdale-based designer also has detailed her own loft-living adventures, described the city’s loft-construction trend and declared her zeal for creating interiors in these high-rise, high-ceiling, industrial-architecture, window-dominated, city-centric dwellings.

“What this speaks is edges, geometry, shapes,” she says. “A loft is very much defined by its form language and spatial relations and proportions. It’s not defined by things, and that’s what I love.”

Before her second cigarette Vinken has offered — for the benefit of her 19-year-old niece, Sarah, visiting from Germany — some thoughts on turning a passion into a career: “I thought I wanted to be a painter. I had a passion for color and creativity and space and form,” says Vinken, who started to study painting in college but then switched to design. “The trick is, because we don’t live in huts or on a campground, also to make sure you can make money doing it.”



"People ask me what color I'm going to paint the walls. I say, 'What do you mean?'"

With a luminous smile, vivid blue eyes and über-blond hair, Sarah looks like an earlier version — or perhaps a clever gene-pool variation — of Aunt Nani. She's here doing a multifaceted internship with Vinken's companies. "She's always planning everything for me so I don't have one boring minute," Sarah says.

No doubt. Vinken's mind and her life move faster than the discs she spins in dance clubs from New York City to Miami. A designer on the TLC television show *In a Fix*, which ended last year, she recently launched a broadcast *The Fringe* on Internet-based Webmaster Radio. "Nani Vinken takes you to the edge, the fringe," she announces, "everything new in music, technology, people, design, events."

Brandy Shapiro-Babin of Webmaster extols the network's new personality: "Nani is so multitasking, with her knowledge of design, music, culture, art...and she can kick my butt," she says, referring to Vinken's martial-arts training. "The concept of her show is to let Nani do what Nani does best: She is cool."

Then there's Vinken's other career: running residential and yacht interior design firms. Plus, she recently opened District four35 with art dealer Giovanni Rossi in an Avenue Lofts storefront on North Andrews Avenue. Located in Fort Lauderdale's fledgling Flagler Arts & Technology Village, the space defies even her own description on the web

site, which focuses in part on what it's not: "We are not a gallery, or a studio; we are an ever-changing window of cultural enlightenment and awareness...a dynamic blend of art, design, furniture, music, clothing, jewelry, accessories, and so much more."

Over sliced tomatoes and fresh mozzarella, Vinken expresses an even loftier vision for District four35 — a bit of Gertrude Stein's 27 Rue de Fleurus. "I want the salon feel. I want people to go by and say, 'Hey, what's happening in here?' And be intrigued and find creativity and inspiration."

Her borderless definition mirrors a no-boundaries philosophy of design — "One of my biggest tips is to never listen to rules" — and a

love of loft-style living. "It's very generous; it's very airy and free...A loft is so much of a white canvas that you can modify it over and over."

A Tuscan villa, by its architecture, will have a Mediterranean interior, she adds, but a loft can be whatever you want it to be. "If you're going to park a Hummer in it, it's going to look rugged. If you're going to hang 200 Indian saris from the ceiling, it's going to look dramatic."

Vinken's own experience with lofts began during her design school days, when she moved into her grandfather's empty silk factory near Düsseldorf, Germany. "I was roller-skating through the whole thing," she says. While in college in Montreux, Switzerland, she rented a 20,000-

square-foot railroad warehouse with floor-to-ceiling arched windows. "I had 1,000 feet squared off, and in the rest I had my paintings." It was here that Vinken designed a 12-foot-long aquarium-glass bridge to connect the raised living spaces. Photos of the loft, which is now a performing arts space, reveal sun-soaked white walls and gleaming glass and metal stairs contrasting with rugged corrugated metal beneath the bedroom loft.

Although Fort Lauderdale is nearly bereft of genuine warehouse lofts, many developers mimic the industrial look by incorporating expansive windows, cinderblock and brick walls, exposed air-conditioning ducts and electrical conduits, stained concrete floors and unfin-

ished metal staircases. One such development is Avenue Lofts, where Vinken recently designed two penthouse units for the grand opening of District four35. Although she currently lives in a house, she has purchased a loft in a downtown development, in the proposed 21-story Waves Las Olas, which — to her frustration — has faced construction delays.

On a recent tour of Avenue Lofts, she seems to covet one of the units, describing how she would put her collection of books and records in a two-story alcove in the main living space that's "just the size of an old freight elevator." To reach the second-story section, she



A modern-classic daybed and Barcelona chairs from Ludwig Mies van der Rohe offer an elegant counterpoint to the unfinished look of the loft. A black-and-white striped area rug, opposite, echoes the repeating pattern of the windows.



A mixed-media Romy Schneider overlooks a crow's nest studio in an Avenue Lofts penthouse. Clear furnishings, including Philippe Starck Louis Ghost Chairs and hurricane-glass candles, add to the airy atmosphere.



Where does a college student in Switzerland stash her snow tires in the summer? Under the bed, of course. Vinken gives her once-utilitarian idea a retreat in this red-and-black loft bedroom.

would add that rolling library ladder she conjured up at lunch.

In the upstairs room, typically the master bedroom, she has created the studio of her dreams — a crow's nest filled with transparent furnishings, including a glass work table, a '60s acrylic coffee table and two Philippe Starck polycarbonate Louis Ghost Chairs. Illuminating the scene are 50 cylindrical hurricane lanterns in varying sizes reflecting the light of 50 candles. The only injection of color: a massive red and black mixed-media artwork of Romy Schneider. "I've taken the light, airy feeling of the loft literally," she says. "If this were mine, I would work up here in my bird's nest, looking out onto the city."

Although the 2,300-square-foot penthouse has large living spaces, there are only a few separate rooms, including a small bedroom-sized area devoted to storage — necessary because "you don't want to clutter such beautiful space," Vinken says.

"You have to understand," she pauses dramatically, "the soul of the loft. Otherwise you have people saying, 'What? I don't have more rooms than that?'" The flowing floor plans and wide-open, light-bathed spaces create the atmosphere of the loft, she says. However, she does advocate using portable screens, partitions and bookcases to create intimate areas when the spirit moves.

Downstairs from the penthouse, among the modern-classic furnishings and abstract paintings of District four35, she shows her own rolling

partition, built to showcase artwork and provide privacy. Then she notices that the white paint is "not the proper white." Sarah offers that no one will notice. "I will," Vinken counters, adding that it will have to be changed.

Abruptly, her intensity gives way to excitement. "Stand by the door. Ha, ha, ha, he, he, he," she says and runs to the back room, then returns a few seconds later. "Hello...turn around." From the front awning, a cloud of mist drifts to the sidewalk. Vinken runs outside and jumps up and down, admiring the growing fog bank emanating from tiny hidden nozzles.

"When it's lit at night, it does draw attention," she says. "I'll have the whole neighborhood here."



NANI'S NO-RULES RULES

- **Never listen to rules.** "NEVER DO SOMETHING doesn't apply to me. I live by my own rules," Vinken says. "If put in the right context, everything absolutely has the right to exist. I've painted chocolate-brown walls; I've painted walls pink and apple-green. It depends what you want to communicate."

- **Analyze your lifestyle, understand the problem.** "A friend wanted me to redesign her kitchen, but I wouldn't do it. That's not your problem, I told her. The kitchen is in the wrong spot. So we

moved the kitchen and redid it, and she was happy."

- **Let building materials speak.** "People ask me what color I'm going to paint the walls," Vinken says, indicating a 24-foot high expanse of gray cinderblock in an Avenue Lofts unit. "I say, 'What do you mean?'" Patched walls, unfinished beams, exposed electrical conduits and air-conditioning ducts add interest to lofts, she says.

- **Think contrasts.** "It's so easy to combine [minimalist architecture] with something refined to create magic juxtapositions. How beautiful to take a stainless-steel or rusted metal wall and in front of it you put one of the most refined pieces of furniture? You need the white to understand the black."

- **Play to the view.** "In a high-rise loft or apartment, the view is part of the design. You feel like you're flying or in a boat. Keeping everything very light supports the feeling of being high up."

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Nani Vinken recently opened District four35 with gallerist Giovanni Rossi in an Avenue Lofts storefront in Fort Lauderdale. Opposite, a Le Corbusier chaise lounge and Eileen Gray side table anchor a corner of the studio.

