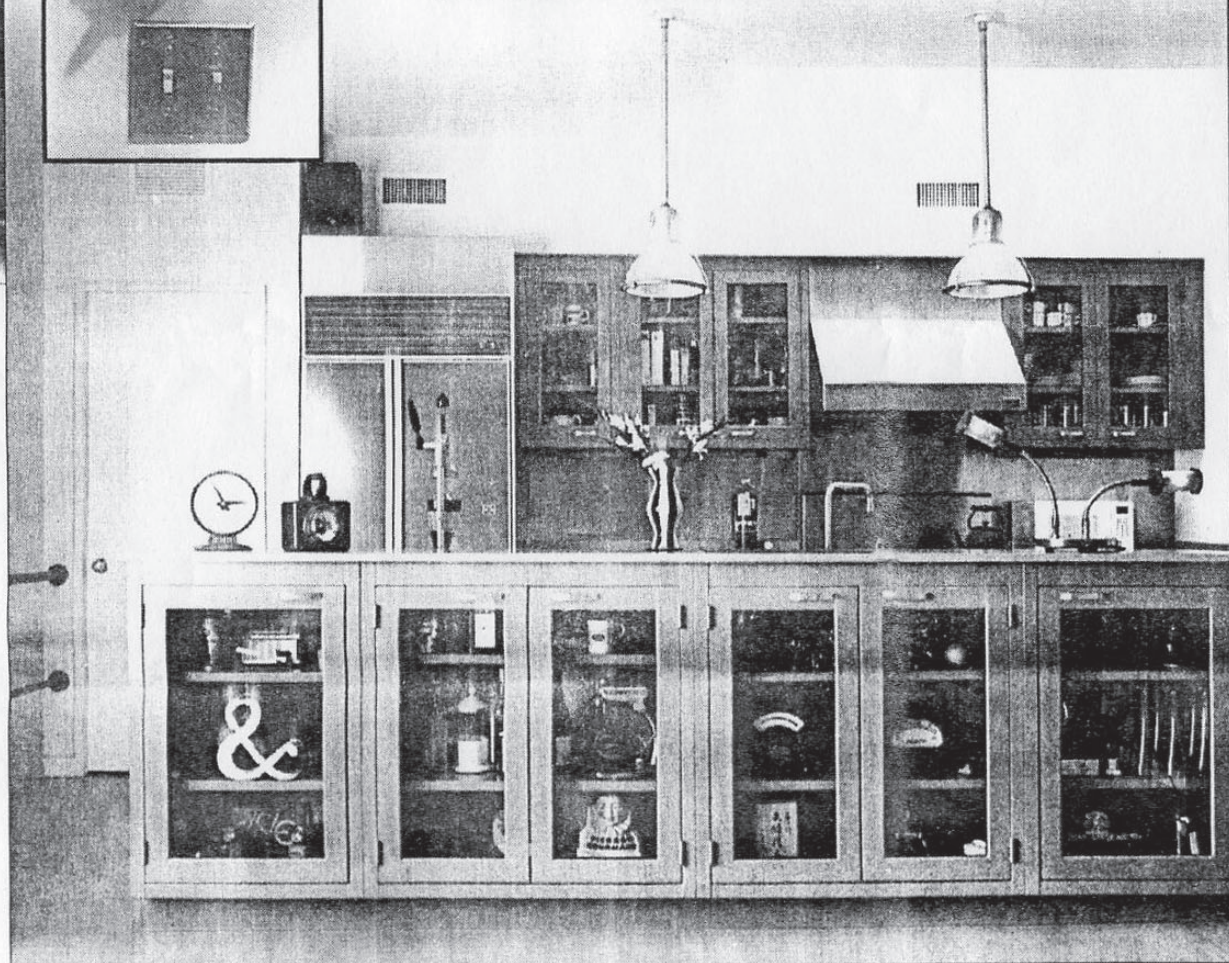
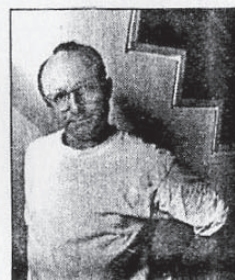


# Industrial Flotsam Elevated to Art



Above, detail of bronze footboard. Inset, the bedroom.



By SUZANNE SLESIN

**L**IKE waves at the shore, decorating styles of the last decade — English country, cozy cottage, Art Deco, Old World and New Age — have risen and receded, leaving their gentle traces on our sensibilities and on the pillows in many living rooms. But these trends, with their feeling of fantasy and escape, have not enthralled the photographer Jan Staller.

For nearly 35 years, Mr. Staller, whose professional focus is the ruins of the man-made landscape (its remote streets and decaying piers, the crumbling West Side Highway, New Jersey landfills, abandoned chemical plants and construction sites after hours), has been attuned to one muse only: 20th-century industrial design, whether in the furniture of masters like George Nelson and Charles Eames or in the myriad anonymous objects that were once an intrinsic part of the machine age.

"I'm more interested in the era we're moving out of than the era we're moving into," he said.

A few months ago, Mr. Staller moved into what he called his "dream house" in Greenwich Village and began displaying his artifacts in rooms whose minimalist style and meticulous attention to detail are right on the pulse of a modern sensibility. Ten years ago, the style was called high tech. It has evolved into a less austere version of the industrial esthetic —

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High tech's sequel: Jan Staller, right, uses medical cabinets for display; intercom is drive-in-movie speaker, inset.

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call it high-tech redux or industrial romanticism. It incorporates not just the early-20th-century relics but still-in-production objects and one-of-a-kind art pieces that are forged, welded, polished and cast out of metal, of course.

Alongside his apocalyptic photographs — including some of nuclear test sites in Nevada — Mr. Staller has arranged his inventory of more than 100 domestic objects — the "quintessential objects," he calls them, because they embody intriguing design and utility. These items are the industrial antiques of our time and, for Mr. Staller, the ones that should be preserved. "The silicone age that came after the industrial age is pretty dull and principally putty colored," he said.

The cameras, cast-metal toy cars and trucks, early flashlights and compelling old machines like a 1920's megawatt meter that came from a power plant in Philadelphia are packed into display cases from Dur-

alab, a Brooklyn maker of scientific and medical cabinetry that comes in a wide variety of sizes and colors. (The Duralab cabinets in Mr. Staller's kitchen cost less than \$15,000.) Simplicity, economy and durability aside, what appealed to Mr. Staller was the fact that they came from an institutional source.

He found just the right spots for his Eames chairs, Le Corbusier sofa and Philco television set, as well as the lamps and tables he designed from aluminum, copper or bronze. Luckily, he is not one to move furniture around in the middle of the night. The dining table top is a sheath of polished copper that weighs 375 pounds. Even the mops and brooms, the sleekest of their kind, are perfectly lined up in an alcove off the kitchen. "I'm very picky," Mr. Staller said.

The 3,000-square-foot, three-story mid-19th-century brick building has an oblique view of ships passing on the Hudson River, a terrace shaded by a tall tree and a garage where Mr. Staller parks his green Land Rover. That setting might be just enough perfection for most New Yorkers.

But not for Mr. Staller. The renovation of the building was as meticulous and detailed as everything else in his life. The spaces, restructured with the help of Richard Lewis, a New York architect, and Deborah Staller, an architect and Mr. Staller's sister-in-law, became the palette for Mr. Staller's lifelong romance with all things industrial.

**T**HAT passion explains the corrosion-resistant bright yellow electrical outlets in the kitchen, yards of Duralab laboratory cabinets in "eyerest" green that hold socks and underwear in the bedroom, the outdoor table made from a vintage Esso sign and the art piece de résistance: a footboard on which broken gears and bearings are cast in bronze. "The idea was based on some sort of industrial fossil," Mr. Staller said.

Three drive-in-movie speakers have been transformed into intercoms with the aura of African masks, and an explosion-proof cast aluminum telephone from the late 1950's sits regally on the counter in

the bedroom. "It came from a mine or gasworks, where any sparks were insulated from the atmosphere," Mr. Staller said. "I thought it was a beautiful object, sort of like an orthopedic shoe, don't you think?"

Mr. Staller's rather unusual esthetic sense has its roots in his childhood. For a few years, infatuated with wiring devices, he collected switches and outlets and wanted to be an electrician.

His father, Erwin Staller, a developer of shopping centers on Long Island and an architecture and design enthusiast, also subscribed to photography and "shelter" magazines. And the basement, equipped with a radial saw and a turning lathe, made furniture-making a family affair. While Erwin Staller sculptured tables out of large pieces of rough-edged wood, inspired by the work of George Nakashima, his son was prolific in the area of salad bowls and candlesticks and once made an elaborate walnut floor lamp with a turned base and stem.

"My parents would raise their eyes and say, 'If only you could put

that effort into your schoolwork,'" Mr. Staller said. He would send for free samples of floor coverings and plastic laminates. Later these samples of mass-produced materials would join the discarded meters and gauges and a large ampersand, all found at flea markets and in dumpsters.

During his teens, Mr. Staller went to a boarding school in Vermont, where he declared his future career as an industrial designer. It was not to be his exact fate. But the appeal of high tech, the industrial style that flowered in the early 1980's, never diminished. It found a niche in both his work and his home, with its cement walls, bare wood floors and unadorned fireplace (in which a toy train sits alone on the hearth, looking like the subject of a painting by Magritte). The windows are framed by plain, even satisfyingly dull green curtains. "I call them motel drapes," Mr. Staller said.

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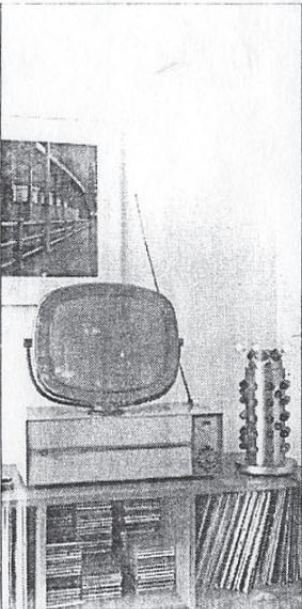
behind the special details." Take the footboard of the bed. The 200-pound, roughly half-inch-thick panel is a bronze casting of broken gears and bits of machinery collected by Mr. Staller. They appear imbedded in steel, "as if some machinery had gotten smashed and burned, then found in mud or tar and partially revealed," he said.

The footboard, Mr. Staller added, is reminiscent of "the industrial celebrations in the paintings and reliefs" at Rockefeller Center.

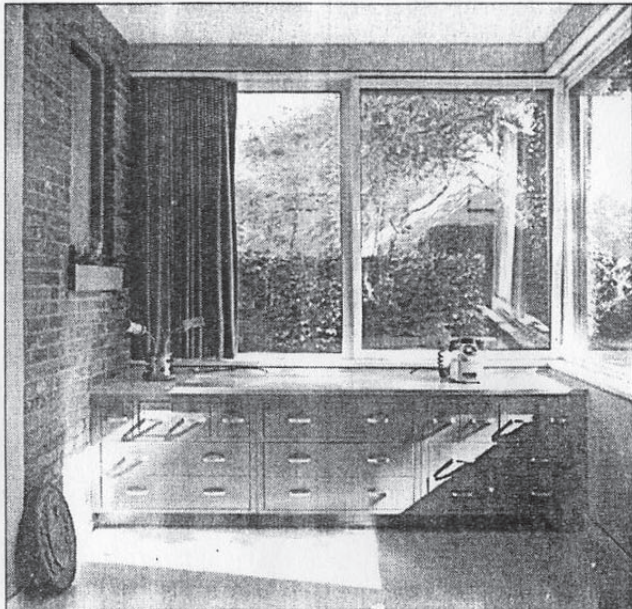
"But that imagery was in celebration of some kind of idea of a smoothly running machine," he continued. His imagery is one of disarray that mirrors the forbidding feeling of his photographs.

He has even asked himself if this end-of-the-civilized-world imagery is appropriate for a bedroom, never mind the time and expense it took to come to fruition. The bed, he acknowledged, is really quite impractical. "I guess that makes my work either art or folly," Mr. Staller said. "I only hope I live with more of the former and less of the latter."

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times



Photographs by Jan Staller



Jan Staller made the lamp and took the photograph near the Philco set, above left. Motel-style drapes in bedroom, above right. Living and dining areas, right, have cement walls.

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