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HOLIDAY BOOKS

Houses and Gardens

By [ALIDA BECKER](#)
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Some people aren't interested in real estate - but not many. After all, a house (yours, your neighbor's, your rich uncle's) is always more than a home: it's a source of gossip and speculation, competition and outright fantasy. With a click of your TV remote, whole networks of architects, decorators, gardeners and contractors prove the point - and so, especially at this time of year, does a high-end niche of the publishing business.

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Photo by Dana Gallagher
From "The New Garden Paradise":
a water-lily garden in Spain by
Fernando Caruncho.

For sheer star power, it's hard to beat **ROBERT A. M. STERN HOUSES AND GARDENS (Monacelli, \$85)**, a heavyweight extravaganza, with an introduction by Witold Rybczynski, featuring 24 "residences" (what Newport magnates used to call "cottages") from Montecito to Kiawah Island to the Hamptons and - for the rest of us - a pair of more modest "dream houses" commissioned by two magazines. **THE NEW GARDEN PARADISE: Great Private Gardens of the World (Norton, \$59.95)**, compiled by Dominique Browning and the editors of House & Garden, is an outdoor rival to Stern's offering. Full of knockout vistas by big-name landscape architects, it's as lovely as an art book - only this art, as Browning reminds us in her foreword, is one that's constantly changing.

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Photo by Jason Dewey from "Winter House"
A slipper chair helps warm
Charlotte Moss's place in Aspen,
Colo.

In **THE AMERICAN TOWNHOUSE (Abrams, \$45)**, Kevin D. Murphy and the photographer Radek Kurzaj present a pleasing illustrated history of another kind of change: the evolution of what New Yorkers insist on calling brownstones. A sequence of chapters illustrates their points by focusing on individual houses, beginning with an 18th-century row house in Philadelphia's Elfreth's Alley and finishing with a 1920's bungalow in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.

Über-WASP decor may seem to be frozen in time, but two books by prominent decorators give the lie to that assumption, using their own enormously inviting homes as examples. In **AN AFFAIR WITH A HOUSE (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, \$55)**, Bunny Williams and Christine Pittel document the results of Williams's 30-year occupancy of a sprawling 18th-century house in the New England countryside. And Charlotte Moss provides a potent antidote to cabin fever in **WINTER HOUSE (Clarkson Potter, \$50)**, interspersing her chapters with plenty of timeouts for the "little luxuries" she's scattered around her own home.

Maybe the biggest luxury is to have somebody else take charge of your housing, if only temporarily. In **FRENCH COUNTRY HIDEAWAYS: Vacationing at Private Châteaux and Manors in Rural France (Rizzoli, \$39.95)**, Casey O'Brien Blondes collects 30 properties that take the concept of bed and breakfast to sumptuous heights, as documented by Stephanie Cardon's radiant photographs. And for those with an itch to travel farther afield, Herbert Ypma's **HIP HOTELS ATLAS (Thames and Hudson, \$50)** is a compendium of "highly individual places to stay," including an ice palace in Sweden, a ranch in Colorado and a lodge in Tasmania. My advice: don't look at the price listings, just look at the pictures. And allow yourself, as Ypma urges when he opens the door to a seaside villa hotel in Italy, "to be Agnelli for a day."

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Photo by Melanie Acevedo
From "The New Garden Paradise":
tropical textures by Jay Griffith for
Brad Pitt's California home.

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