

# Great Homes and Destinations

ON LOCATION

## The Loft That Mediabistro Built



Trevor Tondro for The New York Times

The kitchen was a collaboration between SHoP and Jaqueline Touby, the decorator. [More Photos »](#)

By [PENELOPE GREEN](#)

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IN 2007, when Laurel Touby, the freelance writers' saloniste, sold her online media company, Mediabistro, for \$23 million, she banked a little more than half that amount and looked forward, she said at the time, to having a new car with a driver, a new apartment and a whole new life. Two out of three of those things, she quickly learned, are what a payday like hers buys you in [Manhattan](#).

### Multimedia



['In the Heart of Silicon Alley'](#)

She is still driving her 2002 Subaru Forester. Instead of a new car, Ms. Touby acquired a \$30,000 hand-woven leather, chain-mail and fur indoor swing designed by a guy who also works in anthracite, a medium Ms. Touby and her husband, Jon Fine, a musician and magazine writer, found a little grim for their taste. The swing was one of the first things they chose for their new apartment, a 4,000-square-foot loft a few blocks north of Union Square — “in the heart of Silicon Alley,” Ms. Touby will tell you proudly. They bought it in 2009 for \$3.9 million, and in a process that ended only eight days ago, renovated and furnished it for an additional \$2 million.

If numbers like these make you wince, that’s good, said Ms. Touby, whose policy regarding her affairs is relentlessly open kimono. “I have no boundaries and no taboos, and I figured once it was public, why not talk about it?” she said, referring to the sale of her company. “I wish when I was growing up people had been more honest about things like money.”

To learn how to handle her windfall properly, she and her husband made a list of “smart rich people,” like Tony Greenberg, a serial entrepreneur, and grilled them on topics like charitable giving, requests from family and friends, and how to allocate their resources.

Famously brash and bossy, Ms. Touby, 49, charged her decorator, Jaqueline Touby, a distant cousin whom she met by accident when she moved to New York after graduating from Smith in the 1980s, with making a place “that everyone would be jealous of.” SHoP Architects, creators of the Barclays Center, gutted and rebuilt the loft in shiny surfaces: stainless steel, lacquered walls and glazed concrete.

Choosing and then waiting for the sort of art furniture Ms. Touby and Mr. Fine were after, like a black rubber Harry Bertoia chair, takes buckets of money and time. Mr. Fine said they quickly went beyond what he used to call in his younger days “Design Not Really in Reach” (though amid so much custom work there were some relative bargains, like \$3,500 for a plastic and glass coffee table filled with cobalt-blue pigment and a toy taxi that was a copy of an Yves Klein piece). Months can stretch into years. To be sure, in the middle of it all, there was a yearlong sabbatical, during which the couple took a modern grand tour, though Ms. Touby regrets its timing because she found the renovation so invigorating.



Last week, when the final piece was installed — a blush-colored ceramic chandelier — and Mr. Fine had returned from the last concert of his reunion tour with Bitch Magnet, the post-punk, hard-core, Oberlin-grown band of his youth (and about which he is writing a memoir for Penguin), the couple had a housewarming party. They invited more than 200 friends and colleagues, former employees and former bosses, along with the concrete pourers, stainless steel fabricators, lacquerers and cabinetmakers who worked on the apartment, as well as some emerging artists whose work was also displayed, albeit temporarily (and quietly for sale), in a “show” that will be “up” until next month.

“It was superb,” Ms. Touby said later of the party. “I wanted it to go on forever.”

The event marked a milestone in Ms. Touby’s 20-year career — a midpoint, she hopes, as she is reimagining herself as a venture capitalist — as does the apartment it was held in.

Diminutive in stature only (Ms. Touby is 5-foot-1), this Miami-born entrepreneur has a Bildungsroman familiar to even casual observers of the New York media scene, and to almost anyone who regularly reads Web sites like Gawker. For Ms. Touby has been accruing snarky (as well as grudgingly admiring) ink since she started a monthly series of networking parties for writers and editors at an East Village bar in the early 1990s.

The self-described “desperate freelancer” used to cold-call magazine editors, who were baffled by her intentions. “Who *are* you?” they would ask. “Who do you represent?” Then she would strong-arm them into attending her events, which she presided over wearing a brightly colored feather boa and two-tone glasses.

“I was a party dominatrix,” she will tell you, who herded shy young writers into groups and forced them to talk to one another. Lonely and single and still new to New York, Ms. Touby had this idea, she said, “that I could meet editors at The New Yorker and date one of them. I had multiple ulterior motives.”

It wasn’t long before she realized she could use the Internet, then in its infancy, to invite people to her parties, as well as much more: create an online platform for job listings and offer publishing classes, health insurance for freelancers and actual content, like media commentary to rival Gawker’s. Martin Peretz of The New Republic was an early investor. Cyndi Stivers, the founding editor of Time Out New York who is now editor in chief of The Columbia Journalism Review, sat on [Mediabistro](#)’s board.

Yet Ms. Touby remained a media outsider, a role she welcomed and still flaunts. While her peers were mocking her as a networking freelancer, no one seemed to realize that Ms. Touby was actually something else: a natural entrepreneur.

“She made herself into a bit of a personality with the boa and the glasses,” recalled Alan Light, a music journalist and former editor of Spin and Vibe magazines. Mr. Light attended a few of her parties when he was the young editor in chief at Vibe in the early '90s. “She wasn't hiding behind any pretense, however. She was pretty upfront about what it was all about. In a world that's as cool-obsessed as most of the media world is, it's not hard to figure out why people were ready to not take her all that seriously. I'm not surprised that her success brought out the snark.”

Ms. Stivers said: “Way before anyone else, she saw there was a market for niche online classifieds. On a certain level, she did it instinctively. She also had a really good eye for talent. She spotted Brian Stelter when he was a college student. She spotted Rachel Sklar.” Mr. Stelter is now a business reporter at The New York Times; Ms. Sklar is a media blogger and CNN contributor.

“The feather boas distracted a lot of people from the person of substance,” Ms. Stivers added. “It seems to have been a reason for people to dismiss, overlook and underestimate her.”

Of course, as Ms. Stivers went on to say, on a certain level being underestimated can be an advantage. Remember that Ms. Touby was building her company during the dot-com boom. While other dot-com entrepreneurs quickly found themselves trophy apartments to swan about in, Ms. Touby, Ms. Stivers said, “stayed in her one-bedroom on Avenue A and got the job done.”

MR. FINE and Ms. Touby met at a media conference in Arizona in 2002 when he was a columnist at Ad Age. He was charmed by her forthrightness. Pointing out the difference in their ages (Mr. Fine is five years younger), Ms. Touby told him if he wanted children in 10 years they had better not date. (He told her he could add.)

She thought he was cute, but a player, the guy who hits on all the girls at the conferences. He also exhibited ruthless networking skills. In one exchange, Ms. Touby recalled, “where I was oversharing my fears to him, he looked past me, said ‘I have to talk to that guy,’ and ran away. I was devastated. I truly thought I had seemed too insecure and thus he was exiting stage left.”

Ten years later, the two bicker gently and happily. She calls him a peacock; he admits to being a “clothes geek” and claims to have taught his wife to dress properly.

On a tour of the apartment and all its pricey fixings (that sprawling sectional sofa cost more than \$30,000), you ask the couple if it makes them anxious to live with so much high-end gear.

“I was brought up to worry about stuff,” said Ms. Touby, who was raised by a single mother and described her childhood as chaotic. “So I'm anxious all the time. We're both pretty anxious people.”

Still, they seem to be having fun, like children left home alone by the grown-ups. They have fantasy bathrooms: there's a disco ball in one that was designed like an '80s fantasy lair, with mirrored finishes that evoke Halston on a cocaine bender, and a steam shower and tub for two in another.

There is so much storage hidden behind the shiny walls that Ms. Touby hired an organizer to provide, as she put it, "a taxonomy of things," so that she and Mr. Fine could figure out what to put where. In the kitchen, drawers sport labels like "Whisks," "Graters" and "Peelers." Mr. Fine said he had the organizational skills of a goldfish, as well as a large sneaker collection, so he was doubly grateful for the assistance.

Their resources have given them dependents, like Ms. Touby's mother, but there is pleasure in that, they said. They are also helping to put seven nieces, nephews and cousins through college.

Some mornings, Mr. Fine said, they wake up expecting someone to throw them out of their fancy-pants loft. "If so, I'd still feel lucky," he said. "I was looking for Laurel for a very long time."

As for Ms. Touby, her anxieties transcend the price of her furniture, she said. When pressed on what she spends time worrying about, she answered quickly.

"Losing it all," she said. "Or being forgotten."

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: November 15, 2012***

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that SHoP Architects were the creators of the Museum of Sex. In fact, they were the creators of a design for the Museum of Sex.*

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