

June 21, 2001

Designed to Pry: Building a Better Fishbowl

By JOHN LELAND

AT a West Village deli last winter, Petra Barchi got an unexpected earful. She had been working 24-hour days in the neighborhood and needed a cup of coffee. The man behind the counter wanted to dish. Some big TV show, he confided, was destroying everything inside the building next door.

Ms. Barchi, a production designer, held her tongue. If the deli man only knew.

In fact, Ms. Barchi was orchestrating many of the shenanigans next door, and destruction was not the word. In this quiet stretch of the Village, a crew of workers was transforming an antiques-filled loft into a kind of video playhouse, wired for round-the-clock surveillance of its occupants. In just a few weeks, the house would become the main set for MTV's "Real World," in which seven people, ages 18 to 23, submit their lives to the imperious curiosity of the television eye.

"The Real World," now in its 10th season, is the music channel's high-design forerunner to reality shows like "Survivor" and "Big Brother." The set house, located in a different city and with a different cast each season, is a barometer of the domestic fantasies of the audience.

Out went the French and Italian provincial furnishings. In came the Ikea pieces and hardware: 15 video cameras, 29 monitors, 142 blinding television lights, dozens of microphones and about a mile of cable. Out, also, went the locks in all the rooms, including the bathrooms. For the next four months, from late January to late May, the residents at 632 Hudson Street, near Horatio Street, could not sleep, dress, kiss, eat, brush or talk on the telephone without being recorded on videotape. The show goes on the air on July 3 and continues in weekly installments through November.

On an evening toward the end of shooting, Gretchen Warthen, one of the directors, sat in the control room staring at a bank of television sets. The control room, ordinarily a three-bedroom apartment below the main duplex, was a hive of activity, of crews coming and going. The duplex, by contrast, was a snooze. One cast member was asleep on a couch, another was reading; the rest were out. Two fish in the tank, Puffy and Eminem, had long since died and been removed. Ms. Warthen scanned a tableau of banal television images: a bedroom strewn with dirty laundry, an empty stairway, a littered roof deck. "Basically," she said, "they're leading their lives, and mine is pretty dull."

For the cast members, the loft was a big part of the "Real World" experience. Before moving to the loft, one of the women lived in \$22-a-month public housing. In the first episode, when she arrives at the house, she says that she never wants to leave.

Most had lived in dorms, so were accustomed to roommates and limited privacy. When it came time to select bedrooms, one of the three men wanted to go co-ed. The four women put a stop to that. "I knew my mom would kill me," said Rachel, an 18-year-old freshman from the University of Missouri (an MTV publicist told cast members not to give their last names, to protect them from harassment, the publicist said). Rachel said she found the group, all of whom had survived a Darwinian audition process, an adjustment. "I'm not confrontational, not

used to living with six strong personalities," she said. "This helped bring me out."

The home in "The Real World" functions like the eighth cast member, said Jonathan Murray, an executive producer. In the quick-cutting, heavily manipulated version of reality that Mr. Murray calls commercialized documentary, the apartment carries a lot of narrative weight, stimulating the action and framing it in pretty colors.

Unlike "Survivor" or "Big Brother," MTV's version of reality television allows the cast to move about town freely, accompanied by mobile film crews. All seven were given jobs at Arista Records. But the designers hoped the furnishings would keep them home, in a controlled recording environment — décor as social engineering.

"Everyone was here every night," said Mike, 20, who had lived with his father in Parma, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. "We played a lot of beer games." The producers had a strict policy against illegal drug use, but not against under-age drinking. "We ask the cast to obey the law and tell them that if they break it, we have the right to terminate their contract and participation in the show," Mr. Murray said. "But we're not the police and don't want to act as such."

Mr. Murray and his business partner, Mary-Ellis Bunim, originally planned to rent raw space in Midtown and build a loft from scratch, but in the end chose the loft on Hudson Street. Its owner, Karen Lashinsky, had converted two floors of an old sausage factory into a three-bedroom, 3,200-square-foot loft in the style of a European villa. She often rented out her home for photo shoots or weddings for \$3,000 to \$5,000 a day.

There was only one problem. "It was a little 'old-lady style,'" said Ms. Barchi, who often designs movie sets. She began an overhaul with a budget of \$50,000 to \$60,000. Ms. Lashinsky's living room walls were finished with Structolite, a powdery plaster tinted unevenly with pigment. In natural light, it gives a warm, Tuscan glow. "But on video, under the lights, it looks like fungus," Ms. Barchi said.

Ms. Lashinsky would not allow them to paint over the treated walls, so the crew hung pleated silvery fabric, creating the effect of water cascading down from the ceilings. They bartered for art and furniture, including bright pieces from Ikea.

Past "Real World" sets, including the New York loft used in the first season, have been overstuffed playhouses, like Gymborees for postadolescents. Given the economic turndown, and the network's new, slightly more realistic approach to décor in "MTV's Cribs," the idea this year was to tone down the fantasy, Ms. Barchi said.

"To make it less art-director-y," she said. She included a pool table in the kitchen, but few other toys. Even so, this fantasy is not everyone's idea of practical: the space used for the control room alone ordinarily rents for \$8,500 a month.

Ms. Barchi conceived the loft along a water theme. A square walkway on the top floor overlooked the large, two-story living room. "I thought of that as the spiral of a shell, and the bedrooms as islands," she said. An aquarium in the living room, equipped with a Web cam, completed the theme. She added a padded room, a confessional, where cast members were expected to talk directly to the camera.

On the walls she was allowed to paint, Ms. Barchi said, she chose reds and blues "three shades darker" than might be aesthetically most pleasing, because the bright lights tended to make them seem lighter on tape. The cast did not seem to notice. "I'm a big fan of the colors," Lori, 21, said. "They're very sophisticated, not playhouse-y."

As a visual pun on the home's network of bugs, Ms. Barchi mounted dozens of glass cases

containing giant framed insects in brilliant colors, which the Evolution Store in SoHo donated in exchange for on-screen credit. She also decorated walls with plaster sculptures denoting the senses. These walls literally had ears — eyes, noses and mouths.

Ms. Barchi also put lots of storage bins in the three bedrooms, in a quixotic effort to influence the cast's cleaning habits for television. Since the crew could not tell the residents to clean up their dirty laundry, she hoped the furniture would get the message across. It did not.

But the bigger alteration involved the lights and surveillance equipment. The crew installed cameras and microphones in every room except the three bathrooms, including infrared cameras for night vision in the bedrooms. Victor Mignatti, one of the lead directors, described the show's strategy for covering any sexual activity. The crews with hand-held cameras will "shoot as far as a very passionate kiss, then discreetly leave the room," he said. In his two seasons, amorous cast members always ducked under the covers to evade the surveillance cameras. "Or they barricaded themselves in the bathroom," he said.

The crew also tapped the telephone and monitored the loft's Internet connection. Cast members were not allowed to carry cellphones or use pay phones, since these could not be tapped. For legal reasons, there were other odd house rules. The cast members could not wear any clothing or put up posters showing copyrighted images or logos; if they wanted to bring in any pictures of family members or friends, the people in the pictures had to sign releases. In the end, the cast did little to customize their home. "Everything fits," said Lori. "There's not really space to bring your own stuff."

The cast knew that even small bubbles of privacy might collapse at any time. "As soon as they engage in conversation," Ms. Warthen said, "we don't care what they're wearing or not wearing, we'll shoot them."

There were, however, limits to the surveillance. "There were no cameras by the closets, so we could change," said Kevin, 22. There were also no cameras in the bathrooms, though crews using hand-held cameras often followed cast members to the sinks. "You put your makeup on in the bathroom and they're there," Lori said. "That you never get used to. I don't want to clean my ears on TV."

As they ended their four months in an electronic fishbowl, the cast spoke of the show not as an experiment in voluntary surveillance but as a test of their personalities. "I wanted to be thrown out of my comfort zone," Lori said. "I knew I would learn a lot about myself."

This is a peculiar reasoning: a faith in a highly artificial living arrangement and stylized video product to produce not just television but revelation. For 10 years, "The Real World" has shaped this inversion — that people would behave most honestly on camera, and that television truths are the substantive ones. Lori and the others brought it to the house as an expectation.

The cast members have all returned to their past lives, each with a small stipend, described by Mr. Murray as enough to buy a used subcompact car. When the furnishings are auctioned online later this year, the producers will donate their half to the cast.

Before she returned to her home in Chicago, Rachel measured the effects of four months of being watched. It was easy to get used to, she said. "Now," she said, "not having a mic and camera feels weird to me." Welcome to the real world.