The gold in copper... Ben Bayntern’s “The Wire,” the cover story of *Bloomberg Businessweek* (November 29–December 5, 2010), reads like a police drama. Since 2001, metal theft has spiked in the US, increasing as much as 1,000 percent. Bayntern reports that “gangs use foreclosure lists like treasure maps” as they hunt for pipes and wire. Copper is easily recycled and difficult to trace; international prices have quadrupled in this decade. The even larger problem is that $1 in stolen copper causes $10 to $25 in associated repairs. Typical targets are small churches (often empty) and boarded buildings, while more industrious thieves mine infrastructure such as cell towers and municipal irrigation systems. Cities are trying to crack down, revising scrap recycling laws while creating new police undercover metal-theft units. These officers operate as construction detectives and display an increasingly impressive knowledge of pipe fittings.

Inside story... In a fascinating essay disguised as a book review, James Fenton (“The Age of Exuberance,” *Harper’s*, January 2011) provides thoughtful, detailed musings on the Gilded Age and late-19th-century residential interiors. He paints a picture of what these living spaces were and what they meant, with their excess of dark paint, textures, and patterns. Ceilings were heavily timbered and colored, for example, a reminder that they provide shelter. A number of these interiors still exist in Upper Manhattan (read: Harlem) brownstones, protected, in a way, by decades of poverty. Yet as this neighborhood undergoes its own renaissance, the future of these Gilded Age interiors is in question. Fenton argues that the whole interior ensemble — ceiling, rugs, drapery, decorated walls — is important and emotionally powerful, as he laments their inevitable destruction. Lofts are nice, he suggests, but they don’t belong in brownstones.

Sea the future... In one of the more interesting annual summaries, *Popular Science* features its "100 Best Innovations of the Year" (December 2010). From an uncomplicated bucket that helps trees grow in inhospitable places to extreme engineering that allows skyscrapers and airports to be unimaginably taller and earthquake resistant, there’s lots to gawk at here. But the coolest award winner draws inspiration from humble ocean creatures. In the 1980s, marine biologist Brent Constantz learned how to mimic the way sea coral grows. Recently, he has developed a bioengineered coral-like product that can replace limestone in building cement mix by using sea water and the byproducts of existing power-plant smokestacks. A California demonstration plant is underway, making 1,800 tons of coral cement daily. The US Department of Energy reports that cement’s conventional production — which requires extreme heat to prepare limestone — is the second largest source of carbon-dioxide emissions in the US after fossil fuel. A Google search shows that Constantz has his skeptics, but the potential impact of coral concrete is stunning.

Chia Pets on the loose... If it’s in *Time*, it must be a trend, right? In “Upwardly Fertile: The Rise of the Vertical Garden” (December 13, 2010), Tim Newcomb discusses the growing popularity and one-upmanship of “vertical gardens” — exterior walls covered by a hanging carpet of plants, like the widely published one at the new CaixaForum in Madrid, Spain. Purportedly demonstrating environmental awareness (or at least a “green” company image), installations are getting bigger as they crisscross the globe. The current North American title was captured by Philadelphia’s Longwood Gardens in October with a 3,600-square-foot wall, while Santiago, Chile, unveiled a 17,000-square-foot wall in December. Yet these walls are less energy efficient and more expensive than a green roof. Newcomb touches on the inherent contradiction of the “green-ness” of these planted surfaces, suggesting that their ongoing maintenance requirements mean that a vertical garden should be considered a “very large and thirsty pet” rather than a building material.

Gretchen Schneider AIA, LEED AP is the principal of Schneider Studio in Boston.