

Upper East Side Renovation

*Bold Revisions and Artful Contrasts
Update a Classic Prewar Apartment*

INTERIOR DESIGN BY TIMOTHY MACDONALD
ARCHITECTURE BY GILLIS ASSOCIATES ARCHITECTS
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"We wanted a contemporary interpretation of a classic prewar apartment," says designer Timothy Macdonald of a project for clients Joel and Marsha Handel in Manhattan. "We reconstructed the whole thing," adds architect Ralph Gillis. Mirrored doors now separate the living room from the media room. A Swedish Biedermeier armchair joins an Empire-style side table and Empire-style lamp from Sotheby's at rear. Chinese needlepoint carpet from Stark. Bronze Art Déco-style sconces in the hall are from Marvin Alexander.





"The colors in the rooms proceed from lighter to deeper values," says Macdonald, who worked with associate Jane S. Ellsworth. Also in the living room, brocades and an Aubusson fragment adorn pillows on a sofa covered in ribbed velvet from Henry Calvin Fabrics. A gilt bracket holds a Chinese sang-de-boeuf jar. Tiffany's vase, foreground; Empire-style candlesticks from Christie's.

IN MANY WAYS it's a classic story. A middle-aged couple, having raised four children in a large house out on the island, pack the youngest off to college and decide to move into the city. Five bedrooms shrink to two; a garden turns into a handful of houseplants; and the long quiet twilight of suburbia is replaced by the horns and sirens and vitriol of the New York rush hour.

What's different about Joel and

Marsha Handel is that they have taken to the urban scene with particular vigor. As a managing partner in the legal firm of Baer Marks & Upham, Joel Handel has experienced less of a change in his daily routine, but Marsha has found a whole new life in New York, deciding to become a full-time volunteer. She now divides her week between a day-care center in the neighborhood; Bellevue Hospital, where she works with drug-addicted

babies; and the pediatric floor of Memorial Sloan-Kettering, where she also assists children, including those who are in isolation. "I suppose it's a way of continuing my motherhood," she says. "I just couldn't be one of those Park Avenue ladies who spend their days shopping."

Marsha Handel may not be "one of those Park Avenue ladies," but her apartment, which is situated in a circa 1913 building on the Upper East Side,





is indisputably a Park Avenue apartment. This would be a meaningless tag if the Handels, their architect, Ralph Gillis, and their interior designer, Timothy Macdonald, hadn't so much sought to restore the space to its original condition as to reach beyond it, to an idealized version of a prewar New York interior, where all the walls are finished in comely moldings, the floors are burnished and rooms line up in almost perfect enfilade.

Idealized, though, is a key word. The Handels acquired the apartment from the archdiocese of New York, whose property it had become after the death of an elderly widow who had lived in and not touched the quirky interior for nearly fifty years. "There was even a player piano in the living room," Joel Handel recalls. "We're talking ugly," interjects Marsha Handel. "After I signed, I said, 'I cannot believe I bought this place—it's so bad.'" A long, narrow hall ran half the length of the apartment, snaking along the building's elevator and service stairs. The former parlor and drawing room had been opened up into a single large but ungainly space. Next to the dining room, the kitchen, maid's room and service area were cramped together in a dark, uninviting warren that also obscured the view of the master bedroom, which provides the strongest source of light in the apartment.

For Ralph Gillis and associates Marcia Previti and Rich Oechsler, moving the corridor was the first obvious choice. "By shifting and straightening the hall, we got a series of openings that created the enfilade," Gillis says. "You have to understand that when they laid out those old apartments, the architects would often choose things like moldings and then leave the execution to the craftsmen, who didn't anticipate every offset and cor-

The terraced ceiling, at right, "separates the dining area from the library and implies the continuation of the hall," says Gillis. The entrance hall and living room are beyond. A Charles X mahogany *bureau plat* joins bookcases created for the library, left. Fabric on the circa 1825 Danish armchairs from Scalmandré.



ner. We tried to linger over the details." The dining room emerged as an entirely new space: Enlarged with a piece of the old hall, it acquired an alcove that now serves as a library. A new, open kitchen and breakfast area replaced the former warren of smaller rooms. A dramatic entrance hall was fashioned by lowering the ceiling and shortening the old entrance. And taking their cue from beam drops, the remnants of plaster molding, patterns in the parquet floor, and the Handels' wishes, the architects returned the vast living room space to two separate rooms, a living room and media room, which can be united by opening a pair of mirrored doors. "Basically," Gillis says, "we demolished the whole apartment."

Demolition may go quickly, but construction, especially in New York, does not. During the fourteen months it took for the Handels' apartment to be rebuilt, Marsha Handel collaborated with Timothy Macdonald on the planning of the interiors. "I had very

clear ideas," she explains. "I had folders, clippings, lists. I wanted antiques, for example. I wanted lace. I wanted a red room and a green room. I was very specific. Ask Timothy—I'm kind of a nut about details." Macdonald responds genially, "Actually, I prefer clients who are involved. It allows you to live up to and, you hope, exceed their expectations."

Early on, the Handels and Macdonald made a buying trip to London together. "I had the best time," says Marsha Handel. "In four days we found all the antique furniture. I didn't know a thing—I only knew what I liked, and what I liked, it turned out, was French Empire, Russian and Biedermeier. Timothy and I sat up until two in the morning in the lobby of our hotel. We designed the whole place right there, with a set of blueprints and a stack of Polaroids."

Timothy Macdonald designs comfortably within a range of styles, among them Art Déco, hard-edged contemporary and high Victorian. He



"We tried to contrast the spaces with maximum impact," the designer notes. LEFT: The dining area's French gueridon, English convex mirror and Russian side chairs are 19th century. A Roman capriccio adds a whimsical note. Clarence House wallcovering and side chair fabric. Stark Portuguese rug. ABOVE: The Swedish mahogany dining table is set with cut crystal from Baccarat.





LEFT: "In the master bedroom, we achieved an Old World feeling with the warmth of polished natural wood floors, antique furnishings, crisp linen and romantic lace bed hangings," says Macdonald. The drapery fabric, wallcovering and tub chairs are from Bruntschwig & Fils. Cut-crystal lamp is from Florian Papp. Silver tea paper on the ceiling is from Gracie.



"All the moldings are new, but they're sympathetic to the period and style of the building," Gillis explains. ABOVE: The sitting room/guest bedroom features a Swedish Biedermeier gueridon, an Empire-style sleigh bed and 19th-century English ebonized mirror. Bruntschwig & Fils silk taffeta has Christopher Hyland gold rope trim. Wallcovering from Clarence House.

welcomed the Handels' challenge, which was to create an Old World apartment that still had all the amenities and flexibility of the most up-to-date New York interior. In order "not to tempt returning kids," as Joel Handel quips, Macdonald treated the second bedroom as a sitting room. And heeding Marsha's palette, he provided her with red (library/dining area) and green (guest bedroom-cum-sitting room), then introduced her to yellow (the living room) and what he calls a "warm black" (the media room, where the couple can watch televi-

sion or, if pressed, accommodate another one of those returning kids). "This project," Macdonald concludes, "was thoroughly collaborative."

Is the exacting Marsha Handel pleased? "You bet," she says. "And from someone as obsessive as I am, that's not faint praise." Joel Handel concurs. "I think the apartment is fabulous. We've been here about two years now, and it works completely. Nothing gives us any trouble—and everything is beautiful to look at." He smiles. "It's come a long way from the days of that old player piano." □