

# HÄUSER

ARCHITECTURE LIVING DESIGN ART GARDENS

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from the Italian Marches,  
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the bathroom

**New York**  
Townhouse between  
purism and opulence



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indoors*

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The parents' realm is located behind the row of kitchen cabinets and accessed via a sliding door to the right of the stairwell. The dovetailing of the bedroom and bathroom with the main living space has definitely proved its worth, says the architect. "The sliding door is usually open." Stepping through it, you enter another, quieter world. Whilst the living room is dominated by exposed concrete, the walls and ceilings in these intimate private spaces have been plastered smooth and painted white, and the rooms are lower too. The view into the valley is blocked out; instead, lying in bed or in the tub, Paul and Susanne Steurer can enjoy the view of the forest edge. The zoning is clearly visible on the outside of the house too: the bedroom wing sets itself apart from the main part of the building and is clad not in metal but in anthracite-coloured rendering.

"You don't come up with solutions like these overnight," says Paul Steurer. He and his wife spent almost two years brooding over every single detail before they moved so much as a speck of soil. Now they've been living in their hillside home for three years and don't feel as if they're missing anything at all – least of all a garden.

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## Modern but with soul

Interior designer Etienne Benjamin breathed new life into an old New York townhouse: the captivating rooms exude a nonchalant mix of opulence and purism.

In the late nineties Etienne Benjamin, who was still running a gallery for design and objets d'art in Paris at the time, got to know a wealthy English businessman and his French wife. They commissioned him with the interior design of their apartment in Notting Hill, London. Years later, the couple approached the Frenchman again, this time about the remodelling and interior design of a house in Manhattan. Together with New York-based Italian architect Michele Busiri-Vici of Space4 Architecture, Etienne Benjamin spent two years working on the project. HÄUSER's Claudia Bodin interviewed the autodidact about his experiences.

*Mr. Benjamin, you originally studied economics and finance. How did you get into interior design?*

I grew up in a very old house in the Loire Valley, where I was surrounded by design, art and architecture. My father, François Benjamin, was an architect. He educated me according to Mies van der Rohe's motto: "God is in the details". I try to explore that principle every single day.

*How would you describe your style?*

My work centres on balancing time: I try to find a position that both acknowledges the present and appreciates the past.

*So you're not keen on rigorously modern interiors?*

Sometimes we look to the future too much. The furnishings might be pure and clear, but you're not quite sure what a playing child is supposed to do in there. A design like that lacks the will to take risks, it lacks feeling and it lacks life. Finding the right balance is extremely difficult.



*So how did you manage to achieve the right mix in the New York townhouse?*

The starting point was a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century brownstone house with a reddish-brown sandstone facade and ornamentations on the windows and front door. We removed the old decorations. Instead we decided to create a simple, grey frontage with black window frames – now the building looks as if it's wearing a stylish cocktail dress for the evening. The rear facade on the south side of the building was replaced with windows, set in frames made of robust ipe wood. Inside we exposed some of the brick walls on every floor of the house, which gives the rooms a pleasant sense of warmth. The interior design is a combination of modern and antique pieces, we juxtaposed 18<sup>th</sup>-century French furniture with Scandinavian design from the 1950s. Thanks to the exquisite materials and simple forms, the mix has a harmonious effect. I prefer to use just a few carefully selected pieces, but then they should be originals by first-rate designers, things that have a soul and won't lose value

*What was the biggest challenge when it came to the remodelling?*

The building is 15 metres long but only five metres wide. So we were dealing with a pretty narrow house. We had five storeys in which to accommodate the living room, kitchen, three children's rooms, the master bedroom, an office, a guest room and lots of storage space. Because each floor was only big enough for two rooms, we added another storey. On all the other levels, we moved walls and reorganised the spaces. Glazed stairways bring as much light as possible into the house. We also installed an elevator to connect the various storeys, but didn't want it to dominate the spaces. So we integrated it behind a bookcase or between two rooms.

*How much freedom did you have for the design?*

Our clients were open to everything. One of the few

conditions was the bathtub in the master bedroom. I alluded to the works of artist George Rousse by surrounding it with a white circle that takes on a different shape depending on where you're standing but is also very functional thanks to the waterproof paint. For the floors, we used oak floorboards that are around a hundred years old and were originally laid in a house in Paris. The second stipulation was that the kitchen on the ground floor should open up completely to the garden.

*Did you have a leitmotiv for the remodelling?*

It was important to Michele Busiri-Vici and myself not to have any tangible boundaries between the interior and outdoor spaces – a goal we achieved by means of a patio door that slides upwards and disappears, windows that extend all the way down to the floor and the skylight on the top level. And we continued the wooden floor and panelling out into the garden, so that even when you're outside, sitting on the weatherproof furniture, it feels as if you're in a sheltered space.

*Is the house a reflection of New York?*

The city is shaped by people from all over the world and their cultures – our project is a perfect example. New York always opens its doors to outside influences. The house reflects a certain openness for that tradition.

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## High-Level Rescue

In the Italian Marches, Markus Wespi and Jérôme de Meuron transformed a ruin into a holiday home that is as magnificent as it is simple.

Thick rubble walls, dependable shelter for man and beast for centuries. Gently rolling hills round about. Turnip fields, cornfields, vineyards, olive groves. The sound of pheasants calling in the distance. The ▶

Nur fünf Meter breit, dafür fünf Geschosse hoch: Der Umbau eines im 19. Jahrhundert errichteten Hauses in Manhattan stellte den Architekten Michele Busiri-Vici und den französischen Designer **Etienne Benjamin** vor große Probleme. Zwei Jahre arbeiteten sie an dem Projekt. Ihre Maxime: klare Verhältnisse schaffen und die Seele des Hauses bewahren.

TEXT CLAUDIA BODIN FOTOS MG DE SAINT VENANT/PHOTOFOYER

# MODERN, ABER MIT SEELE

Der Interior-Designer Etienne Benjamin hauchte einem alten New Yorker Townhouse neues Leben ein: Die Räume bezaubern durch einen nonchalanten Mix aus Opulenz und Purismus

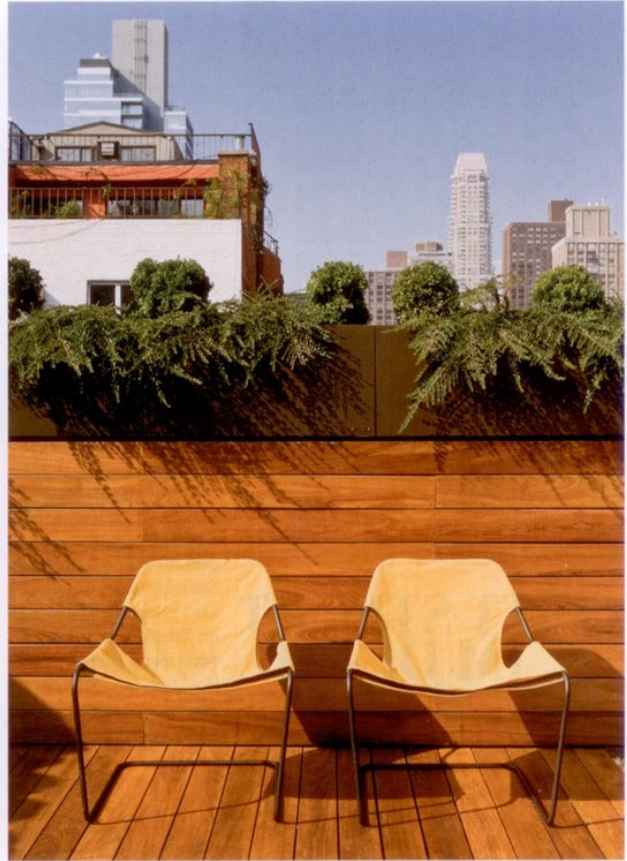




Die Inspiration zu dem **Farbspot**, mit dem Benjamin die Badewanne umgab, stammt vom Künstler George Rousse. Eine **Kommode** aus dem 18. Jahrhundert ist der Hingucker im Schlafzimmer. Ein Oberlicht sorgt für Helligkeit im **Treppenhaus**. Die **Fensterrahmen** aus Ipé-Holz und das dekorative **Zitat** („Lebe, wie du, wenn du stirbst, wünschen wirst, gelebt zu haben“) sind Beispiele für die liebevollen Details, die sich überall in dem Haus finden.

**GOTT STECKT IM DETAIL**  
 „Nach dieser Devise wurde ich unterrichtet“





Die wiederhergestellte Fassade präsentiert sich mit einem edlen dunkelgrauen Anstrich. Um mehr Tageslicht ins Haus zu bringen, wurde die Rückseite komplett geöffnet und mit großen Fenstern versehen. Die Glaswand im Parterre lässt sich per Knopfdruck nach oben schieben. Dielenboden und Holzpaneele verleihen dem kleinen Hof vor dem Speisezimmer wohnlichen Charakter. Die Dachterrasse bietet einen Ausblick über die Skyline von Manhattan.

**DIE GRAUE FASSADE**  
„Sie wirkt wie ein stilvolles Cocktailkleid“





