

NEW YORK SPACES

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TOP 50 DESIGNERS

MODERN MIX
asian fusion
WEST VILLAGE
TOWN HOUSE



When a young family can't find an Upper East Side loft that fits,
they design one of their own—inside an Italianate town house

wide openspaces



ARCHITECTURE MICHELE BUSIRI-VICI/SPACE4

INTERIOR DESIGN ETIENNE BENJAMIN

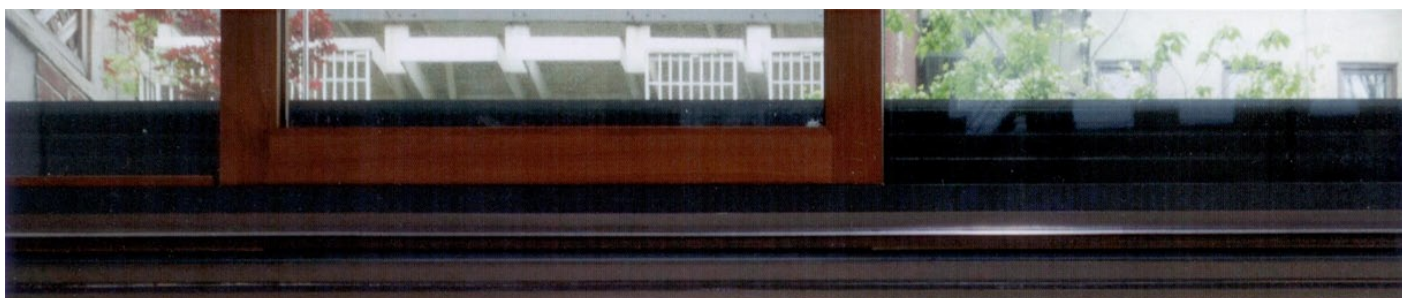
TEXT SALLIE BRADY

PRODUCED BY ELIZABETH SVERBEYEFF BYRON

PHOTOGRAPHY NORMAN MCGRATH



modern MAKEOVER Designer Etienne Benjamin worked with architect Michele Busiri-Vici to retool the town house interior. In the living room, a Moroccan kilim anchors Benjamin's Haricot metal-and-wood coffee table and vintage leather chairs, purchased at auction in Paris. Blackened steel, the material used in the apartment's window frames, here encloses the fireplace. The ink-on-fabric painting of Faye Dunaway is by Servane Mary.



open SESAME This page: The glass wall dividing the kitchen from the garden terrace lifts up hydraulically, creating a fluid indoor/outdoor space. Arne Jacobsen chairs surround the new table by Etienne Benjamin. Opposite, top: A loftlike view from the second-floor living room. Opposite, bottom: "We kept the façade as it was—very traditional," says Busiri-Vici, "but convinced the client to paint it charcoal, almost black. It's a hint of what is happening inside—a little rock-and-roll."

MOTIVATED BY A DESIRE TO LIVE WITHIN EASY WALKING DISTANCE OF THEIR children's schools, a young family of "three with another on the way" began to search for a spacious Upper East Side loft like the ones they loved in Tribeca. But after a fruitless search for an uptown space with a downtown sensibility, they decided to take matters into their own imaginations, hiring an architect and a designer who understood their vision: With Michele Busiri-Vici of New York's Space4 Architecture and

Etienne Benjamin, a Paris-based interior designer, to help them, they felt confident that the Italianate town house they valued for its convenient location could also provide them with the wide open spaces and contemporary comforts they had grown accustomed to downtown.

"The goal was to create a visual connection between floors," says Busiri-Vici. "We also wanted views that connected to the city." While the structure's late-19th-century façade was left intact, the rest of the



structure was erased and replaced from bottom to top. To gain ceiling height, they drilled three feet down into the ground before putting up a five-story, 6,500-square-foot home that bumped out an additional 12 feet in the rear. The street façade remains true to period, but the back story is 21st century—a wall of glass, framed in blackened steel.

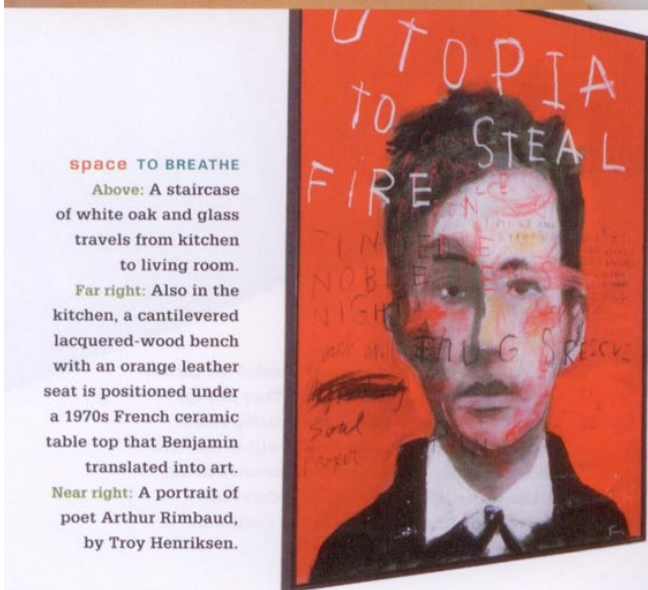
The house, explains the owner, had to serve three purposes: "It very much had to be a family house. It had to be a 'hotel,' because we



have an enormous number of house guests—about 100 a year. And it had to be a social house. We have big parties—which is why I invested in a good sound system.”

The homeowner also requested that Busiri-Vici find a way to replicate something he saw in Argentina: a glass wall that lifted hydraulically to create a completely open space. Here, he wanted the “disappearing” wall to separate his kitchen and garden terrace. For authenticity, the designers ended up importing the device—and its installers—from Argentina.

Much of the home’s decor comes from France—where the Paris-based Benjamin sourced 18th-century stone floors for the kitchen; 19th-century white-oak floors for the rest of the apartment; and mid-century furniture by Jacobsen, Eames, Aalto, and Perriand. The pieces are mixed with antiques and contemporary artwork, much found at New York’s Martos Gallery. The result has “the flavor of something that has been there awhile,” says Busiri-Vici. “But it doesn’t look like an Upper East Side apartment.” — See Resources.



space TO BREATHE

Above: A staircase of white oak and glass travels from kitchen to living room.

Far right: Also in the kitchen, a cantilevered lacquered-wood bench with an orange leather seat is positioned under a 1970s French ceramic table top that Benjamin translated into art.

Near right: A portrait of poet Arthur Rimbaud, by Troy Henriksen.

