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ART IN DESIGN



I'LL TAKE MANHATTAN

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If it's not an ironclad law, it's still at least a general rule that as Manhattan couples begin having children and expanding their families, they move off of the island—where living space is as famously cramped as it is expensive—and into a more forgiving borough, or perhaps out of New York City altogether. Raising one child in a Manhattan apartment is still very doable. Raising two children is certainly possible. But if you're a family of five determined to stay in the city, and you're not in a townhouse situation, you're definitely going to need some sort of a plan.

That was the reality facing one Manhattan couple with three young children who had grown out of their Manhattan apartment, but couldn't bear to leave the borough behind. After conducting an exhaustive search, they finally found a space—in a Fifth Avenue building set catty-corner from the Metropolitan Museum of Art—that was close to perfect, at least in theory.

But the path from theoretical to actual perfection wouldn't necessarily be an easy one. While the space, originally crafted out of three small apartments on two floors, was filled with potential, that was pretty much all that it had going for it, aside from its astounding Central Park views. It was in what Matt Berman, principal and co-founder of the design firm Workshop/APD, calls "estate shape," as in: cleaned up and modernized just enough to allow you to use your imagination. "Let's put it this way: Sometimes you feel bad ripping everything out of an apartment for a project, especially when you get the feeling that the previous owners have just renovated it themselves. That wasn't the case here. This felt more like justice being done."

Working closely with interior designer Jenny Stone, Berman was tasked with unlocking all of that potential and transforming it into a family home that could accommodate playdates and sleepovers just as comfortably as cocktail parties and Thanksgivings. The key, according to Berman, was finding a way to let the family "use one hundred percent of the space, one hundred percent of the time." That meant adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward dead space—thinking of the apartment "almost like it was a yacht," says Stone, "where things are hiding behind other things." To illustrate her point, she reaches up and peels open a wall panel beside the dining table to reveal a restaurant-worthy wine refrigerator, then takes a few steps toward an intimate seating cluster and repeats the performance to manifest a flat-screen television.

Another way the apartment was like a yacht: low ceilings, especially on the lower floor, which contains all of the public spaces as well as the children's bedrooms. "In Manhattan, you get used to dealing with low ceilings," says Berman. His solution involved a visual sequence of "compression and expansion. When you drop ceilings in certain places—like over a dining table, for instance, where you would tend to be sitting anyway—and then you pop them up in other areas, it makes the ceiling in those other areas feel taller."

Painting the ceiling with a reflective, high-gloss paint and installing light covers helped confer a sense of depth. "You can't put a chandelier over the dining table in a space like this," says Stone. "You want to bring the eye down, not up." To help guide it in this direction, she picked low-slung sofas for seating areas, and low-backed chairs—including a set of six vintage chairs found in Rotterdam's Contemporary Showroom and covered in fabrics from Pierre Frey and Larsen, as well as two leather chairs from Larkin Gaudet—around a Kelly Wearstler dining table. All work in concert to reinforce a mood of calming horizontality.





On the apartment's north wall—just to the right of the pair of Pierre Paulin Ribbon chairs in Pierre Frey Fabric, from Tishu, and a dramatic triptych by the photographer Chris McCaw—is a breathtaking staircase, sheathed in painted steel and sculpturally corkscrewing its way up to the second story. Set against a dramatic 17-foot travertine backdrop that spans both floors, its swirling, cyclonic energy seems designed to pull in anyone who comes near it and draw them upwards—but before you succumb, know that the second story has been entirely given over to the couple as their private realm.

The clients knew they wanted this space to feel open, and said as much. Berman's response was: "Okay, but how open do you want it to feel?" What he and Stone gave them—an entire wall of frosted glass opposite the room-length window—would mean that the couple was giving up the sense of cocoon-like privacy that so many say they want in a master bedroom. But the payoff would be worth it: natural light flooding practically the entire floor, and the sense that their bed, from Hickory Chair, was magically suspended in the air above the Central Park tree line.

"People don't live the way that they lived forty, fifty years ago," says Berman. "That formality is gone. The kitchen used to be a place where the cooking was done; now everybody's in the kitchen all of the time. Nobody wants to have 'that room' that you're not allowed to go into. I grew up with that room: a living room that actually had carpet lines in it from the vacuum cleaner, and my mother would know if we had gone in there because she'd see the footprints. You can't afford to have a room like that now, especially in this city. To not use a hundred percent of your space is just a crime."

"Luxury" is a relative term that can mean vastly different things to different clients. For some of them, it's all about finishes, furnishings and fabrics; for others, it's a synonym for space; for others still, it's a catch-all term for a showroom's worth of well-curated accoutrements. But for Matt Berman's and Jenny Stone's clients, it meant combining style, artistry, economy and thoughtfulness in such a way that they and their children could have room to live and grow in the city that they love. As Stone puts it: "It's a family house, built for a family. Sometimes it doesn't look or feel like a house with three kids, but it is. The children really do jump on the couches." ■ Workshop/APD, workshopapd.com



