

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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BEFORE & AFTER

# Attitude Adjustment

CHILLY MINIMALIST ROOMS THAW OUT BY THE EAST RIVER

Architecture by Alexander Neratoff/Interior Design by Charles Allem

Text by Steven M. L. Aronson/Before Photography by Billy Cunningham/After Photography by Paul Warchol



**T**his house was a huge compromise," says Angela Rich. "In every single way. When I married lawyer Jeffrey Siger a couple of years ago and we decided to do a new home together, I didn't even want a house, I wanted an apartment—and this was something in between. And he wanted downtown and I wanted uptown—and we settled on midtown."

What they found seemed, even on first reflection, a potential gem: a five-story 19th-century row house in the East

Fifties, right on the Beekman Place riverfront (the view of water was welcome, Rich having insisted she couldn't face "the brick of another building"). The house adjoined—was in fact part and parcel of—a grand prewar cooperative and shared its many amenities, including a substantial garden, an indoor swimming pool and a squash court. The couple acquired the bottom three floors on the spot (subsequently Rich was able to purchase the fourth; with visits never not in the off-

"Previous remodeling had made it too minimalist and stark," designer Charles Allem (left) says of the 19th-century Manhattan house he and architect Alexander Neratoff redid for Angela Rich. "We wanted it to be more warm and traditional, yet still modern." ABOVE: The living room.

ing from grown children who live in California, she decided to keep it a self-contained apartment).

The triplex's previous owner, who used it as a pied-à-terre, was a celebrated disciple of minimalism and had had it sweepingly renovated to serve as a pristine setting for the Conceptual art she collected. The space featured a double-height living room with a wall of sheet-glass windows looking out on a private terrace and in on a mezzanine study, ultrastark staircases and halls, and two-

OPPOSITE: "In order to give the narrow, double-height living room some interest and better proportions, we put in an overscale tray ceiling at a lower height, decorated it with shimmering silver leaf and installed cove lighting," Allem points out. Old World Weavers chair fabric.

by-two gray-stone-grid floors that marched unrelentingly throughout. It was a triumph of pure concept, to be sure—a very coherent work of architecture indeed—but the place struck many as cold: an icebox, in fact.

"I knew it had all been done with the greatest of integrity," says Rich. "The problem was I hate minimalism. Normally I would have done the interiors myself, but I didn't have a clue how to incorporate my 15th-century Venetian canapé, my Neoclassical pieces, my Gus-



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The triplex's previous owner was a celebrated disciple of minimalism. "The problem was I hate minimalism," says Angela Rich.

LEFT: "It was wonderful to have so much incoming light. We kept the windows as they were and left them drapery-free." BELOW: An 18th-century Florentine portrait of Cardinal Strozzi overlooks the living room. "The painting's beautiful red inspired me; I chose that tone for accents."

OPPOSITE: "I like to use one color continuously in a design, although I may have 50 different shadings of it," notes Allem. "Here I went with taupe." The Art Déco Murano glass chandelier "is neither too old nor too new. It completes the space." Aga John rug. Jim Thompson stripe.

tavian chairs. . . . I mean, have you ever had that dream where you're sliding off the bottom of a bed? Well, I have that dream a lot, and that's how the house originally made me feel: I couldn't figure out where the house was going—up, down or sideways." She called two friends for help—New York architect Alexander Neratoff and New York- and Los Angeles-based designer Charles Allem. "I asked Alex to soften the rigid lines of the house for me so that structurally it could be as hospitable to my traditional things as it had been to Conceptual or whatever, and I asked Charles to suffuse it all with warmth and elegance."

Neratoff committed his energy and ingenuity to the shell, and the things he didn't see the need to reconfigure, he and Allem went on to aesthetically retune. The space was "stabilized" and new spatial rhythms imposed, the floors relaid, the ceiling heights differentiated (by means of coves, trays and overscale crown moldings), the parapet of the mezzanine study "punched out" and the walls reorganized via cabinets and bookcases (the latter conceived as centered compositions, with recessed glass shelves lit from within to create depth). "Here you had a place that didn't have



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ABOVE: "To be perfectly frank, I thought the dining room looked like a sterile morgue." OPPOSITE: Old-master drawings, including works by Giovanni Battista Benaschi and Giacomo Zoboli, are arranged on one wall. Art Déco chairs complement the French Neoclassical table.

much of a comfortable residential function," Neratoff expounds. "My job was to give it a sense of refuge and a more *classically* modern atmosphere. And of course we also had to remake it to match the patterns and contours of how Angela wanted to live in it." Allem adds by way of example: "There was no entrance hall, so we created one, because she likes to entertain formally and she was never going to be happy with people having to walk directly into her dining room."

"I'm an *abbondanza* type of person," Rich volunteers. "In Italian—which I am, 100 percent—that means I like a lot of everything. Plus I like lush. All my previous homes were big: The house in Bel-Air, for instance, was 15,000

square feet, and the one in Litchfield County, Connecticut, was 20,000. So you can imagine what a tremendous discipline it was to do a 2,500-square-foot place like this." As Allem recalls, "She showed me her entire collection of furniture, pictures and accessories, and together we edited them way, way down." The ruthless pruning paid off handsomely, Rich believes: "When my friends come over, they all say that this house makes

Allem reserved an entire wall of the dining room for her drawings—"When you cluster," he maintains, "you get a richer feeling."



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ABOVE RIGHT AND RIGHT: "We demolished the existing awkward kitchen and created a gracious, functional, up-to-date one that is entirely separate and closed off. I loathe kitchens that open directly onto the living or dining rooms." Sub-Zero wine cooler. Range hood from Miele.



LEFT AND BELOW: "The study is now a comfortable, multipurpose room," says Allem. At left is a painting by Carbonata that was displayed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893; at right is a work by Pierre Lesieur. Lewis Mittman sofa, with Old World Weavers fabric. Stark wallcovering.

room as a whole. "Charles took the already double-height ceiling to another dimension—he said, 'We're going to do silver foil, we're going to do silver leaf,'" Rich marvels. They hunted long and hard for the right light fixture—"We didn't want just another bunch of dangling crystals," Allem insists. The Art Déco Venetian chandelier they found, made on Murano for the French market, is "bold and thick—it's got



them want to go right home and get rid of everything *they* have."

In the entrance hall, while a console in the style of Edgar Brandt sets the Déco tone, it's a 1960s American oval mirror that reduces Rich to rhapsody: "I love the texture, and it looks like jewelry—and I love jewelry." On the back of the front door, of all improbable places, hang two Italian old-master drawings. "I managed to put together a nice little collec-

tion over the years," she admits, adding, "Some of them I was bidding against places like the Morgan Library for, and others are 'just-because-I-like-them' kind of pictures." Allem reserved an entire wall of the dining room for these drawings—"When you cluster and concentrate," he maintains, "you get a richer feeling."

The length of the Neoclassical dining table is repeated in the slight elevation detail in the ceiling.

The small-scale Déco dining chairs, re-covered in lamb-skin leather, are refreshingly cranberry. "It was the cardinal that gave me the inspiration, or should I say dispensation, to use that color," Allem confesses.

The cardinal in question, Strozzi, glows incarnadine over the living room fireplace, embodied in an 18th-century Florentine painting. "He's very 'smart,'" the designer observes. "He has really nice energy." So does the





great direction to it—and it's not too traditional and it's not too contemporary." Not incidentally, it hangs by a cardinal-red cord.

That Venetian canapé, covered in green leather and richly embellished with an antique cardinal-red velvet throw, looks perfectly at home here in the living room. The low table was fashioned by the French Déco master Jules Leleu, and Allem himself de-

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**RIGHT AND BELOW:** "Warm and cozy is fine, but I prefer to have a little edge as well. The bedroom is a romantic, feminine hideaway, but it's also glamorous." Aga John rug. Beige wallcovering, Stark. Clarence House bed, tufted wall and drapery silk. Nobilis fabric on H. M. Luther chairs.



**BEFORE**



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