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Manhattan Grand

OLD-SCHOOL GLAMOUR GETS A MODERN LIFT
IN A LANDMARK BUILDING

"The space itself was inspirational," designer Charles Allen says of a penthouse he remade for a Manhattan couple. Silver leaf adds drama to the living room's barrel-vaulted ceiling. Velvet draperies, hand-printed in Italy, "never stop cascading," he says, from the beveled-mirror rods he designed. Italian etchings and Murano glass lamp, left, Lorin Marsh. Stark carpet.





ABOVE: A chaise longue and a 1960s bronze low table by Philip and Kelvin LaVerne anchor a corner of the living room. OPPOSITE: Working with Laci-na-Heitler Architects, Allem designed a monolithic Jerusalem stone fireplace, one of a pair. The aluminum-alloy piano is a rare circa 1960 edition. Midcentury chairs from John Salibello are at each end of a mirrored low table. The floor lamps, by Jules Leleu, are from Bernd Goeckler. Slipper chairs, Donghia.

Interior Design by Charles Allem, ASID
 Text by Nancy Collins
 Photography by Paul Warchol

When I walked into the apartment for the first time, into this extraordinary living room, then onto a terrace so big you could comfortably have a sit-down dinner for 200, my jaw dropped,” says interior designer Charles Allem. “I really fell in love.”

And why not? After all, a Manhattan penthouse boasting nearly 2,000 square feet of wraparound terrace, not to mention an equally impressive

pedigree—a former owner, social arbiter Earl Blackwell, filled the 7,000-square-foot space with the crème of power and celebrity (when Greta Garbo *didn't* want to be alone, she showed up here)—doesn't drop into a decorator's life just any old day.

So when this lavish apartment's new owners, a recently married Wall Street financier and his wife, asked Allem to take a look, he jumped. “I said, ‘Let me take 20 minutes to walk the property.’ And there was so much potential. The bones from the original period were still there; nothing had been changed.

“By the time I finished, I was running wild with design,” he recalls. “I said, ‘I see the Temple of Dendur, two monolithic stone fireplaces. And let's open it up; tear out all the doors, but leave the frames of the French doors—all in bronze—to maintain the space's powerful feeling of security, of being protected from the outside world.’”

Three years later Allem delivered on his vision—despite the problems inherent in refurbishing a landmark building: “New York gives you a golden egg with one hand,” he laughs, “then slaps you with the other. But that's what keeps you standing straight.” Especially when it came to this throwback of a decorating challenge, “one of those extraordinary design jobs done on something of the old scale.”

Make that grand. Take the glorious ceiling in the living room—“all silver leaf, done by hand on a scaffolding. That performance took us three months,” Allem remarks. Or the room's walls, “all Venetian plaster, waxed to create wonderful texture. It's the leather-and-lace story—make things look fabulous, then give them an edge.” And then there are the exquisite, hand-printed, silk-velvet draperies in the living and dining rooms, custom-made in Venice by tex-



“I love having one medium throughout, then using furniture to change direction,” the designer explains.





OPPOSITE: Walnut doors, fitted with bronze hardware, open to the dining room. Hanging over the expansive walnut table is an 18-foot-long bespoke fixture. Fabricated using 105 sandblasted-glass cylinders of varying heights, it gives off "incredible shades that reflect all over the room," Allem remarks. Flatware from Tiffany's. ABOVE: The bar. As in the rest of the apartment, the floors are wide-plank walnut. The walls are covered in leather from J. Robert Scott. Side chair from Donghia; barstools from Holly Hunt. Circa 1940 low table with beveled-mirror top and base, John Salibello.



ABOVE: Allem extended the subdued palette into the master bedroom, adding terra-cotta tones. A tufted-silk wall lends warmth. Over a velvet-covered settee is an early-19th-century French portrait; in front of it stands a circa 1940 table. J. Robert Scott fabric on bed bolster. OPPOSITE: Inside the apartment, Allem says, “you feel so removed—then you burst onto this incredible terrace. I didn’t want to clutter it with furniture.” The landscaping on the 1,700-square-foot space was designed by Town and Gardens. Furniture, Kreiss.

tile designer Mirella Spinella.

In a nod to the couple’s sensibilities—he “Upper East Side,” she “more of a downtown girl”—Allem strove for “glamorous but hip,” apparent in the apartment’s loft-like openness. Working with the architectural firm Lacina-Heitler, he created an open flow from the bar and dining room to the living room; a wide passageway leads to three en suite bedrooms.

When it came to the floors, Allem opted for “all walnut, dark, dark wood in 12-inch

planks to accommodate the scale,” he says. “I love having one medium throughout, then using furniture to change the direction. Of course, walnut takes a lot of upkeep, but you don’t get anything fabulous without maintenance.”

Finally, after meticulously reconfiguring the apartment, in “the sturdiest building I’ve ever seen,” it boiled down to “the home run of pulling a space this size together. The last two weeks were like being in a war zone.” Garnering a commitment from the own-

ers that nary a “foot would be put in the door” until everything was completely ready, Allem personally took charge. “When I produce an interior, I do everything. The client walks in, and I have the refrigerator entirely stocked, an orchid in every vase, perfumed candles lit and the *1812 Overture* playing. So, at six on the appointed day, the place was flawless—every linen folded in every closet, every sheet ironed, a bottle of Champagne and a checkerboard of caviar on the bar.

“Finally, they appeared. I

opened the door, threw my arms around them and said: ‘Welcome home.’ And then for 30 minutes, their coats still on, they just walked around the place, not speaking. All the husband could say was, ‘Oh my God.’ Finally he came up to me—tears in his eyes—and said: ‘I never dreamed I’d be able to live in something like this.’

“And that is the ultimate satisfaction for anybody who is passionate about his work—the real reward a designer gets. After all, these projects are *my children.*” □

