



A Lux urious Loft

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What do you do when you crave a family home with well-proportioned rooms and a calm, classic look — and don't want to move to Park Avenue? If you are Connie Tarrant, you reinvent a Manhattan loft with designer Thomas O'Brien, of Aero Ltd.

"My friends couldn't imagine a blue living room," says German-born Connie Tarrant (above left). "Now they all want one." The folding doors flanking the mantel read as a modern form of boiserie, one of several elements that cleverly update the traditional salon. Mrs. Tarrant's hair and makeup by Mally Roncal for Garren New York. For product information throughout, see page 254.



"I ALWAYS HAD VERY MODERN, GERMAN HOMES," says very modern, German-born Connie Tarrant, twirling a strand of caramel-colored hair as she mentally retraces the path to her new residence. "But then I had children, and I wanted something cozier and more long-lasting." Like most young parents, she and her husband, a financier, also craved a little peace—especially because they had been living in a can-hear-a-pin-drop loft downtown. "We had so little privacy before; from the little one's birth we whispered all the time. We wanted big, solid walls and fat doors."

Once, such a checklist would have convinced a Manhattan couple like the Tarrants to head straight for one of the proud prewar buildings on Park Avenue. But they loved their downtown neighborhood and loft-living—even though they no longer wanted the wide-open, semicom-munal feeling of a traditional loft. So they were delighted when they found 3,500 square feet of blank canvas (with an additional 2,000 square feet of terrace space) waiting for them just down the street. "You had to have a lot of imagination, though; the space was really a



mess," Connie remembers. "Everything raw. Absolutely raw."

A graphic designer by profession and a painter by avocation, Connie certainly didn't lack imagination—and the duplex space, with its four generous terraces and walls of windows, had plenty of potential. She also had the good fortune to find a designer who immediately understood her vision of a downtown environment with an uptown flavor: Thomas O'Brien, owner of Aero Ltd., a design firm renowned for its emphasis on classic but modern good

looks. (O'Brien has worked on the residences of both Ralph Lauren and Giorgio Armani.) "It was a fantastic collaboration," marvels the designer, who crunched his way through the rubble with the enthusiastic Tarrants before taking on the challenge of keeping the space "clean, modern and loft-like, while traditional," as he puts it. To orchestrate the total look, a soup-to-nuts approach by Aero—or, in this case, a walls-to-toothbrush approach—was essential. "It all started with the architecture," O'Brien emphasizes. "The rest was in response to that." How so? "The views *through* rooms were very important to Connie; she was drawn to images of prewar European apartments, so paneled double doors led the way to a language that was used throughout."

That language is remarkably French, whispering of both 18th-century neoclassicism and 20th-century moderne. Traditional but unmistakably chic, it embraces purity of line even as it gleefully incorporates the unexpected. The cumulative effect? A 21st-century siren song of graciousness and serenity.

To reach this modern state of grace, the staircase—

Thomas O'Brien knew that double doors would be the key when his clients told him that views through the rooms were important to them. "Even a very small house seems big if it flows," observes Connie. **Opposite: An enfilade of living room, dining room and kitchen. This page: The living room's coffee table was actually a velvet-lined antique display case that Connie loved and O'Brien filled with shells. The ottoman is Robsjohn-Gibbings.**



A vintage mirror lends a bit of swagger to the living room in the way it leans casually against a wall. It's the sort of deft styling detail for which Thomas O'Brien (opposite, bottom left) is known. The same relaxed elegance is reflected in everything from the makeover of a top-of-the-line conservatory into an artist's studio (opposite, top left) to the sheen and texture of the accessories chosen for the living room and guest room (opposite, right).









As the parents of young children, Connie and her husband needed a master suite that was a peaceful retreat, removed physically and spiritually from the hurly-burly of family life. "While the loft was under construction, everyone kept asking, 'Why do you want to cut it all up?' Then they saw, and they stopped asking," notes Connie. Above: behind the mirrored center door lies a cozy study, a refuge within a refuge. Opposite, clockwise from bottom right: A long internal hallway, with an entrance to the generously sized master bath at right, comes alive thanks to filmy silk curtains that seem to change color with the light of day. The drapery fabric is from Nobilis; the sheers are from Bergamo. The antiqued mirrored doors, with custom hardware from Nanz, give the master suite a European glamour without undercutting the restful mood; so do the Aero-designed headboard and bedside lamp, and the antique mahogany and mother-of-pearl chest of drawers that O'Brien bought in London's Camden Passage. The round chrome table is by Eileen Gray.



A MODERN KITCHEN Of course it has a double Viking range, a Sub-Zero refrigerator, a set of refrigerated drawers near the stove (“I told Thomas the refrigerator was too far away,” says Connie) and enough stainless-steel counters to refloat the *Titanic*. But what makes the Tarrant kitchen so modern is its centrality: this is a principal room, not an afterthought—extremely unusual within a traditional vernacular. “The space is very cohesive with the rest of the architecture in the apartment,” explains Michael Aiduss, project manager at Aero. “It’s old-world design used in a modern way.” That enormous, welcoming table on wheels, an Aero design in walnut and steel, provides plenty of what Aiduss declares people want in their kitchens right now: “Surfaces. You can have great appliances, but if you have no surfaces, you’re lost. Also, people want plenty of storage. For example, they are well hidden, but this kitchen has two different garbage locations with four different receptacles.” (“Very German!” exclaims Connie.) It even has storage bins for the children’s toys.

originally an awkward iron artifact skulking as far from the entrance to the space as possible—was reimagined in a slimmer, unobtrusive style. The contractors, Regele Builders, constructed a new staircase to Aero’s specifications, placing it far forward to become the backdrop for an informal entrance hall. The resulting raw space behind the stairs could then become the sweeping flow of indoor and outdoor rooms that Connie could see in her mind’s eye: terrace flowing into living room,

flowing into dining room, flowing into . . . kitchen (yes, kitchen), flowing out onto another terrace. The library one ordinarily would have expected to find as part of any formal enfilade of principal rooms has been shunted off to one side.

The primacy of the kitchen says a great deal about the Tarrants. After the living room, it is the largest and most handsomely appointed area in the house, a reminder that, historically, the kitchen reigned not only as the cozy center of private family life but as the de facto locus for a family’s active socializing. “All my parents’ parties ended up with everyone in the kitchen—I remember them all sitting on the counters,” laughs Connie, her soft brown eyes glowing. “It’s actually possible to entertain in this kitchen: we’ve had a chef come in to teach people cooking, and everyone gathers around the big center table. I will do that more often, I think.”

That’s not to say that the living room plays second fiddle. It’s still the main entertaining area, doubly so when the weather becomes fine enough for guests to enjoy the large, adjacent terrace and its sweeping downtown views. “People from ▶243

The beams and sightlines of the handsomely proportioned kitchen align perfectly. The 1930s pendant light fixture is from New York’s Urban Archaeology; the chair is Arne Jacobsen.



uptown come for drinks before dinner and then don't want to leave for the restaurant," says Connie. "They just want to order in or make spaghetti." The very first piece purchased for the apartment is in the living room: a simple French neo-classical limestone mantel from Elizabeth Street Antiques that sets the decorative mood and anchors the space. "Originally I wanted one of their grander mantels," Connie confides, "but Thomas was right. This is perfect." The designer had no objections to other Tarrant choices, however. "Connie has exquisite taste—very elegant but casual at the same time. And she is very much intrigued by the unusual—few people would conceive of a display case as a coffee table, but she did as soon as she saw this particular piece, which is now in the living room. Also, she and her husband had seen an Ingrid Bergman movie with a blue living room, and they very much wanted that, too."

Make no mistake, however; despite the touches of whimsy, this is a couture environment. At least 80 percent of the contents and fittings were custom-made, from the hardware and furniture to the fabrics and carpets. "This was a very exciting project for the Tarrants, and it was very much tailored to *them*," O'Brien notes, pointing out the true delight of custom work, even though it does require extraordinary patience on the part of the homeowner. The multimillion-dollar project, which began in October 1998, was not finished until the summer of 2000. Connie admits now that the family moved in a bit sooner than they should have (February 2000, in fact, while the finish work was still going on), but they were eager to live in the new home they loved—and into which they had put so much of themselves.

From the beginning, both Tarrants were available for everything from weekly site meetings to the tiniest details. "That was probably the most fun," smiles Connie, remembering the meetings around the table at Aero's SoHo office with O'Brien and project manager Michael Aiduss. "Thomas is so good with fabric and color, it's amazing. He and

Michael would have just a few tiles or swatches to show. It all went very quickly because everything was so well edited."

The most critical part of the balance was accessing the traditional, while avoiding the stodgy. "I was always afraid of having a *real* Park Avenue apartment," Connie confesses. "I wanted a twist to make it younger." Among the many twists: in the dining room, no massive central table looms or breaks the visual flow into the next room; instead, a pair of small flip-top consoles snuggle up to the walls (upholstered in noise-baffling camel's hair) when not in use. One console is perfect for intimate dinners; for larger parties, the two can be opened and joined together to seat ten. Other young choices: framing the floor-to-ceiling windows with gauzy, cream-colored curtains and anchoring the foot of the stairs with a simply framed collage of antique deeds and other hand-lettered documents. "I got them all on eBay," Connie says conspiratorially. "I love the penmanship and the colors—I have drawerfuls. I think I'll use them in my paintings."

Connie's painting studio, a conservatory from the Jamestown, New York, firm Hope's Windows, is an unexpected treasure on the second floor, which also contains the family's private rooms—including a study that had originally been conceived as a large, windowed closet off the master bedroom. "I suggested to my husband that he take it—and now he calls it his basement or his garage, because that's usually all the man gets!" In this case, he gets a hideaway redolent of the scent of the leather-covered walls, as well as a place where he can keep all the well-loved record albums that have followed men of a certain age since their school days. This is undoubtedly one of his favorite rooms.

And Connie's? "Never before have I liked *all* the rooms—and I use them all, all the time. I learned so much doing this. I'm actually amazed at how much you *can* do to something. In fact," she says, with a giggle and a sideways glance, as if her next remark is shocking even to herself, "I think I would like to do it *again*!" ❧