

# PRIVATE LIVES

WITH HELP FROM INTERIOR DESIGNER THOMAS O'BRIEN, A MANHATTAN COUPLE TRADES IN A MODERNIST WAY OF LIFE UPTOWN FOR THE CREATURE COMFORTS—AND CURTAINS—OF AN APARTMENT IN THE WEST VILLAGE

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**AT SOME POINT** we all need childproofing.

Many of us, raring to get up and out and be chic citizens of the world, have gone and embraced the hard, brash edges of the world—a Mies van der Rohe glass-top cocktail table. A Jean Prouvé metal-and-wood dining chair. A Dutch Constructivist Rietveld chair. A Bauhaus-crisp door handle.

The apartment—or rather, the collection—looks fantastic. But what happens when you just want to stay in and be comfortable? One couple hired interior designer Thomas O'Brien. And while his vision for them wasn't necessarily inspired by the foam corner guards that ended up on the most angular of the furniture—put there to protect the clients' two-year-old daughter from any modern-edged trauma—he certainly performed a similar function.

In short, he took the edge off.

"It was very crisp," says O'Brien, with palpable diplomacy, of the pair's former apartment. "Very Bauhaus." A huge north-facing loft in a historic building on Manhattan's Upper West Side that the investment manager and his wife, a former model who is studying to become a psychologist, had rented, the place was a study in stark Modernism, with black leather sofas, tubular metal furniture, white walls and gray wall-to-wall carpeting, and lots of Prouvé furniture. It was terribly sophisticated but, the wife admits, not terribly livable.

"They had no curtains," O'Brien sighs. "They lived in blinding sunlight and had no privacy whatsoever."

"We used to sort of perch on the furniture and run out to dinner," the wife recalls with a laugh. But with a baby on the way, their lives were changing, and they needed more than a perch. Buying a place in the West Village and starting from scratch, the cou-



At a West Village apartment designed by Thomas O'Brien, a Jean-Michel Frank-style sofa and Bridgewater armchairs, all upholstered in Bergamo fabrics, form a vignette in the living room with a vintage Tokyo bench by Charlotte Perriand. Ceramic serving pieces by Aero sit atop a circa-1950 Jean Prouvé terrazzo-top table; the aluminum tripod floor lamp is by Aero Studios. See Resources.





From top: Vintage armchairs by Charles and Ray Eames for Herman Miller bank a circa-1950 Jean Prouvé table in the dining area; an Akari lantern by Noguchi hangs overhead. A 1950s Jens Risom walnut credenza stands beside a brick wall and fireplace surround by Aero Studios; the vintage side chairs are by Prouvé. A Holophane ceiling light from Urban Archaeology and a marble-and-concrete kitchen island by Aero Studios. Facing page: Curtains of Lee Jofa's Cream wool frame the windows; a lithograph by Jay Bray is propped on a Foley Console by Thomas O'Brien for Hickory Chair. See Resources.

ple knew they needed and wanted one thing: walls, which O'Brien and his Aero Studios team were only too happy to give them. "Our old place was a three-bedroom apartment that the owner had converted into a loft," she explains. "If I wanted any privacy, I had to go hide in the bathroom."

What they didn't realize was how much they needed a little tenderness. "My aesthetic is much harder-lined," the client adds. "Thomas definitely softened things up." When it came time to discuss certain pieces of furniture, like the all-important sofa and armchairs—no longer the visual center of the apartment—O'Brien had a bit of trouble convincing them to abandon their fondness for famous-Modernist-designer numbers in favor of an almost decadently comfortable made-to-order sofa.

"I had collected midcentury-modern furnishings, as many people have," she says. "But Thomas said that this was something we were going to sit on every single day. This furniture is so comfortable, much softer than what I would have chosen."

Likewise, while the apartment might not be a color explosion worthy of a *Laugh-In* set, the designer gently steered the couple away from their beloved black-and-white scheme toward pale, warm colors that almost rate as neutrals. "I wasn't sure about the raisin," the wife says of the purplish-brown material that O'Brien picked out (and won out) to anchor the









From left: In the master bedroom, an Aero Studios bed is upholstered in Maharam's Satu bouclé and dressed in linens by Thomas O'Brien for Marshall Field's; the circa-1954 fiberglass-and-aluminum chair is by George Nelson for Herman Miller. Waterworks chrome shower and sink fittings in the master bath; the mosaic-tile flooring is by Walker Zanger, and the Ice Blue and White jacquard bath towels are by Thomas O'Brien for Marshall Field's. See Resources.



living room as the fabric to cover the two armchairs (which, like the sofa, are by Jonas Upholstery).

Choosing finishes, materials, and colors that would complement the pieces—mostly Prouvé—that the pair most wanted to keep, he crafted a kind of Modernist warmth. Echoed in the kitchen's blond-green cabinetry and white marble countertops streaked with honey, the designer's vision is perhaps best (and most literally) exemplified by the main visual element that ties the apartment together: an asymmetrical 1950s California-style fireplace paved floor to ceiling with upright butter-yellow brick.

But O'Brien didn't want to jettison his clients' fondness for an industrialist aesthetic altogether. Using the same wire-shot safety glass that surrounded the elevator core in their old building, he created an airy yet private den and work space off the living room. He painted all the wooden doors a rich brown, making them faintly reminiscent of painted steel doors; you unconsciously find yourself knocking on them to see what they're made of. And last but not least, O'Brien got the couple to knock down that final psychological wall—and put up curtains.

"You have to have drapes," he says flatly. It's a quandary for many who feel that all the real estate that goes into curtains—all that fabric, all that hardware—seems a vestige of a time when people felt they had more to hide. But while draperies seem to be about a kind of privacy that keeps the rest of the world out, the truth is that they're perhaps more functional at keeping the world we create *in*, an acknowledgment that, hard as we like to present ourselves on the outside, we're all pretty much softies inside. ■

