

THE NEW LOOK

LETTING GO OF HIS SPARE AESTHETIC, THOMAS O'BRIEN RETOOLS HIS MANHATTAN APARTMENT TO SYNTHESIZE ANTIQUE, VINTAGE, AND MODERN DESIGN INTO A HARMONIOUS WHOLE

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One of modernism's most seductive lures is its promise to pare down our lives, to knock down walls, to make our days more efficient—and thus more enjoyable. The problem is, by the time most people can afford to have someone streamline their lifestyle, they don't want things simpler—they want them bigger and grander. It turns out that—guess what?—instead of a clean, open space for everyday use, many covet that formal living room after all.

As a Manhattan designer with plenty of clients facing that same quandary, Thomas O'Brien can relate. He is the creator of the eclectic SoHo shop Aero and of home-furnishings lines for Hickory Chair, Safavieh, Groundworks, and Target among others. That makes O'Brien a modernist who comes down on the side of simplicity. But he is also a collector of all manner of things, from vintage jeans and antique textiles to ceramics, pressed glass, and figure drawings. And he walks the clutter tight-rope with much aplomb. Both his proper prewar in New York City—a one-bedroom complete with a double-height living room and a terrace—and his

weekend getaway in the tony Long Island town of Bellport display a knack for synthesizing antique, vintage, and new design into a harmonious, lived-in whole. It's a lifestyle, it would appear, that borders on the seamless and the faultless.

That was just the problem. One day last winter, after eight years of living decorously in his 1,100-square-foot apartment, O'Brien realized that, owing to his busy life, he seldom saw more than the bedroom itself. In the meantime, the living room was evolving into a repository for his collecting habit, a kind of bric-a-brac limbo. "I was always cleaning it up," says O'Brien. "It was almost like a faux library. I didn't like to work or even entertain in there—the sofa was too low and too soft."

Listening to a strong inner voice, the designer eventually decided to try something that many a six-year-old has dreamed of but that few grown-ups would dare: He moved the bed into the living room. While some might fear such a step would prompt a slide into decrepitude, O'Brien says transforming the bedroom into his study and the living room into



Designer Thomas O'Brien, in the living room of his prewar Manhattan apartment; the space has 18-foot ceilings, whitewashed hardwood floors, original casement windows, and also functions as his bedroom. The Chippendale-style side chair is antique, and the Vintage Modern Circle rug is from O'Brien's line for Target. See Resources.

An oversize bulletin board in the living room is O'Brien's wall of inspiration. The folding library ladder is from Aero, O'Brien's SoHo shop, and the Bennett storage boxes are part of his Hickory Chair collection. Facing page, clockwise from top: In the living room, the Hallings secretary is by Hickory Chair, and the 4th-century Celtic bust is from Joel Mathieson. On the terrace, O'Brien's dogs, Elcy Jones and Bubbie, nestle on garden furniture by Target. A vintage Russel Wright bed and *Shipwreck Rock* by Ray Mortenson anchor a living room corner. An antique Queen Anne-style table, and an Odeon mirror by Hickory Chair. See Resources.





sleeping quarters was exactly the right thing to do, at exactly the right time. "It's so wonderful to wake up in this great big room," he says.

The way O'Brien mentions this offhandedly might suggest that one day he just got up, called a friend, and moved some furniture around. Instead, the inspiration prompted a full-fledged renovation, with O'Brien reimagining the entire space. "It's easier to ask what I kept than what I changed," he says with a laugh, noting that only a handful of things made the cut, among them his Russel Wright bed, a chest-high armoire, and an 18th-century carved cabinet.

As for acquisitions, several pieces of the designer's Hickory Chair collection fit the bill: A bookshelf worked with the flat-screen television in the new study, while an angular secretary was perfect for the redesigned main room. In that same area, a giant blue and white wool rug from O'Brien's line for Target popped on the whitewashed hardwood floors, while another piece of O'Brien handiwork, a series of wood storage boxes lined up against a wall, became a stand-in for a suite of closets. Added to that was a just-so assortment of ceramics, sculptures, clocks, and whatnot—is there another man on earth with a better eye for a lamp?—and O'Brien had an interior unimpeachable enough to make anyone wonder: Why isn't my bed in the living room?

Yet, pulled together as it is, the designer's makeover is more than just a polished bit of sleight of hand. It's also a nod to the glamour of the artist's

A commercial-grade range from DCS in the kitchen; the chrome and leather stool is vintage.



In the sleeping area of the living room, a Sharp LCD television, and a 1930s bureau by James Mont.



A series of 1940s figure sketches flanks the entrance to O'Brien's dressing room; the vintage Chinese table holds an Opal Spiral glass lamp designed for Target. See Resources.



O'Brien designed the adjustable kitchen-cabinet shelves, where he displays pieces of Russel Wright's American Modern series and his own stoneware for Target.



In the living room, the Queen Anne-style table expands for dinner parties, and O'Brien often seats a guest on the bed; the mahogany armoire is antique, and the oak armchair is from the 1940s.



A framed collection of portraits in the foyer.



O'Brien's former bedroom was converted into a study/dressing room. See Resources.