



Easy Evolution

If anyone can make Chippendale look hip and stainless steel feel welcoming, it's **Thomas O'Brien**. In an excerpt from his first book, *American Modern*, the designer shares his remarkable gift for creating rooms that embrace the changes life deals us—and that just get better with time.

"Clients in New York City with two young children debated between moving uptown and staying downtown in a loft," says O'Brien (above right). "They decided to remain downtown, and we created this classic Continental apartment on a modern, industrial scale. We used antiques and antique detailing throughout but in an uncluttered way. That approach allows a new space to feel seasoned and at the same time current."

"My apartment is in a thirties building on 57th Street in Manhattan. I think it's possible to impart New York glamour of the twenties and thirties to any willing home just by streamlining and lightening up the basic elements [below], as I did when I moved in, in 1997. By 2001, I was beginning to make a more significant investment in art; my place is now about inspiration and collecting [opposite] and also about not being afraid of change. I had outgrown one way of life, spare and serene as it was, but I still loved my apartment. Understanding that difference freed me to use the space I had and make something new. The white stool is by John Dickinson; the Hallings secretary to the left of the fireplace is a piece I designed for Hickory Chair."



chine Age claim on European modern ideals, intended to have an impact on the daily lives of ordinary people through mostly modest objects. Though this is certainly a huge touchstone for me with regard to the forms I most like and return to, in describing American modern today, I mean to borrow something that is more a set of tools than an aesthetic. And these tools show how to approach the whole mix of historical styles, from traditional to modern.

When people ask me what I do, I start by making this link between the traditional and the modern. Very often I find that people will be attracted to something other than what they live with but won't let themselves try it. The traditional client is drawn to modern things; the modern client craves antiques. For those who find their way to me, my products or my New York City store, Aero, the major breakthrough is always seeing that these elements can coexist and actually look better together than apart.

Not so long ago this approach to design was viewed as a vague hybrid that worried advocates from both traditional and modern camps. But now I think it is the link for people who have

become comfortable with what is reconciled, and indeed what always was, in design's terra firma of honest craft and clear form. Make an object work well and look correct in proportion and line. Highlight good structure and authentic details. Eliminate excess but prize gracefulness. Be sustainable and sparing in the use of materials. Create for the enjoyment of all—not just some.

These foundations and tools carry over from classical style to neoclassical, from Georgian to Federal, from early to mid-century modernism—all of them the building blocks of my own sense of tradition. And the common thread is the power of reduction: less ornament and less material. The simplicity in modernism does progress directly out of this kind of thinking, for things become more modern when they are abbreviated. Yet it's all still historical, and it's all revisited, refined and reinterpreted again and again in keeping with the latest audience. Every generation is a creator of its own modernism.

So when people ask about what I do, I might say that I help



Although I'm often referred to as a modern designer, my job is, I think, more about editing what has come before and making it into something new. I've always felt that you can't move ahead unless you know where you're coming from, in order to decide what you really want to take with you and what you can leave behind. In American design, making these choices entails understanding a particular debt to English and Continental influences filtered through Colonial assimilation, rural expansiveness and the intensity of city life. Remixing these ingredients—and making the mix your own—is what I like to practice. I do believe there is something in this process that is quite American in spirit and ultimately modern in implementation.

Practicality, industry, boldness, scale. Simplicity and sincerity. Innovation. These are the ingredients of American modern style. From the 1920s through World War II, the first American modern movement in design arose. It was a homegrown Ma-



find the classic elements from past generations in furnishings and then edit them to work together for this one. An American idea of reinvention: traditional things for modern living.

Over the years at my design studio and through my store, I've been privileged to work on different kinds of homes for clients: country and city residences; historical and more modernist spaces. I've also experimented with and documented certain ideas in my own homes. Taken together, they are clarified and edited spaces; they blend old and new elements. But the proportions in that blend are unique to each project, determined by what the clients liked, where they started from and what the interior had to say. With all these variations being possible, with the boldness of individual choices, each home is a true delegate of American modern style.

My job, finally, is to determine the set of ideas that will create the right balance for each project. Making a home—or really, making any design decision—is ultimately about the search for an inner reason that is honest: Why this piece? Why this place? And in that search lies the real usefulness of design. I hope my work not only illustrates that search but also describes aspects of American modern living that feel calm, subtle, comfortable, beautiful and collected. To aim for these qualities is to have an artful life, where we choose even the simplest objects with purpose and are rewarded by the integrity of our discoveries.

From the book American Modern (Abrams, 2010; \$50), by Thomas O'Brien. Written with Lisa Light. Photographs by Laura Resen. All rights reserved.

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"The owners of this downtown loft began with a significant collection of fine French modernist furniture. But focusing on only one genre can become limiting. By bringing in other pieces from the period and adding American items in particular, we made the resulting space more casual, layered and truly modern. To create the kitchen [opposite], we used ideas and materials that echo those in the rest of the loft. Though it has a very clean attitude, it offers layers of detail that give it the richness of a more traditional kitchen. The circa-1950 stools are by Jean Prouvé."





"For this iconic Fifth Avenue apartment, we assembled a collection of art that is modern to live with but is not only modern art. Then we used cool understatement to reinvent the formality of a magical New York address. In the entrance hall [opposite], Irving Penn's photograph *Mouth for L'Oréal* [1986] is disarming in a way that puts the serious antiques and objects at ease. In the living room [above], the use of matching fabrics and mirrored elements like the facing sofas revives a deliberately formal situation. All the same, we didn't want overly traditional furniture shapes. Cleaner forms keep the space modern, with the right mix of comfort and refinement. The upholstered pieces were custom-made; the wool-and-silk carpet is one I designed for Safavieh."