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WINTER ESCAPE

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A VILLA ON MUSTIQUE

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RESTORATION DRAMA

BRINGING A MODERN FUNCTIONALITY TO A VICTORIAN TOWNHOUSE REQUIRED A CAREFUL BALANCE BETWEEN PRESERVATION AND INTERVENTION.

BY CAROLYN KENNEDY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE BUCK

The logic behind buying an old home with a view to bringing it back to life can sometimes seem a little twisted. For every stretch of exquisite mouldings or marble fireplace that a vintage structure offers, there are also often the results of decades of neglect or misguided renovations to contend with. Embarking on such a restoration project almost inevitably raises a new dilemma: how to preserve the very characteristics that caught your heart in the first place, while imposing the alterations and updates needed to renew the home and make it practical for modern living.

This New York City home, a five-storey brownstone built in the late 19th century, provides an enlightening case study. Its elegant Victorian character had fortunately survived the years, albeit in greatly diminished fashion. "I've never seen anything so ornate," recalls Julian King, the architect of the restoration. Elaborate Victorian mouldings still exist in buildings in Harlem and SoHo, he says, but this townhouse enjoys more detailed ornamentation than most. Reverently, he cites its original etched-glass doors, the ornamental crown moulding in

Opposite: The front elevation of the townhouse is landmarked and couldn't be altered, so the original iron hand-worked railing was repainted and the stairs were resurfaced. The old sandstone façade shows its mettle.

This page: The original arched doorways and mouldings provide a motif that runs through the house.





The palette is white walls, concrete, glass. 'We wanted the house to be about light and volume, not colour on the walls. We were shooting for an ethereal space.'

Opposite: In their prime, the original pine floors would have been covered with rugs; for contemporary life, they've been bleached and left bare, the patina of years of use now adding character to the room. Elaborate Victorian mouldings still exist in buildings in the Harlem and SoHo areas of New York City, although this 19th-century townhouse retains more elaborate ornamentation than most.

Below: In the minimalist kitchen, the architect pushed out the wall of cabinetry 18 inches and hid the ductwork behind it. The three centre panels of the upper cabinets conceal a Gaggenau oven vent. He couldn't find a vent to match the cabinets, so he had the trim removed from a stainless steel vent and gave it a white powder coating. The fridge is tucked into an arched alcove created by the former opening to the powder room. The old, crumbling plaster crown mouldings were refurbished and are now in use as an air-conditioning vent.





the kitchen, scarred pine floors, and a powder room whose concealed door was unearthed during the demolition. "That entire room was an artifact," he enthuses. "Restoring the house was like an archeological dig."

It may also seem like a surprising choice of project for an architect who describes himself as "a minimalist at heart." But King, who had worked with the homeowner on a renovation prior to this one, saw the opportunity here for what he calls "a respectful intervention."

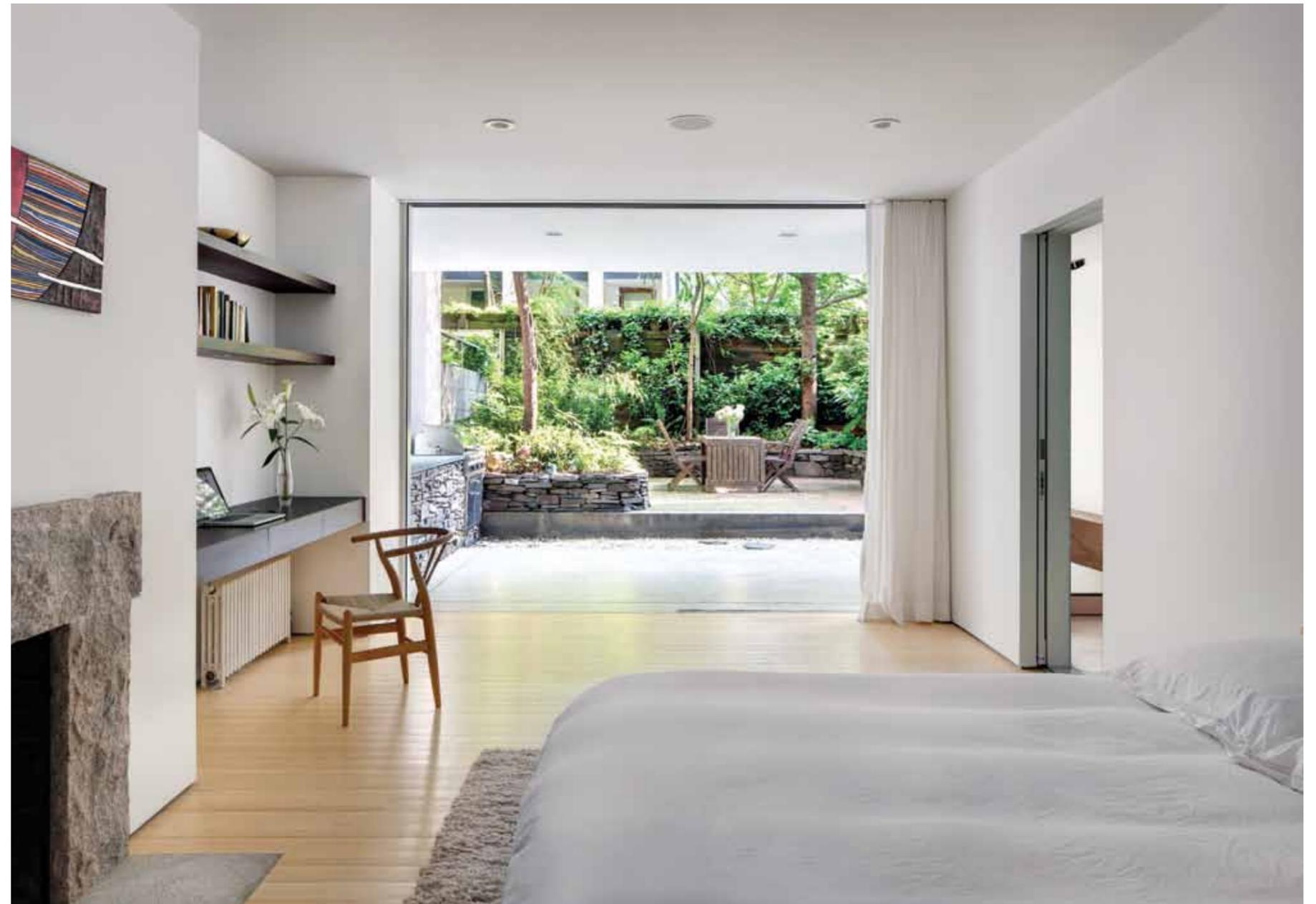
"This was a place in progress," he says. "We always think of architecture as a smaller piece of the whole. Everything has a context. This house was potentially a beautiful stage for a modern way of life."

When the owner first brought him in, though, the house was "a mess," King says bluntly. It had been used for rental apartments, and at some point a clumsy renovation had converted the parlour and ground floors into a single flat with an awkward layout. The dining room and a very narrow kitchen were on the ground floor; on the next level were the living room and a bedroom, accessed only through the living room. A brick wall faced the back garden, which had been long neglected and overgrown. The architect proposed a more logical floor plan for the two-storey flat which the homeowner planned to use himself, with public spaces—living room, combined kitchen/dining area, and powder room—on the parlour floor. A spacious master bedroom and bathroom, and a guest room and bath, were located on the garden level.

Aside from the floor plan, the biggest change, King notes, was removing the brick back wall at the ground-floor level. In its place, the master suite now enjoys a floor-to-ceiling expanse that can be left open in the warmer months, creating a seamless extension to the garden. Two 22-foot steel lintels were installed, and the wall was replaced with three large glass panels that slide across a track embedded flush into the concrete floor, leaving both the bedroom and the bathroom open to the elements. "The connection to nature is important in a city like New York," King says.

Although the detail throughout is streamlined and minimalist, there is a wealth of attention paid to it. "There was an

A former bedroom became a combined kitchen/dining area. The original French doors to the second-floor balcony only needed sanding and re-staining. Dining table and chairs from Molteni & C.



Opposite: The garden was formed out of mostly reclaimed elements: brick pavers salvaged from the demolition of the back wall, and a fieldstone garden bed built from old stone found on the property. The staircase was made of cantilevered *ipe* wood treads, which are hardy through any weather, and a custom steel banister with ½-inch-diameter balusters spaced further apart along the descent to create a feeling of openness. King specified the twist at the bottom to reference the twists in the Victorian moulding. *Custom sliding doors, Fleetwood Windows & Doors.*

Above: The mahogany desk in the master bedroom is a more substantial repetition of the ribbons of shelving above it. Barely visible at the front edge of the desk are mitred doors that conceal storage. "I like to keep things as simple and unobtrusive as possible," King says. "If done right, design fades into the background." A hearth surround of pale Chinese granite replaced a rotted wood fireplace. The architect chose sustainable bamboo for the flooring. "Some bamboo grows about a foot a week," King notes. *Wishbone chair by Hans Wegner, Design Within Reach. Millwork, Siena Woodworks.*



Above: The bathroom's concrete floor and teak bench extend beyond the borders of the house, bridging the transition between indoors and out. "I think concrete is beautiful," King says. "I have no qualms putting it with a really nice piece of stone."

Right: The sleek lines of the tub surround and wall-mounted faucets (here and by the sink), along with a radiant-heated concrete floor, keep the look modern, while the colour and grain of the teak add warmth.



overall attempt to eschew the hard-edged modernism, which tends to be a little masculine," says the architect, "and rather embrace the sensual curves of the Victorian moulding." In the new kitchen the fridge is tucked away in an arched alcove created by the former opening to the powder room. Because the designers chose to cantilever the cabinetry above the base mouldings, they cantilevered the oven as well. "It creates a clean volume, jutting out all of a piece," King notes. And you have to look closely to discover that the three centre panels of the upper cabinets are, in fact, a Gaggenau oven vent. They couldn't find a vent to match, so they installed a stainless steel vent, removed the trim and gave it a white powder coating.

Downstairs, the master bathroom is a streamlined space that marries materials—pale white marble, teak and white concrete—with typical minimalist restraint. The slim-lined sink is a 600-pound slab of white marble cantilevered on substantial steel brackets. The marble, a match to the kitchen island, is similar to Carrara "but with even less colour," King says. "We chose it because it was clean and elegant." Above the sink, the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet swings open to show the communal brick wall of the adjacent property. "It's one of the things we like to do," King says. "It reveals the history of the building."

The new garden space was formed out of mostly reclaimed elements. Brick pavers were salvaged from the demolition of the back wall of the house, and the wall of the garden bed was assembled from old fieldstone found on the property. The architect created a gravel channel between the end of the concrete floor and the brick patio—a metaphor meant to signify the crossing of a river bed, he explains—which softens the line between indoor and outdoor living spaces. A staircase made with cantilevered *ipe* wood treads has a custom steel banister with balusters that are spaced further apart along the descent to create a feeling of openness.

In true minimalist fashion the house is painted white throughout. "It lets the details pop out," King says. As well, the white surfaces reflect light into what he describes as the "landlocked" living area—the home is 112 feet long. "We wanted the house to be about light and volume, not colour on the walls. We were shooting for an ethereal space, so the palette is white walls, concrete, glass."

The architect's favourite element is the restored crown mouldings encircling the kitchen at ceiling height. "They're emblematic of what we did in the house as a whole," he explains. "It was old, crumbling plaster. We had it restored and we refurbished it to create a vent for the air-conditioning. It was purely ornamental, but in restoring it we made it functional as well." ●

For floor plans, see page 88



The sink in the master bathroom is a 600-pound slab of white marble cantilevered on substantial steel brackets. The marble is similar to Carrara "but with even less colour," King says. "We chose it because it was clean and elegant." The floor below the sink dips imperceptibly to send any water spillage under the teak bench, which hides the plumbing and a drain.