Three Different Apartments One Classic Style: Different Apartmens, One style
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Three Different Apartments— One Classic Style

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

HOME is where you hang your hat and your heart—anywhere in the world except New York. Here, home is the result of Darwinian selection. Life is the survival of the fittest and home is whatever you can find and afford. Mutation of the species is part of the process—in my own case, a natural brownstoner became a reluctant Park Avenue dweller; choice is a delusion even with the luxury of options.

Living well in New York is not so much the realization of a dream as it is a blend of hard economic reality and relentless resolve. The real prizes —the rent-controlled penthouse, the parlor floor with 13-foot ceilings and wood burning fireplaces—go to the swift, the canny, the ruthless and the rich. The rest of us just compromise.

We may be fortunate, favored, smiled on in our careers, achievers by the world's standards, but we still compromise. What many seek and get, and what still eludes the rest of us, is the universal dream that we all carry in our hearts, whether born or migrant New Yorkers, of that special New York life style. It is a magic compounded of Bohemia, the movies and worldly success. It is glass-walled living rooms suffused in sunsets or with a nighttime backdrop of sparkling spires, spacious elegance and just enough of Madison Avenue's treasures to be quietly beautiful but not overreaching or outré, ice tinkling in glasses at twilight to an obbligato of erudition and wit, little sitdown dinners for 24 set with Baccarat and vermeil. It is wall-to-wall sophisticated glamour.

This is the dream that brings the young and talented to their hot-plate furnished rooms, that lures the rich and privileged to their penthouse pied-a-terres. It is sometimes achieved on money, but more often on credit, connections and sheer will. For those of us who never achieve it, the image sustains reality.

There is, in fact, a classic pattern to living in New York, from the initial adventure to arrival in the glossy magazines, and I have reached the point in life where I can reminisce about it with appropriate nostalgia and few regrets.

Mine was a marriage of geographical convenience. World War II had begun, and my husband, an industrial designer, had chosen a one-and-a-half-room bachelor apartment exactly halfway between the two defense plants where he worked in Brooklyn and Long Island. Calculating, probably by slide rule, he found a new apartment house in Elmhurst, Queens. There was a wartime housing shortage, and we moved in.

You have to love a man a lot and not have claustrophobia to spend seven years in one-and-a-half rooms in Queens when you've never been farther than a stone's throw from Central Park. He came equipped, as a proper designer did in those days, with a strong bias toward the Bauhaus and Aalto furniture, and a sense of architectural austerity.

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I put ruffles on the Aalto table, added flowered cretonne chairs and tieback curtains to the window with a view of Joe the Tailor across the street. It was a passing phase. He taught me to hate wallpaper. Any color was fine as long as it was white. I retired the ruffles. And with the end of the war we began looking for just the right place.

It took a while, but we found it—the parlor floor of a brownstone on East 76th Street. Those lovely bourgeois-Bohemian quarters were easier to find in those days, before the postwar build-

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Different Apartmens, One Style

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ing boom tore down whole streets of brownstones for the impersonal cardboard travesties called luxury housing.

The apartment consisted of a living room and a bedroom that were originally the house's parlor and dining room, each of ballroom proportions; a huge bath with five exposures (initially a butler's pantry, it had been added and stood on lally columns in what had been the garden); and a kitchen the size and shape of an elevator shaft. The refrigerator was a model A and there was a marbleized stove with cabriole legs and an oven door that kept falling off; a small kitchen window had a two-foot sill cut through solid masonry. We later added a small front apartment as a home-office.

There were three working fireplaces, 12-foot ceilings, a bedroom topped by a soaring barrel vault, and Diana the Huntress over the fireplace. A window wall looked out on small back gardens. We had leaf-dappled shadows in the summer and virtually no heat in the winter. When we found the apartment, its colors were standard green and tan. The paint was peeling and everything seemed to slope. The walls were studded with a mysterious assortment of hooks and nails. "This place," said my husband, "will always be a dump."

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Looking back in a marriage, the first place is usually the best, but for us it was the second. Time has dimmed the memory of the chill, the unexplained leaks, the peculiar plumbing, the front hall that I had to clean myself if clients or company were coming. I remember the profligate spaces and beautiful details, and the fun and challenge of turning those assets into a home. We painted and constructed and converted and duly received the reward that all designers and homemakers coveted in those days: We were published in the Sunday Magazine home pages of The New York Times (that was many years before I worked for the paper).

What we had, in that place, was architecture—the missing ingredient of New York's new building. It asked only to be respected; it needed no additional drama. The design formula, if there was one, was simple: no tricks. And our own design philosophy was equally simple. White walls, of course, for light and serenity, and to give every other color and object its maximum impact. Nothing at the impressive old windows except natural bamboo blinds. Nothing to distract from the height or proportions or details of the rooms. And nothing to "match" them except in scale—no attempts to recreate the brownstone period or ambiance, no scouring of antique shops, no haunting of demolition sites.

We wanted to live in the 20th century in a 19th-century house, with sensitivity, respect and pleasure and the multiple allusions of time and place—the enrichment that the past gives the present when it is encouraged to do so. That is a quality beyond design; it depends on a passive act of understanding.

Everything was to be legitimately new or legitimately old. Except for some basic upholstered pieces, the Aalto table cut down for the bedroom and the Aalto stools used in the living room, the new was designed or selected by my husband. It was all simple, functional and contemporary. The old consisted of a number of objects from home, genuine articles of art or sentiment (Victorian chairs, Chinese lamps, antique white and gold china, Tiffany glass).

We acquired pale cane and birch chairs; a birch dining table by the Swedish architect Bruno Matthson, a polished brass lighting fixture like a cluster of stars from Arteluce in Milan; those were hallowed "modern" names in the 1950's. We designed modular marble coffee tables in creamy French marble, hung two walls beyond repair with a plain-weave gold fabric. When it was all in place, it was almost spring, and I filled the rooms with delicate sprays of mimosa and early forsythia.

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We used one bedroom wall for books, and put the beds on either side of the fireplace with the Aalto table and a chinoiserie tea set between them—a less-than-conventional arrangement that puzzled many. We warmed the

cold room with vibrant color—down-filled satin comforters and curtains of coral red—and an Oriental rug taken off my mother's floor. At night, an unused light fixture in the ceiling vault, converted from gas many years before, glowed dimly and distantly—our only ghost.

I would like to say that we lived there happily ever after. We did for 14 years. And then the brownstone was bought by a neighbor, the Hewitt School, which evicted us, demolished the house, and put up a little Constipated Colonial addition. We took with us the fine old French brass knocker that hung on the outsize mahogany front door before the wrecking ball struck.

We were lucky; we found another parlor floor on East 81st Street—New Yorkers do not like to leave their neighborhoods. Town house living was getting scarcer and more expensive all the time. This house had a limestone facade and balconied windows, a wisteria vine and views of other town houses and gardens. It had fair heat and a strange concierge. There were 11-foot ceilings, one ornate French marble fireplace, pale marquetry-edged floors, a bay window with curved glass and panels of Luxfer prism. (That did it for me; one of Frank Lloyd Wright's most interesting early projects was for the manufacturer of Luxfer prism.) We moved virtually intact, making minor adjustments. Part of the living room appeared in The Times Sunday Magazine.

Our carefully balanced new-old taste was threatened momentarily by the purchase of an old Kirman rug for the large living room floor. As a designer, my husband feels happiest with his own times. There was a lot of that rug, he pointed out, and it "tipped" the place to the past. I countered his argument with the simple birch buffet that he had designed for our 25th anniversary (I never felt really married until I had a felt-lined flatware drawer) and his own silver-gilt candelabra on the mantel with the old French clock.

But our second place did not last for long. An epidemic of rent raises hit New York that ended in the city's rent-stabilization program, but by that time we had found, and bought—partly out of desperation and partly out of prudence and definitely in the spirit of compromise—a cooperative. It was in an apartment house (a kind of living we never wanted) on Park Avenue (a place we really never cared to be). And curiously, with town houses a continuously endangered and constantly demolished species, and their architectural character increasingly in demand, the rents for that kind of space had gone through the roof. The cooperative was the one thing we could afford.

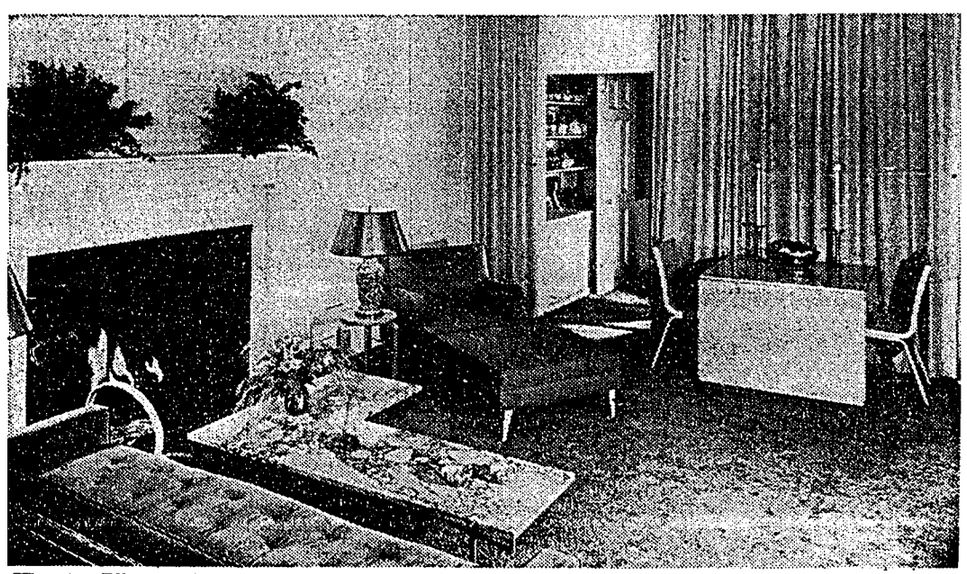
The building is about 70 years old. It is comfortable, clean, warm and fully serviced. The small apartments, converted from larger ones, are well constructed and well planned. What really sold my husband was the solid brass hardware. The ceilings are 9' 6", we found out that the fireplace didn't work after we moved in, and the only architecture is the doors. They are real doors, and they have approximately 20 polished brass doorknobs. Our old French knocker hangs out front, an overscaled curiosity in a hall of identical apartment entrances.

I miss the individualism and the ambiance of town house living, but not the eccentricities of heat and service. I regret the loss of square rooms. Almost everything we brought with us fits in the smaller quarters, except for the Kirman, which crawls up the living room walls. A few too-large and well-worn upholstered pieces were changed to suit the new scale. The Aalto stools are now in the bathroom and kitchen; the new end tables are my husband's olive burl cubes.

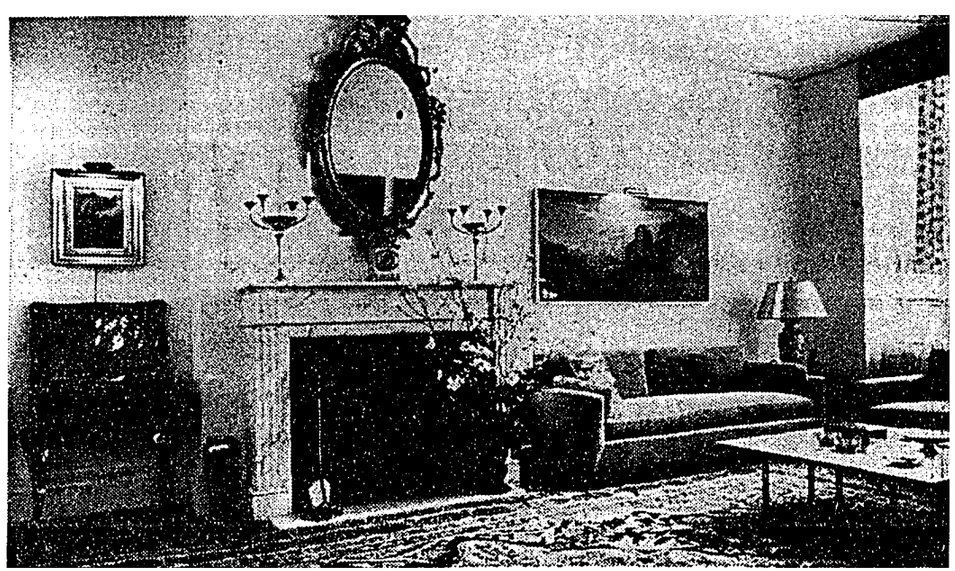
If our home can be characterized in any way, it might be called "vintage modern." We have never abandoned our light birch for dark teak. We have resisted inflated nylon and molded plastic and failed to switch our arrangement to the diagonal from the square. The Tiffany glass our friends despised has achieved status and frightening prices. Our mix of new and old—heresy and anathema to doctrinaire architectural purists when we began—is commonplace today. We're really quite old hat.

We have no place to seat 24 for dinner even if I had the time to attempt it, and there is no view; if I look down six floors I can see a tree. Sometimes, when the books and possessions pile up, I am inclined to agree with my husband, who still thinks that a bare white room with hooks on the wall is the only way to live. If I have learned anything in these years of pursuing the impossible dream, and of seeing others catch the gold-plated ring, it is that I really don't want it. Not without a raft of servants, certainly, and a bundle of dough.

The key to satisfactory New York living, I know now, is freedom, resilience and adaptability. The idea is to take what you have and treat it as an asset. A house tries to tell you something. Adapt gracefully to your surroundings and roll with the architectural punches. That is rule number one in art and life.



Early Huxtable: The 76th Street apartment in 1952



Late Huxtable: The Park Avenue co-op today

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