



Amazing Grace

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz injects soothing hues and quiet charm into the redesign of a Park Avenue apartment in New York.

HOW OFTEN DOES it come to pass that a designer is handed a 15th-century Florentine fresco portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici in order to demonstrate what colors, textures, and mood are wanted for an about-to-be-redesigned Manhattan apartment? Or that said designer, again speaking of the same client, not only gives her credit for her exceptionally keen eye in finding the perfect antiques, but also singles out one piece—it happened to have been a dining table—that, though not exactly what he had in mind, proved to be the eminently correct choice?

These were just three of several pleasant surprises encountered by Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz in the course of transforming a "very modern, wall-to-wall carpeted" 3,500-sq.-ft. apartment on Manhattan's upper Park Avenue into a tranquil environment of great charm. Having lived in the pre-war building for about 20 years, the client couple—she is active in public affairs and often holds →

Opposite: Noriega-Ortiz considers this vignette view of the living room as a quintessential summing-up of the flat's interior design focusing, as it does, on simplicity, sparseness of furnishings, and omnipresence of celadon hues.

Above: Another living room close-up typifies the designer's bent for graphically juxtaposing shapes and forms. Hanging from the wall is an African chieftain's robe.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANTOINE BOOTZ



fundraising events in the apartment; his business is finance and he, too, likes to entertain—had approached the designer about decisively altering their domestic domain. They were, she explained, ready and eager for change. The desired ambience, now that two of their three children had left to embark on lives of their own, was to be romantic and calm. Pale chalky celadon greens, introduced, so to speak, on her Italian Renaissance color-card, were to be predominant hues. As a matter of fact, the residents' love for all things Italian, nurtured by frequent stays at their own year-around residence in Lucca, Tuscany, accounts for the presence of Venetian table lamps, Fortuny fabrics, and other Italianate finds.

As revitalized by Noriega-Ortiz, the several rooms, heretofore flowing one into another to form a vast borderless expanse, now have individual identities (without, however, blocking fluent progression). Dividing the →

Left: Wide-angle view of living room focuses on fireplace, its former marble mantel replaced by a carved wood frame. The coffee table was stained to match the room's pervasive greens.

Above: View from living room to silk taffeta portière partially screening dining room at other end. Traffic moves on either side.

SOFA: VILLA MELROSE. LOUNGE CHAIRS: ROSE TARLOW. SIDE CHAIR: LOU MAROTTA. TABLES: CIRCLINE.COM; AMBIENCE: YALE BURGE. FABRICS: CLARENCE HOUSE; GRETCHEN BELLINGER; POLLACK; K. FLAM; ZIMMER RHODE; BERGAMO. LAMPS: CHAMELEON; CITY ANTIQUES. OTTOMAN: GEORGE SMITH; WALL FINISHES: JUDY EISLER. WOODWORK FINISHING: CHRISTOPHE POURNY. HARDWARE: EDWARD R. BUTLER. GENERAL CONTRACTOR: STRUCTURETONE.



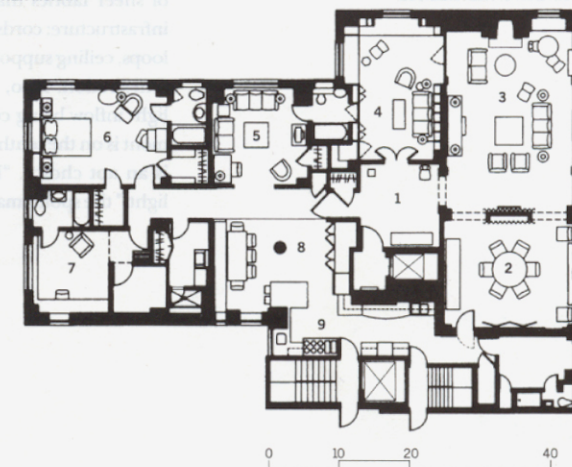
dining room from the living area, for example, is a new freestanding wall supporting, beneath its mouldings, a linear track holding silk taffeta portières. Traffic flows on either side of the wall. Elsewhere doors, conspicuously so at the den, tend to be greatly oversized. On the other hand, a door linking entry and dining areas was deleted, dictating a detour through the living room. Additionally, Noriega-Ortiz rid the library of plastic laminate bookcases and installed aged-oak counterparts. Aging of the wood produced a silvery gray finish similar to that of driftwood; little nicks and knots were retained. The outdated kitchen was transformed into an efficient, modern cooking center. Oak floors, stripped of carpeting, were in good condition; the herringbone-patterned wood was bleached to erase a yellowish cast, then tinted to match the prevailing shade of celadon. New to the living room and entry foyer are hand-carved mahogany pilasters and mouldings, their egg-and-dart and scroll patterns harking back to the habitat's early days. Recreation of the imagined décor as it might have been then was, in fact, a sub-theme for the approach to redesign. →

Opposite: Dining group is set against folding screen of embossed leather. The table was found by the clients in London.

Above, left: Den, reached via oversized swing-back doors, occasionally doubles as guest room. Set of watercolors was painted by a family friend.

Above, right: Library looks through a 5-ft.-by-6-ft. single-pane window to a light-shaft. Cabinetry is new; the ceiling has been glazed.

CHAIRS: WARD BENNETT; CASSINA; BNODESIGN. FOLDING SCREEN: YALE BURGE. SOFAS: AVERY BOARDMAN. OTTOMAN: GEORGE SMITH. FABRICS: GROVES BROTHERS; COVINGTON; NOBILIS; DESIGNTEX; ROGERS AND GOFFIGON. RUG: GREGORY NEWHAM. LAMPS: STEPHEN MCKAY.





Above, left: In the powder room, a single carved frame surrounds the window glass and the shower-head-reflecting mirror.

Above, right: Twisted-iron posts topped with pineapple finials rise from bed in master suite. Wall is draped with Fortuny fabric.

Opposite: The vanity in the all-new master bathroom is "probably French" and formerly was used in a bar.

MIRROR FRAME: SALAZAR. SCONES: CHAMELEON. SHOWER CURTAIN: JACK LENOR LARSEN. SINKS: GRAY GARDENS (MASTER BATH); CANYON (STONE). FAUCETS: KROIN; WATERWORKS. BEDROOM CHAIR: PLEXI-CRAFT. BED: MURRAY'S IRON WORKS. CARPET: ARCHITECTURAL FLOORING. NIGHT TABLES: JULIA GRAY. LAMPS: VILLA MELROSE.

Though the great majority of furniture and accessories is new, Ward Bennett dining chairs, now reupholstered, and a handful of other pieces were kept. Prominently absent, with just a couple of exceptions, are rugs or carpets and draperies. Asked about the former, the designer, keeping a straight face and sounding slightly mock-solemn, declares: "It is chic to place gorgeous furniture on a bare floor." (Den and master bedroom are exempt.) As for window dressing, he favors soft unstructured Roman shades of sheer fabrics that reveal the treatment's infrastructure: cords, wires threaded through loops, ceiling supports, the whole anatomy of fenestration. Also, Central Park views and light inflow being coveted assets—the apartment is on the tenth floor—the transparency is an apt choice. "It's like a veil to diffuse light," the spokesman adds.

Generally speaking, replacement pieces tend to be slimmer and less massive than their precursors, and the prevailing aura is softer and more serene. There is no predominance of any one period nor, heaven forbid, of a decorator's imprimatur. Noriega-Ortiz's criteria for product selections are, one learns, not measured by conventional yardsticks. He doesn't care about supposedly correct or popularly favored style and, instead, judges each selection solely by shape, form, material, color, and "what it says to me." His mission, he says, was "to add grace to architecture."

Project designers Magaili Bermudez and Andy Suvalsky share credit for the year-long job. Although there was no gutting and rebuilding, the principal worked, as is his wont, with longtime collaborator architect Brian Boyle.

—Monica Geran