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Everything New Is Old Again

GLASS BOXES GO PRE-WAR

Designers' challenge: Making modern construction feel classic and cozy

By Rebecca Morse

The early 21st century has proven to be very exhausting. Days are spent navigating traffic on a CitiBike (or a bespoke version), reconciling quinoa with a gluten-free diet, and trying to Lean In. All of which is enough to make even the most indefatigable New Yorker want to run home and curl up in her favorite chair. But you can't really curl up effectively in a fiberglass Hans Wegner shell chair reproduction.

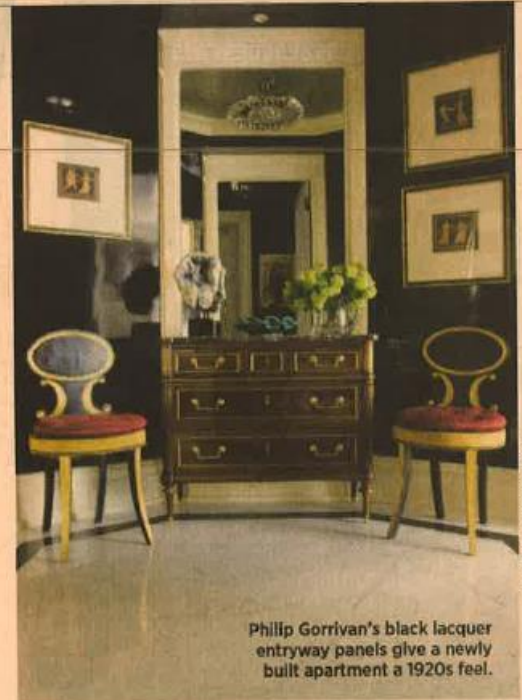
A yearning for the warmth and comfort of yore is sending many New Yorkers' design styles time-traveling back to a bygone era, when chairs were composed of horsehair rather than plastic, when actual books were stored in bookcases, and kitchens were safely hidden

behind doors. The decorative elements and architectural details commonly associated with the pre-war period are making a comeback.

"We have seen a huge swing back to pre-war charm," says New York-based interior designer Sarah Gilbane. "Pre-war feels like home, with all of the details that come along with it. Crown and base moldings, glass door-knobs, window casements—and those are just the architectural elements." Hand-wrought hardware, intricate millwork and thoughtful layouts with discrete rooms are now in big demand.

Developers have taken note. The fetishized

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Philip Gorrivan's black lacquer entryway panels give a newly built apartment a 1920s feel.

COURTESY OF PHILIP GORRIVAN

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"starchitecture" of the previous decade (Richard Meier's towers or Charles Gwathmey's Sculpture for Living) appear slightly alien compared to the ground-up residential developments that are virtually indistinguishable from the period buildings in their pre-war neighborhoods. At limestone-clad 135 East 79th Street, off of Park Avenue, William Sofield has designed residences with custom-pigmented hand-laid brick and hand-cast ironwork.

But new construction with pre-war charm comes at a price: the two remaining units at 135 East 79th Street are penthouses listed at \$25 million and \$50 million respectively. Ironically, the real McCoy—an actual pre-war apartment—might be a better deal, but many are co-operatives with stringent financial requirements and other downsides.

So in the face of bland architecture, many New Yorkers are borrowing those prewar details that make the style so appealing—layouts, flooring, millwork, and fireplaces—and reinventing their own homes, regardless of their era of construction.



Gold-toned fixtures and a clawfoot tub in a new bathroom at 93 Worth Street.

Though Papachristidis doesn't cook much, he feels the separation is essential for elegant entertaining and gracious living. "What if you have fish for dinner? Do you really want it to smell like fish in the living room?"

ACTUAL ROOMS

People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, and they also shouldn't throw dinner parties. The amorphous living and dining room-in-one, with an open kitchen—so commonly found in post-war and modern buildings—can make formal entertaining a challenge and privacy impossible. "I'm a huge fan of rooms," says designer Darren Henault. "Any time I renovate an apartment, I try to put up as many walls as possible. As much as we all love each other, we want get away at the end of the day."

Upon moving into a typical 1970s building, interior designer Alex Papachristidis found the giant room layout typical of apartments designed in that era. "You walked in the apartment and there was no definition of rooms," says Papachristidis. "The entrance hall bled into the living room, and the living room and dining room were one room. No doorways, nothing." Along with classical architects Fairfax & Sammons, he converted the layout into an enfilade, a series of distinct rooms, the doors of which are aligned with each other, creating a single line of sight throughout the entire suite of rooms. "It's so wonderful for entertaining," says Papachristidis of the distinct library, living room and dining rooms, which are now separated with pocket doors. "People are drawn to cozy places. It creates atmosphere."

Detailed built-ins painted buttercup help achieve pre-war style in a 1970s condo designed by Darren Henault.



NICHES, NOOKS AND SHELVEING

It's never been so easy to buy so much stuff. It's virtually impossible, however, to properly indulge a healthy eBay habit in a minimalist apartment. According to Darren Henault, people who like a pre-war style "like stuff. They need a nook, a niche, a shelf, to put their bibelot." To achieve pre-war style in a 1970s condominium, Mr. Henault installed extensive built-ins. "From the second you walked in, you knew it was unlike any other apartment in the building," says Henault. Having places to put things, he said, "is much more relevant to the way people live. A lot of these people who bought these glass buildings, where are they putting their art? There's nowhere to put furniture. They're cool, but how do you actually live there? New York is a hard place to live. You need rooms and space and places to put your stuff."

COFFERED CEILINGS

Living rooms were to the early 2000s as shoulder pads were to the 1980s: bigger was better. Architects supersized rooms, creating bloated spaces without any sense of intimacy. "The whole concept of 'McMansions' popped up in the late 1990s, early 2000s and did a real number on a little-known design principle called scale," says Drew McGukin. "Not to mention, you had a host of mass retailers jump on the bandwagon and begin super-sizing furniture to fill up these clunky spaces." For a house in East Hampton, McGukin brought in a coffered ceiling to add a layer of warmth and intimacy, "as well as building in a handmade quality that reads as craftsmanship and thoughtfulness."

MOULDING

"What sets a square room apart from a box with four walls," says Samantha Knapp, "is the details, be it moulding, chair rails or beadboard. The outcome is a softer and warmer personalized space." Knapp, with The Wellbuilt Company's Mitch Kidd, installed moulding in the unlikelyst of 21st-century homes: a metal-walled glassy tower along the

new development on East 86th Street, Ellie Cullman of Cullman & Kravis replaced all the floors in the apartment with white oak boards, four to six inches wide, and added a custom geometric pattern. "The stencil in the entrance foyer is reminiscent of designs used in several historic houses," says Cullman. Even parquet can look posh with a paint-over. In one recent modern redo, "I had my faux finisher stencil a geometric pattern right over the parquet," said Darren Henault. "It was very Georgian."

FIREPLACES

The focal point of a classic pre-war living room is the fireplace, a source of literal and figurative warmth. With the advent of central heating, the inefficiencies inherent in adding them to newer buildings made them a rarity. "The deal with post-war is almost always a general

High Line. "Pre-war, traditional details like millwork can still have an important role in modern architecture," says Knapp. Kidd agrees. "Custom mouldings add depth, detail, and richness to a room. Whether it is baseboard, casing, chair rail, wainscot or crown mouldings, these details can amplify the attractiveness of a space, emphasize its architecture and create focal points in a space."

FOYERS AND ENTRIES

The Seamless delivery guy standing awkwardly in your living room deserves better. Where pre-war buildings often provided a formal foyer in each apartment—the most upscale ones with private elevator landings and service entrances—as space began to be more of a premium in New York, developers dispensed with the extra square footage and front doors began to open directly into living rooms. Carving out a special space for an entrance allows for a peaceful transition (not to mention a place to put your shoes). For an apartment in the Aldyn, Extell's glassy tower on Riverside Boulevard, classicist Philip Gorrivan created a foyer with lacquered paneled walls, giving it an early 1920s feel. "Especially when you're designing a family house, it's important for people to walk in and feel like it's their home," said Mr. Gorrivan, who added that panels create depth and interest. "Any time you introduce layers to a space, they add warmth. They make a house or an apartment feel like it has a soul to it. Classical elements add a coziness to a space, a sense of familiarity, which you don't always get with contemporary."



To warm up a new apartment on the East Side, Ellie Cullman installed wide-plank oak floors and stenciled them.

STENCILED FLOORING

A cowhide from Ikea is not the chicest way to add personality and warmth underfoot. While cheap parquet floors or engineered wood are common to newer construction, stenciling can add a richness of detail and separate the reception area from surrounding rooms. In a

lack of thoughtfulness in the architecture," said decorator Drew McGukin. "Somewhere along the way, people forgot how to be timeless." Mr. McGukin recently worked in a Chelsea high-rise with big views, but a dearth of character. The solution? Add some heat. "Simply by adding a fireplace, we shifted the focus of the room and created a sense of warmth that was totally absent. Nineties developers were about view-view-view. How about intimacy and living?" Ethanol-burning wall units take your walls where a Yule Log podcast can't; the fireplace McGukin installed in Chelsea is a metal box containing an odorless, smokeless fuel—as easy to light as a big candle. **EW**