SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

With the gut renovation of a storied Manhattan townhouse, architectural firm Leroy Street Studio and designer James Aman devise a new ideal of urban family life—one that is as glamorous as it is kid-friendly

TEXT BY INGRID ABRAMOVITCH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUGLAS FRIEDMAN
PRODUCED BY CYNTHIA FRANK
IT WAS A TALE OF TWO OPPOSITES from the start. She was a Swedish former model—blond and vertiginously tall—who had walked the runways from New York to Paris. He grew up on Long Island as part of a close-knit, observant Jewish family and was working in Manhattan for the family’s real estate firm. “We didn’t have much in common,” Christine Mack says. “Richard came from a stable upbringing, went to business and law school, and had always done the right thing—until he met me. I was raised by a single mother and left home to model in my teens. When we met I was a free spirit, traveling the world and going to art school.”

Now married for 16 years, the Macks are proof that love (or is it compromise?) conquers all. “It all worked out,” she says. “We have three wonderful boys.” But they admit that their differences came back into play six years ago, when they were looking for a home for their young family. “I wanted to move to the suburbs and have a big backyard,” Richard Mack says. “Not with me,” Christine told her husband. “I’m staying in the city.”

That prompted their search for the holy grail of urban family living: a centrally located city house with a big backyard. With his real estate background (his firm, Mack Real Estate Group, has more than $70 billion in investments and co-developed the Time Warner Center), Richard discovered a property that certainly fit the bill: a rare triple townhouse in the Upper East Side’s Carnegie Hill neighborhood, close to Fifth Avenue and Central Park. The backyard alone was 2,000 square feet—big enough for an outdoor kitchen and a basketball court for the boys. “We set out to create a suburban house

ABOVE: The living room’s armchairs, covered in a brocade by Pollack, and sofa are custom made; the vintage brass cocktail table and table lamps are by Willy Daro, and the linen-and-metal rugs are by Holland & Sherry. FACING PAGE: A painting by Julian Opie and a sculpture by Sol LeWitt. In the entry, the Venetian plaster–clad staircase rises to the top floor, and the hanging light fixture is custom. See Resources.
in the city,” says Christine, who designs fashion accessories with her friend Jennifer Creel through their brand Creel-Mack.

But, of course, it wasn’t that simple. The property consisted of three rowhouses on East 94th Street that had been patched together over the course of several decades. Built in 1890, two of the homes had been combined in the 1930s into a 40-foot-wide, five-story house with a neoclassical facade. The Spence-Chapin adoption agency bought it in the 1950s and annexed the building next door, which it renovated into a seven-story office tower. “It was a rabbit’s warren of small offices,” Richard says. “To say the least, it was a mess.”

The Macks decided that he would oversee the transformation of the herringbone architecture into a cohesive family house, while she would supervise the interior design. The plan was to create a light-filled and unified interior that would appear from the outside as if it had always been one large house. But they were soon mired in New York City’s labyrinthine construction-approval rules. “We were building something for our family, so we soldiered on,” Richard says. “My wife was instrumental. There was a division of labor. I trusted her 100 percent, and she almost trusted me 100 percent.”

When it came to matters of style, husband and wife once again agreed to disagree. He leans traditional, while she is a modernist with a penchant for edgy art (let’s just say it wasn’t his idea to hire the artist Cey Adams to spray paint graffiti on the brick wall in the garden). They compromised by bringing together a design team that reflected their own personal yin and yang: the cutting-edge architecture firm of Leroy Street Studio with the more classically oriented interior designs of James Aman. “We put them in a room and said: ‘You’re going to work together,’” Christine recalls.
Antique Regency side chairs surround a custom-made dining table; the 1960s ceiling fixtures are Italian, and the 1980s sculptures are by Bobbie Lee Morris. The flooring is white oak heart grade that has been finished. BACKUP PAGE, FROM TOP: Custom-made lighting; Gabriela Hidalgo's wall of the kitchen; the barstools are by Philippe Starck. The vintage light feature is by Ondine, and the brass wall sconce is by Knoll. Furniture in the background with art is by Guy Adams in front of his mural. See Resources.
"I didn’t want it to be super modern or traditional. I wanted it to feel organic and timeless."

No one expected the house to take six years, but everyone stayed the course. The architects, aiming to create a sense of expansiveness, designed the 18,000-square-foot home around a five-story atrium that is pierced by a spectacular floating staircase that winds its way to the top. "It’s in Venetian plaster to reflect the light," says architect Shawn Watts, "and it almost feels like a character on a stage, playing alongside the wonderful furniture and art."

The sheer size of the house allowed for amenities more typically seen in the suburbs: a large mudroom at the entry, a media den, and a sports room for the Macks’ lacrosse-playing sons that has padded walls clad in faux leather and a rubber play surface used in school gyms. "She wanted a house that’s not a house of no," says Aman. "It’s all very kid-friendly, apart from the living room."

That space, located on the second level, is drop-dead glamorous, with massive custom-made crystal chandeliers, cream and caramel upholstery, 1970s furniture, and contemporary art that ranges from a Ryan McGinness Black Hole circle painting to a small Banksy on the mantelpiece. Despite Christine’s initial reluctance, there is also a formal dining room. "My mother-in-law, who is the queen of entertaining, said, ‘Trust me,’” she recalls. Christine, who converted to Judaism before marrying her husband, now provides over weekly Friday-night Sabbath dinners there, under the gaze of an immense Cindy Sherman photograph.

LEFT: John Meeks designed the bed and nightstands in the master bedroom, the benches are from the 1960s, the sconces are upholstered in a Saho fabric, and the light fixture is by C. Jeré; the photograph is by Douglas Gordon, and the ceiling is lined with a silver-leaf paper by Maya Romanoff. ABOVE: A circa-1960s light fixture by Sarfatti above a Water Monopoly tub in the master bath; the side table is by Achille Selva, and the walls are sheathed in marble. See Resources.