

## A wonderful conundrum

A delightfully different New York home uses its vast space to the fullest to incorporate sweeping views of Manhattan, contemporary styling and even a giant slide.

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The stainless-steel slide winds its way through the apartment's four floors and ends up in the dining room.





The sitting area is furnished with Paola Navone's *Chester Moon* tufted sofa for Baxter while the sectional *Paramount* sofa was designed by Pier Luigi Frighetto. The brass, Corian and clear lacquered ash coffee table is from UM Project; Tom Dixon's *Screw Table*, sits at the side close to the *Spun* floor lamp, by Sebastian Wong for Flos. The wool floor rug is from Sacco Carpet and the enamacyrl on hardboard artwork on the back wall is Geoffrey Notman's *Flat Water* (2004).

"It's not your normal home," says decorator Ghislaine Viñas with certain understatement. Indeed, this four-bedroom apartment on which she collaborated with architect David Hotson is anything but ordinary. It is filled with a masterful interplay of intricate volumes and a wonderful sense of whimsy.

Among other things, it features a 14-metre-high living room, a 25-metre-long slide and a 140-square-metre terrace. There is also a swing, a climbing wall installed on one of the structural columns and some pretty stunning 360-degree views of New York.

"It was," Hotson declares, "an absolutely exceptional design opportunity." Located in Lower Manhattan, the 613-square metre space occupies the top four floors of a 21-storey tower constructed from 1894-96. It was commissioned by the American Tract Society, a publisher of religious pamphlets, and was part of Newspaper Row — a series of skyscrapers lined up just east of City Hall. The building was converted into condominiums in 2002, but this unit was the last to sell. No doubt its complexity had something to do with it. With its sloping rooflines and arched windows, it is quite atypical.

"It's like you situated a grand mansion on the top of a skyscraper," Hotson says. There was no air conditioning, no domestic water on the upper level and just a tiny kitchen and bathroom. It had also never served as a residence before, simply as an architect's office. A scene of the Denzel Washington and Jodie Foster movie *Inside Man* had, however, been shot there. When Hotson first visited, part of the set was still in place.

The current owners first visited it by mistake. "It was advertised as a finished space," they remember. Still, they were not only undaunted by its challenges,

but actually excited by the possibilities of having so much vertical space — a rarity in New York.

Previously, there had been four floor decks more or less in the same place (Hotson simply raised the bottom one a couple of feet to optimise the views out of the windows). None of the space, however, was open — so there was no sense of the dizzying height. One of Hotson's most strategic design decisions was to create a four-storey volume at one end, criss-crossed by a series of glass platforms and bridges that allow vertigo-inducing views up to the eaves and down to the living room.

Stylistically, the clients requested something resolutely contemporary. "The outside of the building has copper cornices and terracotta tiles, and some egg and dart motifs," they explain. "We thought it would be fun to contrast that with something super, super minimal and modern."

More than anything, Hotson was determined to create a breathtaking spatial experience, which he describes as "delightful," "sparkling" and "surprising." It is also deliberately confusing.

"You can't really understand the apartment until you walk through the front door," he says. "You have all these somewhat disorienting, intersecting glimpses that escape your efforts at comprehending them. The space possesses you, you don't possess it."

A typical example is the main staircase, whose polished stainless steel frame creates reflections that constantly distort your vision. Walls are set at angles and there are various ways of moving through the apartment (you can, for example, access the office from the living room via a ladder). As you do so, you are



Left: The custom swing was created by UM Project. The 16-colour intaglio print artwork on the left-hand wall is *Soviet American Array VI* by Robert Rauschenberg. Above: Six powder-coated aluminium *A Stool* bar stools sit at the Nano Glass kitchen counter, above is the mezzanine office furnished with two orange chairs. Below: The *Divis* dining table from Council Design is surrounded with Eero Saarinen's *Executive Chairs* with Tubular Legs from Knoll Studio; Tim Fishlock's "What Wait?" chandelier is made for 1243 suspended bulbs; the plate installation was created by Ghislaine Viñas and installed by Ilevel.

treated to different visions of the same space.

Viñas herself was originally flummoxed. "It's such a mind warp," she says. "It was difficult for me to get a full grasp of the project." However, her aim was very clear: to turn this bravura architectural masterpiece into a home. "The clients are in awe with the beauty of their apartment, but you also have to throw in something more casual," Viñas explains.

She did, however, insist on having a stark white backdrop. "It's almost like putting clean sheets on a bed," she says. "There's a beautiful severity to it."

Viñas also felt it would be the perfect canvas for her trademark pops of bright colour. She is a particular fan of greens and oranges (even the underside of the white dining table was painted tangerine). She incorporated hot pink and vibrant blue into one of the bathrooms, and egg yolk yellow into another. The clients, meanwhile, requested a few softer hues. The wife asked for Prada green, the husband wanted the living room to be cream.

Hotson readily admits they are not tones he would have chosen himself. "I was so enamoured with the spare, severe, white volumes," he says. "I was envisioning a very pale palette."

Viñas adds: "David's work is incredibly pure. I'm all about messing things up." Still, it was a tension that proved extremely exhilarating. As Hotson says: "That contradiction and the contest for attention between us was one of the really successful things about the project."

One thing they did have in common was the desire to introduce lots of quirky, tongue-in-cheek touches. Hotson created a walkway for the clients' two cats, Lady Penelope and Brains — a 3D labyrinth that allows them to move





Re-lanched by the L'Abbate, the yellow Erika chair originally designed by Gio Ponti in 1937 adds colour to the work desk.



From above clockwise: This is only one of the spaces through which the slide passes. The bedhead is covered with a digital wallpaper mural inspired by Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch; The all-white master bathroom has porcelain floor-tiles, a tub from BainUltra's *Origami* collection and a Vola faucet. The artwork to the right is a limited-edition tea towel, hand silkscreened and embroidered by artist Dolly Varden, the yellow Muuto hooks emphasise the colour of the back painted shower glass. The "Nest" is a glass platform perched on the third floor, which offers a stunning view of the living room below. This part of the apartment is open over three of the floors. The climbing wall installed on one of the building's structural columns. The object behind the bed with the red tips in the foreground is a lamp designed by UM Project, made from wood, Conan and glass tubes.





From above clockwise: The main staircase has a stainless steel frame, which creates reflections and distorts the view of visitors. The integration of glass openings allows views through the space as you go up and down. Built between 1894–6 the building's ornate exterior is in contrast to the contemporary architecture inside the apartment. The 140m<sup>2</sup> terrace offers stunning views of the Manhattan skyline and is furnished with furniture from Paola Lenti, *Mah Jong* sofas designed by Hans Hopfer for Roche Bobois and upholstered in a Jean-Paul Gaultier fabric, the fibreglass sculpture is by Jon-Paul Kaiser.



from room to room. He also introduced a number of clever, peek-a-boo views. He pierced the medicine cabinet in one of the bathrooms, for instance, with an opening that allows you to look across the apartment, through a window, all the way to the Manhattan Bridge.

"All you see is this miniature image of the bridge, sitting on the shelf like a souvenir you brought back from your vacation," he says. Viñas, meanwhile, created a crazy mural in one of the guestrooms that is an artist's interpretation of Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch, and chose a brash floral print for a sofa installed on a glass platform over the living room. "It's lovely and hideous at the same time," she laughs.

Many of the most fun ideas, however, actually came from the clients. Among them is the stainless steel slide, which was inspired both by Carsten Holler's Test Site 2006 installation at London's Tate Modern, and Wallace and Gromit.

"I liked the idea of coming down to breakfast in it and being there directly from bed," the husband says.

It was fabricated in Germany, hoisted onto the balcony with a crane, and welded and polished in situ. "It's a tour de force of metalwork and a superb feat of engineering," Hotson declares. For Viñas, it's also very practical: "It's not just a toy. You use it to get down from the second floor really quickly."

That said, it does occasionally engender a few scary moments. "Every so often, somebody will completely freak out in a good way," the husband says. "It's blood-curdling because it acts like a big gramophone amplifier. The first time it happened was with Ghislaine. It was horrifying. Then we realised she was still alive!"