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Midcentury Modern furniture dominates the living room, but windows and a skylight over the adjoining stairway give the space a contemporary sense of light and warmth.





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Alexander Gorlin Architects converts an aging **New York Town House** into an artful, warm, and airy retreat

By Sam Lubell

Many of us may dream of living in a beautifully composed work of art. Yet with many Midcentury Modern houses, living in a masterpiece can be a cold, unwelcoming experience—full of simple elegance, but lacking the essential warmth that makes a home most livable. With a recent project on New York City's Upper East Side, New York–based Alexander Gorlin Architects undertook the challenge of converting a stylish, yet standoffish, Modernist town house into an updated, welcoming retreat.

Gorlin and his firm rebuilt the 6,000-square-foot house around the core of a 1957 Modernist residence designed by little-known architect Paul Mitarachi. Set back considerably from the street, the original two-story building had its promising components, including an expansive, elegant first-floor space with travertine marble floors and large windows. But as Gorlin notes, the original architect and client appeared to run out of money and perhaps inspiration to make the dream a reality. The other floors were small, cluttered, and allowed little sun inside. They were dark-

Project: Town House, New York City

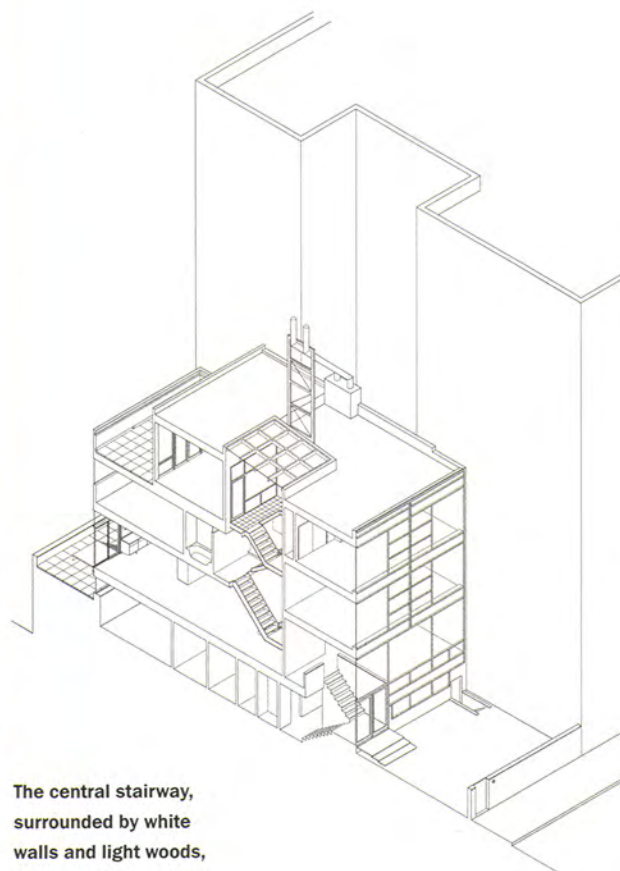
Architect: Alexander Gorlin Architects—Alexander Gorlin, principal; Thomas Bowers, project architect; Brendan Cotter, senior associate

Engineer: Ross Dalland

Interior designers: EFM Design; Steven Sclaroff

Consultants: Matthews/Nielsen (landscape); Kugler Tillotson Associates (lighting); Acoustic Dimensions (acoustics)

General contractor: Kel-Mar Designs



The central stairway, surrounded by white walls and light woods, is topped by a skylight and glass floors, to allow maximum light.

est in all the wrong places: The kitchen sat in the basement, while the upper floors had smaller windows letting in slivers of light. “You went up to the second floor, and you thought you were going to a basement,” says Gorlin. “The house had an inverted feeling; the higher you got, the darker it got.”

Gorlin’s goal was to maintain, and even improve upon, the space’s inherent elegance, but make it livable for a family of four, including two young girls. The most important ingredients were warmth, light, and transparency, achieved, in large part, by gutting much of the interior (except the first floor) and replacing it with a sophisticated layering of interconnected spaces, often covered with white paint and light woods (mostly beech and pearwood), and open to natural illumination whenever possible. To increase light, the architects moved the kitchen to the first floor and replaced it with a lower-level children’s playroom and a gym, while an entire third floor was added onto the roof, increasing space and opening up new possibilities for light.

“When the house was built, efficiency was considered most important, not comfort,” says Gorlin. He says he chose to put form and comfort on an equal footing. The merger is evident in the front facade, which was once largely concealed by vertical tongue-and-groove wood siding. A new front maintains sizable first-floor windows and now includes floor-to-ceiling glazing on the other floors, punctuated by an artful combination of syncopated panes, varying in size, that bathe the interiors in light and recall, through their abstract composition, a Mondrian painting. The red door, formerly gray, contributes (not acci-



FIRST FLOOR

→N 0 10 FT.
3 M.

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1. Living room | 4. Media room |
| 2. Kitchen | 5. Study |
| 3. Bedroom | 6. Roofterrace |



The media room (above), encased in glass, provides visual connectivity to the entire third floor. The kitchen (left), in the back of the town house, receives extra light thanks to partially translucent kitchen cabinets.



Floor-to-ceiling windows bathe the master bedroom in light. The adjacent bathroom contains only glass doors.

dentally) the finishing touch to this palette. The building's deep setback enabled the architect to focus on transparency without displaying the family's life to passersby.

For the collectors who own the home, the luminous first floor is lined with fine art, sculpture, and photography by masters like Jeff Koons and Bernd and Hilla Becher. To accommodate the collection, Gorlin says he designed the space to be intentionally less aggressive, serving as a background for the art. Furniture, rugs, tables, and other interior elements, which have a decidedly Midcentury Modern style, are confidently layered into the space by New York-based EFM Design and Steven Sclaroff. Meanwhile, the living room flows without doors into the sleek kitchen to increase the sense of space and connection. To augment light inside the kitchen, shelves lining the back facade are partially transparent, allowing for greater interior illumination.

The adjacent wood and steel stairway, probably the most important element of the house, ties most spaces together and infuses rooms with light and visual energy. A skylight built over the third floor, and flooring below made of lines of partially transparent structural glass supply light to almost the entire house. Drama is achieved by a floating design, in which stairs are separated slightly from the walls by small steel beams and lined with thin steel cables. Around the stairs, uninterrupted corridors link the bedrooms on the second floor, while on the third floor there is a straight view from the front hallway to the back balcony. The new third-floor multimedia room, a glass cube lined with beech closets, contains a television, stereo, and enough CDs, as well as art, architecture, film, and

photography books, to start a small city library. These interests of the client informed the final ingredient of Gorlin's design, which he describes as having a "sinister edge" inspired by the client's fascination with film noir. The interior of the media room reveals a frame that is painted white inside but black on its exterior. In this vein, both the front and back facades of the house are dark, making it an intriguing yet somewhat ominous presence for onlookers—although the silhouetted walls of the surrounding buildings frame a view that is equally compelling from within. "Too much white would be bad," notes Gorlin.

The sense of warmth throughout the residence tempers and complements this edge. The fashionable fireplace in the center of the living room, lined in black, is indicative of Gorlin's intervention. The previous owners never knew the fireplace worked, but the architect's team found it functioned beautifully, providing a Modern yet warm centerpiece to a home that has also rediscovered its welcoming character. ■

Sources

Masonry: Beldon Brick

Glazing: Windovations (wood windows); Circle Redmont (glass floor system and skylights)

Hardware locksets: FSB

Cabinet hardware: Haeffle Closers

Downlights: Lightolier; Peerless; Iris; bartco; Ardee Lighting; Louis

Poulsen; Nulux; Bega; Rambush;

Roberts; Halo; KIM; Belfer

Hinges: Stanley

Paint: Benjamin Moore

For more information on this project, go to Projects at www.architecturalrecord.com.