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# HOLDING ITS OWN

By Andrea Truppin

Photography by Peter Aaron/Esto



On Manhattan's Upper East Side stands a three-story townhouse, demurely set back 25 feet from the property line. Sandwiched between taller buildings whose brick walls form the looming sides of its courtyard, its most striking aspect is its glass front: a transparent, delicate pause in the heavy march of the street's masonry façades.

Originally two stories high, with a half-basement below, the modest structure was designed in 1958 by architect Paul Mitarachi. Born in Greece in 1921 and raised there and in France, Mitarachi was raised on Modernism; he remembers his mother taking him as a young boy to see Le Corbusier's 1922 Ozenfant house in Paris. He dreamed of studying architecture at Harvard with Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, and after attending college in the United States and serving in World War II, he entered Harvard in 1946 just as Gropius and some of his students were founding the famous Architects Collaborative. His tenure overlapped with fellow students I.M. Pei and Paul Rudolph. After graduating, he taught at Cooper Union and Columbia in New York, where he built his first project in 1954, a townhouse and photographer's studio. In 1958, he joined Rudolph in the architecture department at Yale, where he taught until 1966.

"It was a heroic age for modernist architecture in this country," he recalled in a recent interview. "There was an American architecture, but we weren't aware of it. With Gropius, we looked to Europe." He gradually discovered Frank Lloyd Wright, the Chicago School and the Shingle Style, and became increasingly interested in vernacular architecture while traveling through Italy, Turkey and Greece — the house he built for himself in New Haven in 1963 "was the last house with a flat roof I ever did," he laughed — but in 1958, the Bauhaus still held him in thrall.

His client for the townhouse was Parmania Ekstrom and her husband, Arne, a partner in the Cordier & Ekstrom gallery in New York, which showed artists like

**Top** A view of the two-story townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side, designed by Paul Mitarachi, shortly after it was completed in 1958.

**Left** The house has a split level plan, with short flights of stairs leading down to the half-basement, visible through the clerestory window at ground level, and up to the living room at right. Drawing on landing is *Untitled (Cosmology)* by Matt Mullican, 1989.

**Opposite** To accommodate a new owner, architect Alexander Gorlin added a third level to the house, and reworked the façade above the second floor.







Isamu Noguchi, Romare Bearden, Takis and Man Ray. Although she had initially asked an architect friend in London to design a traditional townhouse for her, she saw Mitarachi's 1954 Manhattan house and decided to go modern.

Mrs. Ekstrom's vision for the empty lot on the far East Side, in a neighborhood of brick and brownstone homes, was far from clear. "She gave me a romantic novel to read about someone who went back to England to live in an ancestor's house during the war," recalled Mitarachi. "That's the kind of house I want," she said, but it was not a modern house. She also said, "I want a lot of glass." This imperative was what moved Mitarachi to push the house so far back from the lot line. "I didn't want to put all that glass right on the street," he said. "I was hoping we would put in large trees." The height was limited to two stories and a half-basement — its vertical layout resembles the classic "split-level" suburban house, with the

lower and first levels accessible by short flights of stairs from the entrance — because the couple did not want to climb many stairs. Mrs. Ekstrom also felt that the modest space was adequate for a family with one child. Her only other request was a narrow "Juliet" balcony on the front façade at the second floor "so that I can wait for my husband to come home from work," Mrs. Ekstrom told her architect, "and I can wave at him."

The façade presented a strong graphic rhythm of horizontal and vertical lines, with tall glass panels above smaller operable windows, separated by dark-stained wooden mullions. The basement, with clerestory windows at ground level, contained the dining room and kitchen; a travertine-floored living room and workroom filled the first level; and bedrooms were on the second floor. A white-painted metal staircase that rose to the second floor from the living room was of lightweight construction with

**Below** The living room extends from the front of the house to the center, separated from the entrance door and stairs by a low partition. The furniture includes newly manufactured pieces designed in the mid 20th century, such as the Vladimir Kagan side table (1953), Poul Kjaerholm PK31 sofa (1958) in natural leather, a beige *Lady* armchair by Marco Zanuso (1951), an Arne Jacobsen *Egg* chair (1956), near window, a contemporary Santa and Cole standing lamp, and a club chair reproduced by Steven Sclaroff from a 1940s Ernst Schwadron design (foreground), as well as vintage, including a coffee table by Florence Knoll (1961). The rug was custom designed by architect Emanuela Frattini Magnusson. The travertine floor is original. Screen print above stairs is by Bruce Nauman, 1975.





**Right** Translucent kitchen cabinets, hung on the rear window wall, with base cabinets raised several inches above the floor, help retain the house's transparency.

**Below** The formal dining table of zebrawood with embedded steel rods was designed by Frattini Magnusson and fabricated in Milan by master woodworker Pierluigi Ghianda. The dining chairs, upholstered in orange Spinneybeck leather, are Eero Saarinen's 1951 *Executive* chairs for Knoll. The side table with removable resin tray on a metal frame, foreground, is a 1950s anonymous vintage piece from R 20th Century gallery in New York. The breakfast area, with an Eero Saarinen table and *Tulip* chairs (1956) for Knoll, visible in background, left, is open to the kitchen, behind dining area wall. Art includes *Four Sock Dolls* by Mike Kelley, 1990, and painting by Christopher Wool, 1992, on dining room wall.







**Above** Daylight from a skylight in the roof of the addition penetrates the glass block stair landing to the floors below, and illuminates the third floor media room through a glass wall. The new rooftop terrace is visible beyond.

**Opposite top** A view into the master bedroom at the front of the second floor, with a Poul Kjaerholm PK24 lounge chair (1965) of steel and woven cane and a vintage standing lamp with a cast iron foot, wood shaft and original parchment shade by an anonymous designer.

**Opposite bottom** The media room seen from the terrace. Wood storage and paneling of steamed beech wood was designed by Gorlin. Furniture includes a red Model P40 lounge chair (1954) by Osvaldo Borsani, left, a Lounge chair (1956) by Charles and Ray Eames, a Cyclone side table (1954) by Isamu Noguchi and Jens Risom's webbed side chairs (1941), Knoll's first design which still in production. Photographic collage on far wall is by David Hockney, 1982.

wooden treads and floating metal risers that allowed light to shine through.

The Ekstroms lived in the house until the end of their lives. In 2002, their son sold it to the current owners, a music industry executive and his wife who had previously occupied a Tribeca loft with their two young children. They were drawn to the modern style of the house, as well as to its luxurious setback, "an enormous waste of space in Manhattan," comments their New York-based architect, Alexander Gorlin, who renovated the house, reworked the functional layout and added a third floor. Gorlin, who has designed an enormous number of projects in his 20-year career, from luxury homes and lofts to affordable housing, schools, skyscrapers, churches and synagogues, and was an early proponent of the New Urbanism — he collaborated on the design of the planned community of Seaside, Florida — is also the author of two books on American townhouses.

While the house's upper floors were illuminated by the front and rear windows, the lower-level kitchen and dining room were dark. Gorlin moved the kitchen up to the rear of the first floor and added a breakfast area, removing a partition to create a single L-shaped space with the living room at the front, with an open dining area. Translucent overhead cabinets set against the rear windows, and lower cabinets raised above the floor, help retain the sense of transparency in the kitchen. To increase daylight throughout the house, Gorlin opened up the roof above the stairs with a large skylight and made the third-floor landing out of glass block. The media, office and guest rooms on the new third floor have glass walls facing the luminous stairwell. Gorlin retained the essential style of the staircase, but replaced the vertical railings with horizontal steel tension cables that emphasize its upward sweep.

Deciding how to treat the third-floor addition was not simple. Setting it back from the original façade would have respected the integrity of the original design. But new codes required the rear of the house to be set back 30 feet from the lot line, rather than the 15 feet mandated in 1958. Setting back both the front and rear of the addition would have severely limited its size, so it was designed flush with the front façade. The exterior of the first level remains unchanged, but the second and third levels have a new mullion pattern. While the obligatory rear



setback enabled an outdoor terrace on the roof of the second level, Mrs. Ekstrom's balcony had to go, since, with the addition, it violated codes. The exterior changes are "impure," admits Gorlin, a bit ruefully. "It would make the Do.co.mo.mo people crazy. I liked the original scale of the house, although this is more monumental."

The interior design, with its blend of vintage and new mid-20th-century pieces, contemporary designs and custom pieces, was orchestrated by architect Emanuela Frattini Magnusson. The clients "were very specific about doing a modernist house," she says. "But they were not interested in just recreating something in a certain style; they also wanted contemporary pieces that would, hopefully, become the vintage of the future."

Mitarachi admitted that he never liked the interior décor of the house because it "was very bare, with no color," he recalled. "There was no joy; it was very self-conscious." Today, the bright red entrance door, and the kinetic reds, oranges, blues and greens of the furniture and rugs, which accent the neutral beige of the travertine floor, the fireplace brick and the built-in wood cabinetry, have brought a warmth and gaiety of which he would surely approve. ■

