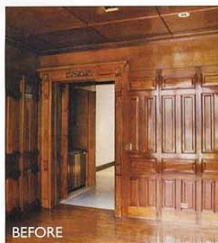


# In with the New

Disciplined yet Classic, a New York Brownstone Rediscovered Its Soul

Architecture and Interior Design by James Sanders and Associates  
Text by Joseph Giovannini/After Photography by Michael Moran



BEFORE

**L**AUREN VERSEL WAS SEEING a therapist, but not for the usual reasons: "My only problem, really, was real estate," remembers the New York film producer, then a screenwriter. "My husband and I thought, naively, that we could buy an apartment with a view of Central Park with the money we had, but the only place we could afford was one with a tiny view through a bathroom window."

Her therapist helpfully told her of a brownstone that had just come on the market. Versel and her husband, Robert Bresnan, a communications executive, made an appointment to see it and found a turn-of-the-last-century town house on a neighboring Upper East Side street. The interior, however, had been so poorly remodeled

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AFTER

Architect James Sanders and designer Gabriela Herzberg redid a New York town house for Lauren Versel and Robert Bresnan.

**ABOVE LEFT:** The living area. **ABOVE:** The music room, with the living room beyond. Pollack sofa and barrel chair fabrics. Steinway piano.

BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY JAMES SANDERS AND ASSOCIATES

**BELOW:** The uninspired dining room. **RIGHT:** *Flower for Tianna Dome*, circa 1982, by Andy Warhol hangs in a paneled alcove near photographs by Flor Garduño.



BEFORE



AFTER

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that the couple would basically be buying the shell. Versel saw the potential, but her husband hesitated: "Can't you nag him into it?" asked a friend.

She did, and they succeeded in placing the winning offer. "Oh my God," said the therapist at the next session,

"you outbid my other patients."

The town house clearly needed architectural resuscitation, including historic preservation on the front façade and a face-lift in back, where a sorry brick extension had been added. The couple turned to James Sanders, a New York architect and friend who had long worked

with the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission and had a particular love for, and familiarity with, brownstones. In his book about New York architecture in film, *Celluloid Skyline*, he analyzed how plans and sections of town houses furthered the plots in their respective movies. He could help ad-

vance the couple's personal story line by designing the right set. Sanders is a modernist, but a compassionate one who was willing to acknowledge that the bare lines, planes and volumes of abstract, classically modernist design do not necessarily make either good movies or

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BEFORE

**ABOVE:** An office/study and an adjoining front terrace are at the south end of the top floor.

**RIGHT:** Sanders added French doors for an "intimate connection between the spaces."

"The narrowness kept informing everything we did," Sanders says.



AFTER

## Before & After



"We chose to create a modern interpretation of a classic row house interior, rendering it in contemporary lines and rich detailing," explains Sanders (left, with Versel).

BELOW LEFT: The master bedroom. BELOW: A 1967 oil by Roberto Matta is above the fireplace in the master suite, which, along with an exercise room, fills the second floor.



BEFORE

AFTER

Sanders is a modernist, but one willing to acknowledge that the bare lines and volumes of classically modernist design do not necessarily make comfortable homes.

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comfortable homes. "Working with the commission, I acquired a love of classical architecture and have great respect for old interiors that offer a sense of comfort and solidity. I didn't see why Lauren and Bob should live without that."  
In what seems an obvious idea but was, in fact, a leap out of conventional architectural practice into the taboo of decoration, Sanders decided to fold in decisions about materials, textures and patterns early into

the design process. He worked with New York designer Gabriela Herzberg, who was then in his office and who now heads her own. The furniture, colors and fabrics would not be an afterthought applied to a stripped white shell but integral to the concept. "We could take clean architectural treatment as a background for a richer, layered environment," he says.

Counterintuitively, the renovation that Sanders and Herzberg designed succeeded in being both cool and warm. The lines

are disciplined, minimalist and cool, but the walls, floors and furniture are dressed in colors and fabrics that are warm to the eye.

At 14 feet from side wall to side wall, the house was narrow, and Sanders gutted the interior to open it as much as possible. "The narrowness kept informing everything we did," he says. "We eliminated any interior partitions that would make cubbyholes. When we wanted to define spaces, we dropped ceilings with floating

planes." Though he reconfigured every floor, the architect kept the inherited organization of the house.

If Sanders pushed his concept of modernism into fresh territory through an expanded palette of materials and colors, he also dropped the idea of uniformity: The designers, consulting with Versel, who was actively involved in all decisions, thought of each area on each floor as a space of its own. "We were looking for a

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## Before & After



BEFORE



AFTER

BELOW AND RIGHT: Landscape designer Judy Kameon, of Elysian Landscapes, transformed the space behind the building into a tranquil garden. Brown Jordan umbrella.

The town house needed historic preservation on the front façade and a face-lift in back.

BELOW AND RIGHT: In order to "establish a unified appearance," Sanders significantly modified the rear façade, while retaining the overall asymmetrical composition.



BEFORE



AFTER

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emotion and a mood in every room," says Herzberg. Each section of the house, as a result, is different.

On the parlor floor, guests enter a luminous foyer walled with planes of sandblasted glass, a material that announces from the hello that the Romanesque Revival house that looks so traditional in this historic district has a contemporary soul. The parlor floor opens, loftlike, from the front living room to the back music room, where a black baby grand piano presides. "French salons inspired the feel of the room," says Herzberg. Two seating areas are arranged on either side of the fireplace.

A suave, custom-designed chaise longue sets the tone at the front window, and its poise is sustained by barrel chairs in a second, larger seating group. The existing paneling was dark and weighed heavily on a space that was too small for the burden. The architect decided to paint the stained wood window trim where it existed and to remove baseboards because the contrast between the wood

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## Before & After

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and the light palette created a graphic effect that would have kept the interior from merging into a serene whole.

But his interpretation of the contemporary did not mean no wood—seven kinds were used throughout the house—just wood handled in a clean, unfussy and inventive way. In the dining room, the designers paneled the walls in an African mahogany hung on a gridded pattern of recessed reveals that eliminate the need for traditional molding: The walls are warm and look contemporary. In the living room, Sanders abstracted traditional wainscoting

with layered wood panels painted the same pearl gray as the room. The resulting horizontal line belts the room front to back.

Architecturally, Sanders achieved a classical sense of balance that Herzberg reinforced with a collage of complementary materials that operates by agreement rather than disagreement. In the dining room, the paisley chair fabric is subtle and speaks to the chenille on a nearby settee.

The renovation took two years, while Versel and Bresnan and their two young children waited it out in a small, rent-controlled apartment. “It was painful to own this space and not be here,” says Versel.

Sanders compares the long design and construction process to making a movie. “You’re producing something. The drawings are like a script: They’re essential, but they’re not the movie. We had to make a

lot of decisions as issues came up. We had to improvise beyond the script.”

“What the story of the house finally tells is that there’s a lot of living going on here—the gardens, entertaining, music—and that we live all over the house,” says Versel. “It’s not like a mausoleum. And we did it in a way that’s fun, elegant without being stiff, with a lot of color.”

Then there’s the happy ending. “Once we got the house, I didn’t need my therapist anymore. And when it was finished, we invited her over, and she liked the renovation. She found it very beautiful. She approved.” □

“We were looking for an emotion and a mood in every room.”



The living room of a New York brownstone, which was transformed with a more modern aesthetic. See page 46.