

WEST VILLAGE TOWNHOUSE

It is unusual to be able to say that you've known a client since he was twelve years old, but that is in fact the case with Robert Stern's son, Nick. Our friendship dates from the 1980s, when I worked with Stern *pere* on his own East Hampton country home, and Nick was often in residence. Twenty five years later, when Nick and his wife, Courtney, an interior designer, found a Greek Revival townhouse in Manhattan's West Village for their growing family (which now includes three children), I was asked to continue my collaboration with the Sterns and help the couple give new life to their historic residence.

The townhouse, which dated from the mid-nineteenth century, had much to recommend it, notably its scale. New York townhouses are typically quite narrow, but this one is twenty-five feet wide, which meant that its three-story side stair didn't impinge on the graciously proportioned living spaces. The challenge lay in the fact that the house had been divided into apartments and, after decades of neglect, little of the original could be salvaged.

Opposite

The master suite vestibule, which connects the bedroom to the private deck overlooking the garden, measures only five by six feet. But by adding a robust chest with family photographs, a big chandelier, and a bright color, Courtney Stern, who oversaw the interior design, transformed a pass-through space into something singular.

With a relatively clean slate, we all wrestled with finding an appropriate aesthetic language for the renovation. The house had been altered over time, most significantly in the twin living rooms on the parlor floor, which had been refitted with ornate Victorian mouldings after the Civil War. Bob Stern, a historian generally in favor of preserving a structure's architectural layers, felt the changes should largely remain. Yet the pure Greek Revival style has a boldness to its proportions and a classical simplicity that is highly compatible with contemporary art, architecture, and furniture – it lets you have your classicism and eat it too, so to speak. While we all liked the idea of a layered experience, the Victorianism didn't appeal to any of our sensibilities. Instead, we drew on Greek Revival precedents for the essential architecture and then tapped its affinity with twentieth-century design movements to go in different directions—in effect we created our own historical layers. This enabled the Sterns and me to find our way as we went in response to different programmatic and aesthetic considerations.

“Finding our way” produced one of the house's most purely delightful elements, which grew out of the reconfiguration of the basement level to include a bedroom/bathroom suite, new kitchen, and a dining room communicating directly with the rear garden. As it happened, the house had a “tea porch,” a two-story pavilion appended to the rear facade, which served as a garden room where the original residents could take afternoon tea. The existing porch contained two rooms, one in the basement, the other at the parlor level, and we decided to reconstruct it as an expansively glazed double-height atrium, with the garden-level dining room accessed from above by a sweeping grand stair—a massive injection of sunlight and glamour. As it represented an opportunity for Bob to research and reinterpret the tea porch typology, this part of the house received intensive study: multiple iterations, featuring different solid-to-glass ratios, were drawn, and the office constructed a large model of the final design. The outcome, supported by the stair's decorative ironwork and Courtney's selection of sconces, offers the Continental flair of a prewar French interior within the larger American context—an environment so inviting that additional furniture was added, as the family now spends much of its time there.



SECTION FACING EAST

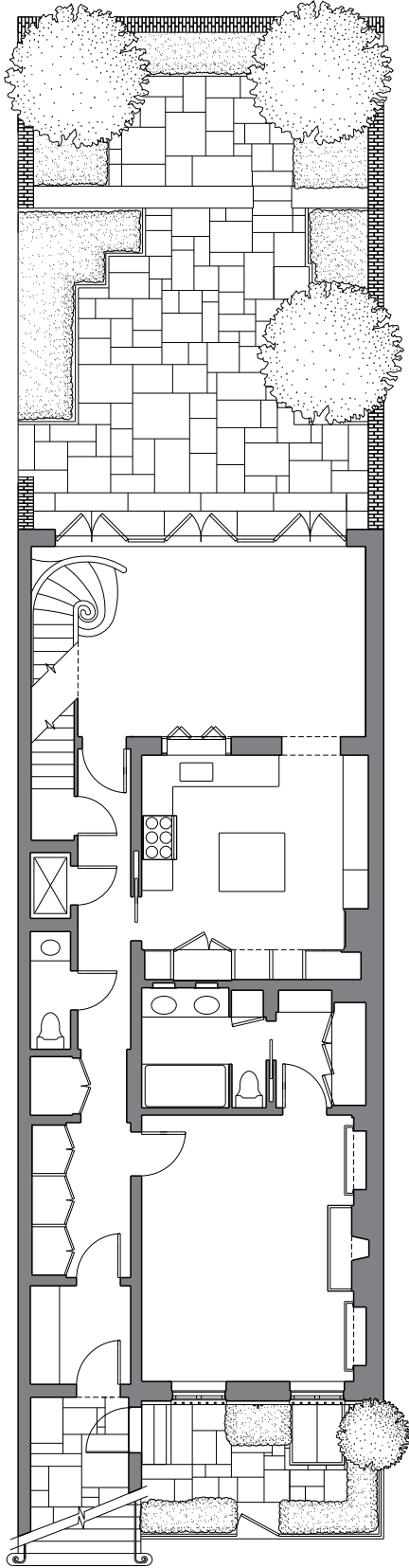


The parlor floor, with its communicating twin living rooms, retained its original plan, though we replaced the crown mouldings, door casings, and mantelpieces with elements approximating what existed originally. But the floor above—the master suite and Courtney's office—is very different. The bedroom, which opens onto a south-facing terrace atop the tea porch, is entered via a vestibule at the top of the stairs, and connects to an en suite dressing room and, beyond it, the bath. The office can be accessed from either the stair hall or the bath, enabling the couple to move exclusively within their private quarters and avoid the house's public zone. The quiet limestone mantel we designed for the bedroom is a response to the tree-patterned wallpaper, a reproduction of an antique Chinese design, which Courtney selected to draw the garden's serenity into the space. Its presence shifted all of the suite's architecture to a supporting role.

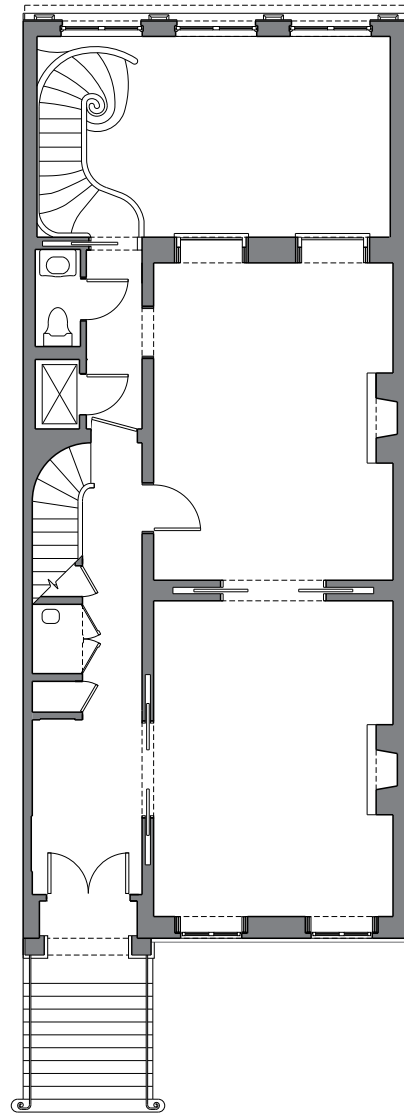
The house's width proved especially beneficial on the children's floor, one flight above their parents. We were able to comfortably fit bedrooms with adjoining baths in both the front and the rear so there was room in the center of the plan for a large shared playroom. The need to bring natural light into this architecturally landlocked space, which necessitated the insertion of windows overlooking the stair hall, directly beneath a skylight, also encouraged us to have fun with the seven-foot-wide, three-story vertical transportation zone. Having been a frequent visitor to the Cleveland Arcade as a child, I have an appreciation of elegant interior public spaces, with tiers of shops and walkways overlooking a central court, and natural illumination

Above, left
The landmarked Greek Revival street facade, which dates from the 1840s, was restored to its original appearance.

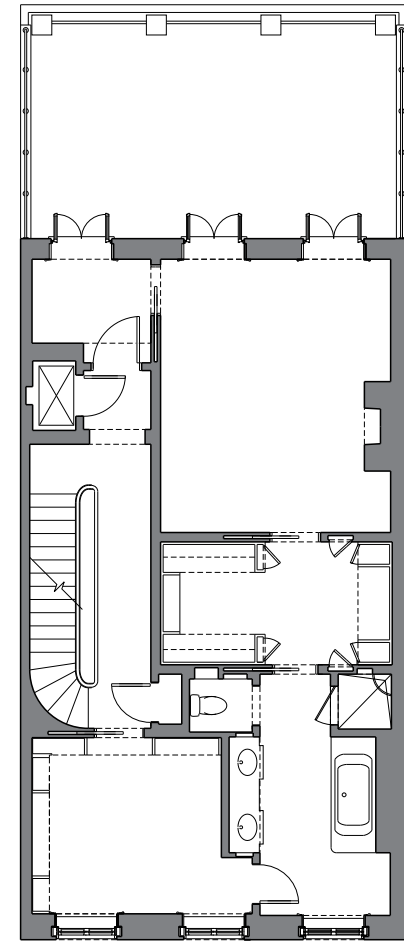
Above, right
Nick and Courtney Stern—joined by Nick's father, Bob—stand in one of the soaring cased openings in the library, which overlooks the double-height atrium on the garden side of the house.



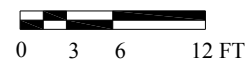
GARDEN FLOOR PLAN



PARLOR FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



Opposite
Bob Stern's reinterpretation of the historic "tea porch" typology transformed what was traditionally an unenclosed two-story structure into a semi-glazed double-height space, but retained the bi-level structural template of the original.

Overleaf
The family room opens onto the south-facing garden. A change in level separates the seating and dining areas. Cairo, the family dog, was the only one not to voice an opinion on the design.



filtering down from a skylight. As the stairwell offered a domestic-scale version of this condition, we were inspired to add a windowed turret at the junction of the playroom and the back bedroom that gives a quirky visual flourish when you look up from below and creates a whimsical domed seating area for the kids to enjoy.

With a cellar-level family room and a penthouse guest suite, the house now has six habitable floors, a spatial palette suited to a variety of experiences. No less rich was the interplay between the Sterns and me as we worked our way through the design. A builder by profession, Nick dug into the myriad visual and mechanical details, while Courtney remained more absorbed in the larger narrative; all of us maintained an ongoing dialogue, and Bob consulted on, and contributed to, every phase. And following our noses produced an unexpected outcome: a satisfying architectural unity that remains flexible enough to accommodate changes in the lives of a young and still evolving family.

Randy Correll, Project Partner





Opposite
 The front parlor features Greek Revival details that pair sympathetically with modern art and furniture. The colorful and eclectic interior design scheme is reminiscent of a prewar Parisian salon but rendered in a contemporary idiom.

Below
 The rear parlor serves as the library. The room sits at the center of the plan but draws abundant light from the double-height family room beyond.





Opposite
The new stair, based on a 1930s French design, cascades with theatrical glamour down from the rear of the parlor floor to the family room. Jean Royere-inspired sconces reinforce the continental atmosphere.

Right
A diptych by Vik Muniz straddles the upper and lower precincts of the atrium. The inner and outer openings, mirroring one another, recall the form of what was once divided into upper and lower floors.



Below

The wallpaper in the master bedroom, a reproduction of an antique Chinese paper, is a fanciful extension of the garden beyond.



Below

The master dressing room connects the bedroom to the bath, which looks onto the street.

Right

Courtney's comfortable, well-equipped study can be accessed from both the master bath, which it adjoins, or the stair hall.

Right, below

Mirrored panels visually expand the master bath.





Opposite
The Sterns' son enjoys his own room, with a view of the garden; their daughters share a prettily papered space facing the street.

Right
Between the two children's rooms is a spacious playroom, with windows that draw in natural light from the skylight at the top of the stairwell.



Opposite, below, and right
Because the townhouse was unusually wide, the stairwell is a graciously proportioned space. The "turret" contains a playroom sitting area.

