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CLOTHES HORSE

A RUNDOWN LOFT IN THE OLD GARMENT DISTRICT IN MANHATTAN BECAME THE PERFECT VEHICLE FOR STEVE BLATZ ON WHICH TO HANG HIS RADICAL AND INVENTIVE DESIGN IDEAS

STYLING MARIANA RAPOPORT

WORDS JULIA VON MYLIUS

PHOTOGRAPHY PHILIP TOUITOU/SURPRESSAGENCY.COM





Previous page A little stair leads from the dining area out to the terrace. The easy access to the outdoors supports the feeling of more space, making the 900 square feet of the apartment appear bigger than they are.

Top The real showpiece of this apartment is the dining table that Steve designed himself, bagging him a coveted design award. Made out of carbon fibre, it carries two layers of dark ebony wood and thick glass resting on a stainless steel cradle

Middle left The building dates back to the 1920s. While some of the upper floors were converted into apartments in the 1980s, the bottom floors still maintain their original function as garment manufacturers

Middle right A small table with photography and artwork on the left side of the terrace door

Below View from the living area towards the kitchen to the right and the dressing area to the left. The white wall marks the separated zones without breaking up the room, maintaining the feeling of a continuous space. The brown 1950s couch belonged to Steve's parents.

Opposite The ensemble of furniture in the living area gives the impression of a careful selection of expensive designer goods but is actually just a hodge podge of old pieces which the owner collected or inherited that somehow acquire an extra touch of chic by harmonising so well with each other and with the cement floor.





How is it possible to create an unconventional, interesting and tasteful apartment out of a place that had languished on the market for months and months on end and was deemed so "horribly ugly" that absolutely nobody wanted to buy it? Obviously this sounds like a challenge. So it comes as no big surprise that ultimately the person who bought it turned out to be a professional. When New York based architect Steve Blatz saw the apartment for the first time, he was interested right away: "I fell in love with it immediately; I knew the potential it had," he remembers.

Located in an old 1920s manufacturing building in the Garment District in Manhattan, the 90 m² space was originally used as a sweatshop for clothing manufacturing. When the upper floors were converted into homes in the 1980s,

the majority of them sold rapidly.

This apartment however had completely lost its charm after its first owner, ignoring the original structure of the place, tried to construct a traditional apartment with many closed up rooms. "It was rooms and doors and walls and platforms and it was everything that this place shouldn't be. Therefore it showed very poorly," remembers Blatz. When he bought it in 1988, the first thing he did was throw out all the extraneous walls, doors and platforms, giving the place back its original 'loft' structure.

"I decided what I really wanted to do here was to add a few very simple but strong elements," says Steve. In order to create the necessary bedroom and to turn this place into an aesthetically pleasing as well as a practical living space, he constructed a wooden wall that separates the living/dining area

from the sleeping area, without making the space appear smaller.

In contrast to a normal wall, it doesn't reach up to the ceiling and gives access from both sides so that the space behind is visible. "It's more like a freestanding element", explains its creator, "an own piece of furniture." And from the other side, the wall creates a separate little bedroom illuminated by generously-sized windows with a great view of New York's stunning skyline.

On the other side of the main room, he used the same visual trick of a freestanding wall to indicate the separate area of the kitchen to the right, and the dressing hallway that leads to the bathroom on the left, so he kept the feeling of open space throughout the whole apartment. "The most private room in the apartment is the bathroom. It is the only room that has a door,"



Top Instead of cutting up the room as a normal wall would do, the size of this wall makes it an own piece of furniture **Below left** Large windows in the kitchen bring in the natural sunlight; together with the little seating area, this makes it a very inviting place **Below right** Visible from the bedroom and the dining area, the study marks the transition between the two zones. Right beside a large window, it is the ideal place to get lost in books. **Opposite page** The kitchen has an unconventional style and displays an interesting contrast; while the traditional white wood cabinets and counters are very simple, a Turkish rug and Moroccan pillows add an oriental touch to the minimalist environment.

says Steve, and explains that his main objective was to get natural light into every corner.

As regards the floors, he wanted to keep them simple, so he removed all the carpet, brought back the old original floor and simply painted it a dark blue-grey tone. As for the furnishings, Steve makes it sound like a relatively simple task to choose a stylish and tasteful combination without spending a lot of money. Clearly though good taste and talent are essential. The living room furniture is a mixture of old and new pieces which acquire an extra touch of chic by harmonising so well with the dark floor. The couch is a relic from the 1950s that

stood in his parents' living room for ages and ages and only needed a new cover. And as for the pair of wooden chairs with turquoise covers – one of them he found in the trash and, unbelievably, four years later he picked up its exact counterpart in an antique store!

A lot of the furniture he designed himself: the bed, the benches in the dressing room and the kitchen and several tables. But the highlight, his absolute pride and joy, is the large dining table that he created together with his business partner, Antonio Pio Saracino, which brought them a design award.

Having a feeling for unconventional and at the same time stylish

ideas, the table was created as an experimental design. Made out of carbon fibre, it is very thin and light but because of its unique structure, reminiscent of the skeleton of a dove, it is able to carry the weight of a dark ebony wood layer topped with a thick plate of glass.

Using the same dark wood, the chairs were designed especially to accompany the prize-winning table.

In spite of his inviting and tasteful living area, for Steve, a passionate cook, the kitchen is the hub of his home, and is another successful example of how to combine aesthetic with practical considerations. The inventive small seating





area with cushioned bench and colourful Moroccan pillows makes it an inviting place to hang out, and the bench extension can be used as extra counter space for food and drinks preparation.

"The kitchen is very nice," confirms Steve: "People can sit in the kitchen and talk to me while I am cooking. And it leads out to the terrace. In the summertime I have a lot of barbecues and we can just open the windows and pass the food out."

On the left side of the kitchen, a short hallway leads to the bathroom, where light pours in through an oval window in the upper part of the door as well as two further windows while soft beige tiles and tub contrast with the dark stone counters. Despite having lived here

for years, Steve is still constantly changing things and developing new ideas. Although it was so ugly when he first laid eyes on it, it was exactly what he was looking for. In fact, had it not been for the ugliness and therefore undesirability of the place, he couldn't have afforded it at the time. For him it was a welcoming challenge: "Since it was my own home it was an opportunity for me to experiment and use the place as a laboratory, to explore the type of design I wanted to work with but didn't have the clients for. So in a sense it became like a showcase to me," he says.

A short look around proves that the experiment turned out a success. ■■

Steve Blatz, www.blatzarc.com



Opposite page clockwise from left The dressing area, an example of family teamwork with a bench designed by Steve and a rug made by his grandmother, leads directly into the bathroom. The most private room in the house gets lots of natural light with three windows and a small oval window in the upper part of the door. The entire interior was designed and fabricated in Italy; In one corner of the bedroom the owner created a little reading area with a large cushioned vintage chair purchased in upstate New York upholstered in raw linen together and a side table. On the wall behind are pieces of artwork that the architect collected over the years including street art from homeless people, friends from around the world and souvenirs from various trips; Close-up of pottery on the windowsill with a view of Manhattan beyond

Above The bed was designed by the owner himself. Through the wooden wall, the bedroom is a separated area that is full of light during the day. At night, you can see how New York's shimmering skyline meets the stars from the bed. The trunk is an old family piece.
Below Steve's terrace is a rare luxury in the middle of Manhattan. During the summer he throws a lot of barbecues for his friends. "Space is so scarce that you are almost obliged to entertain if you have a terrace like this," he laughs.

