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DECEMBER 2012  
USA \$5.99  
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The living area of a Manhattan apartment designed by Matthew Patrick Smyth for ELLE DECOR's Designer Visions showhouse. A painting by Edgar Buonagurio hangs above an antique Chinese cabinet; the lamps are by Hudson Valley Lighting, the pedestal side table is by Ironies, and the shades are of a Schumacher fabric. See Resources.



## ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

Matthew Patrick Smyth transforms a challenging space in a former Manhattan warehouse into a stylish urban oasis for ELLE DECOR's Designer Visions

**ELLE DECOR:** What were the particular issues you faced with this project?

**MATTHEW PATRICK SMYTH:** The building, 250 West Street, is a former warehouse that dates from 1906 and was selected by Hearst for its Designer Visions showhouse program. It's the last structure before the Hudson River, but this is a middle unit, with windows on only one side facing a side street, so light is an issue. As in all conversions, the developer, the

ELAD Group, inherited certain structural elements that just can't be eliminated, like columns and bearing walls. This apartment includes a room that is big enough to be a third bedroom but can't be listed as one because it has no windows.

**ED:** Is that the room you've set up as a dining room?

**MPS:** Yes. I wanted to show off the flexibility of the apartment. For example, most of us don't have the space to dedicate a bedroom to occasional >



In the living area, Schumacher fabrics cover the sectional, pillows, and chair; the sofa's trim is by Samuel & Sons, the mirror is Indonesian, and the rug is by Patterson, Flynn & Martin. The walls and door frame are painted in Benjamin Moore's Notre Dame and Barely There, respectively.

visitors. So after conversations with Designer Visions' executive director, Alana Frumkes, I decided to turn the second bedroom into an office and the "auxiliary" room off the entrance into a dining room. Since dining rooms are used mostly at night, the lack of a window was not a big deal.

**ED:** Is it more or less difficult to design a place without a client?

**MPS:** That depends on the client. Some are great, of

course, but there are nightmare clients too. Either way, the client gives me the clues I need to do my job. I like to say that I can walk into a room and immediately think of five ways to do it, so I rely on client input to focus my thinking.

**ED:** How did you work here, without a client?

**MPS:** I invented clients. I originally decided they were a couple, not very young, but maybe their kids were in college, and the apartment was a gift

to themselves for a new chapter in their lives. They've done a lot of traveling, maybe took the Orient Express from Paris to Istanbul and kept going, and they've brought back pieces from their journeys. No matter what I do in a room, I like the idea that things have been collected over a lifetime, rather than just bought and installed. Partway through the project I realized that it didn't matter if it was a straight couple or gay couple, so I turned the imaginary owners into two men.

**ED:** Did that make the apartment very different?

**MPS:** Not really. I mean, what's a man's style and a woman's style these days? We've certainly moved past the stereotypes. The clothes in the master suite's dressing room are all men's, otherwise the design is pretty gender neutral.

**ED:** What was the first piece you bought?

**MPS:** The carved door frame behind the bed in the master suite. It's from R.T. Facts, an antiques store in Kent, Connecticut, which is near my country place. I'd seen the frame before and always wanted to find someplace to use it. It seemed perfect here.

**ED:** What was appealing about it?

**MPS:** I love the color and the carving and its history. It gave the room some architecture and some instant drama. I had to cut it down 10 inches so it would fit, and then I had a large-scale mirror installed within the framework, which expands the room and brings some modernity to the antique piece. It also gave me that sense of the world brought home that I tried to express throughout the apartment, as if the whole place were a kind of scrapbook of the couple's Grand Tour.

**ED:** You used quite a bit of wallpaper. How do you decide when to wallpaper and when to paint? Isn't wallpaper more expensive?

**MPS:** Yes it is, so you have to decide where in the room you're going to spend money and where you're going to conserve. Generally I use wallpaper only in the smaller, more private rooms. I get such a rush of instant gratification the first time I see a room with the paper up.

**ED:** Why did you choose a dark color for the living area?

**MPS:** I had already narrowed the fabric choices in my mind. It was important that I do that early because I was having the upholstery and window treatments custom made. I was trying to decide whether to go light or dark on the walls. I always think that dark walls add glamour to a room and make rooms look bigger, but it was really the paint itself that won me over. The color is Notre >

A photo work by Peter Margonelli in the living area; the 1930s French table base has a custom-made top. **BELOW:** The floor plan.





**FROM TOP:** The dining room wallpapers are by Schumacher, the light fixture is by Corbett Lighting, and the mirror is by Oly; the 1970s console holds lamps by Hudson Valley Lighting, and the chairs are vintage. The kitchen's cooktop, vent hood, and ovens are by Jenn-Air, and the stools are by McGuire Furniture; the walls are sheathed in Ann Sacks tiles, the countertop is Silestone, and the sink and fittings are by Kohler.



**WHAT THE PROS KNOW: PAINT AND PAPER**

- Smyth generally uses three finishes of paint in each room: flat on the ceiling, eggshell on the walls, and satin on the trim. This gives the room visual depth and added texture.
- For consistency, Smyth used the same ceiling paint, Benjamin Moore's Barely There, throughout, except for the dining room, where he applied Benjamin Moore's Blue Veil. "I'm probably the only one who will ever know this, but the hint of blue in that paint makes me think of the sky, so it's a subliminal way of suggesting openness and light."
- You can use more than one wallpaper in a room. For the office, Smyth chose two papers by Hermès. One has a fernlike pattern; the second is a geometric herringbone. The herringbone pattern is small and subtle and doesn't fight the more visually commanding botanical on the other walls.
- For the dressing room and a reading nook, the Alpha Workshops customized the color of its Newport wallpaper to match the two Benjamin Moore paints—Greenwich Gate and Barely There—that Smyth chose for the bedroom walls and ceiling.

Dame. It's from a new Benjamin Moore line called Color Stories. It has a lot of pigment in it. It manages to go with almost anything.

**ED:** How did the color help with the structural column between the living area and the kitchen?

**MPS:** I painted the column the same color as the walls, and it kind of disappears. These columns are not unusual in old commercial buildings, but they take some finessing in terms of the floor plan. Instead of being a visual problem of any kind, the column now helps define the two main areas of the room, much the way the rug does.

**ED:** What is your general starting point in a room?

**MPS:** I start with the floor plan. Then I add and substitute furniture until I get it right. For the living area, I decided to create two separate seating areas, one I think of as conversational, for company, and one more private, for reading or having a cup of tea. You could have a small meal there too.

**ED:** I understand that the mirror over the sofa is strategically placed.

**MPS:** I was considering hanging it between the windows, but I like a mirror to have a purpose other than just being there. I placed the mirror on the wall above the sofa to bring the view of the river into the room. Without the mirror you have to walk to the window to see the view; now you see it, reflected, the minute you enter the room.

**ED:** What's the story behind the photograph opposite the mirror?



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** The walls of the office are covered in Hermès wallpapers, and the desk is made of a galvanized-steel drum base and a custom-made top finished by the Alpha Workshops; the chairs are by John Boone, the shelving is custom made, and the rug is by Patterson, Flynn & Martin. Cabinetry and shelving by California Closets in the dressing room; the clothing and accessories are from Mr Porter, and the rug is by the Rug Company. A nook is decorated with a mirror from Z Gallerie, and a 19th-century Corinthian capital serves as a console; the wallpaper is by the Alpha Workshops.



**MPS:** I was really worried about that wall, because it's a big space, and I didn't know what I was going to do there. So I asked my friend Peter Margonelli, a photographer, if he might have anything, and he pulled out this image. It's a vintage photograph he purchased from a vendor in India. The original picture had undergone an interesting deterioration, including cobweb patterns. I had it blown up and just started playing with it and decided on that grid of nine pieces, because if you look at them closely, any one of the nine sections could be a photo on its own.

**ED:** You've brought an Eastern flair to the dining room, too. Where did you find that wallpaper?

**MPS:** It's by Schumacher. Again, it's a new line called Byzantium. It was displayed in the showroom in a bright blue, and when I saw this colorway, which is called Mica, I thought it would be perfect. It reminds me of a palace in Morocco. I was also trying

to give the room some subliminal openness, so I had it in my mind that it was a courtyard. I used two different patterns and two different borders because I wanted to create some architecture with the application of the paper. I called the same installer who had put it up in the showroom because it looked tricky, and I figured he'd know what to do with it. I added a pair of ebonized pillars for some more architectural heft and to break up the expanse of wallpaper. Then, to provide some contrasting lightness, I chose the light fixture by Corbett Lighting, which is made up of capiz shells and crystals. It's a perfect balance of formal and informal.

**ED:** In the master suite, did you choose the finish for the dressing room shelves to match the kitchen cabinets?

**MPS:** No, that was actually a happy accident. I think it's great that they match, but when the closet >

An antique door frame serves as a headboard in the master bedroom, and the Room & Board bed is dressed in Anichini linens; the bedside tables are by Ironies, the rug is by Smyth for Patterson, Flynn & Martin, and the walls are painted in Benjamin Moore's Greenwich Gate.



## WHAT THE PROS KNOW: IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

- The sisal rugs in the living area, dining room, and office are bound in a linen tape that is an intermediate color between the rug and the dark-finished floors, which are standard-issue in the building. That color choice softens the edges while still defining the spaces.
- The rugs—all Patterson, Flynn & Martin—also help tie the rooms together, but each rug has a different pattern, the scale altering with the dimensions of the room to provide visual interest. “The one in the office has a subtle stripe,” says Smyth, “but I know it’s there, because when I saw the way the installers had laid it, I made them rotate it 90 degrees so the stripe would run the other way.”
- Since the windows are the best element of the original architecture, Smyth ordered Roman shades, fabricated by Michael Tavano for MT Custom, to follow the top arch of the frame. The fabrics for the shades are different for each room: sheers in the living area and office, a denser linen for the master bedroom. The shades in each room have different trims, too.
- Smyth customized the dining chairs by using two different Schumacher fabrics. The seats are covered in Gainsborough velvet in Graphite, and the backs are upholstered in Kyousha, a silvery silk with a subtle floral pattern.



A photograph by Gerald Incandela and a Jansen-style chair in the same room; a sculpture by Bruno Romeda sits atop a parchment-covered trunk.

was being done I didn't know what the finish on the kitchen cabinets was going to be. The closet finish is called Umbrian Oak.

**ED:** So you designed the kitchen?

**MPS:** Yes, within the developer's parameters. The cabinet system is by Poggenpohl in a slightly textured, striated finish they call Sandpine. To contrast with the light cabinetry, we went dark but reflective with the backsplash, using 6-by-18-inch Soleil tiles by Ann Sacks in Grey Crackle. All the major appliances are by Jenn-Air, including the vent hood, which is almost vertical, like a picture hanging on the wall.

**ED:** Is it true that you used some of your own possessions in the apartment?

**MPS:** The painting of Venice in the master bedroom is usually in my office. And the dining table lives in my bedroom. It's a faux finish, by the way—it's wood painted to look like stone. And there are a few odds and ends: a little sketch I bought at an auction at Christie's that I've had for years, a pair of lamps that once appeared in a Kips Bay showhouse, and a stone model of Angkor Wat that I lugged home in my suitcase from Cambodia. It's working both ways, though. I bought the claw-foot ottoman in the living area for this project, but I may decide to keep it. That's just one of those unexpected things that happen in design that can make the job so much fun. ■