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APARTMENTS • TOWNHOUSES • COUNTRY HOUSES

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CARNEGIE HILL BROWNSTONE

BELOW

A new neo-Federal garden facade steps back to create terraces.

OPPOSITE

The vaulted second-floor library leads to the family room facing the garden.



OVER THE PAST CENTURY, THE ARCHITECTURE OF THIS SLENDER, eighteen-foot-wide brownstone located in the heart of the Carnegie Hill Historic District had been significantly debased. A holdover from the speculative building boom at the end of the nineteenth century, when the streets of Carnegie Hill were developed as rows of houses, it was built by the architectural firm A. B. Ogden & Son in 1886 as one of four Queen Anne-style houses for Andrew J. Kerwin, a real estate operator credited with the invention of the kitchenette. During the first half of the twentieth century, the house was divided into apartments, its emblematic brownstone stoop was removed, and its parlor-floor windows were enlarged and shifted to reflect the reconfigured rooms inside. While various architects had tried to relieve the monotony of these strips of brownstones during the early years of the 1900s by removing stoops and designing new street facades in variations of Georgian, Tudor, and French styles, this particular house stood mainly as a degraded version of its former self. In restoring it to a single house, PPA reconstructed the entire building down to the party walls, creating an utterly new house set between a restored street facade and a newly designed garden facade. The firm's approach, in adapting the house to the modern needs of a family, focused on differentiating and distinguishing an otherwise thin and unremarkable brownstone. What could have been a straightforward renovation of a conventional building type with a predictable plan and section was translated into a moment of inspired design innovation.

Working under the regulations of the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, PPA preserved the historic spirit of the well-worn street facade. Lost brownstone details were reestablished, such as the carved window and door surrounds at the ground and parlor levels, which were modeled after the existing original window frames on the upper stories. The street level, which formerly consisted of an enlarged window sandwiched between two unaligned entrances, was redesigned to fit the eighteen-foot width of the house more agilely and to create a more appropriate entrance. Since the garden facade was visible at street level, through an alley on the next street, it was also subject to design review by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Formerly a hodgepodge of additions built deeper into the garden than current codes allow, this elevation presented a chance to create

PLAN

The north and south flights of stairs connect at a central landing on the second floor.

- | | |
|-------------------|------------|
| 1. Living room | 5. Kitchen |
| 2. Library | 6. Hall |
| 3. Sitting room | 7. Foyer |
| 4. Breakfast room | 8. Study |



something new. Rather than carrying over elements from the front, the firm designed an elegant red-brick and stone neo-Federal facade with terraces on the setbacks and stairs from the second floor spiraling down to the restored rear garden area designed by Maureen Hackett. The rooftop addition, which expanded the building to five stories and 5,000 square feet, was also subject to review; PPA contextually designed it to recede and to be undetectable from the street, winning the support of the local civic group.

While preservation guidelines and parameters controlled the outcome of the exterior, the interiors, decorated by Matthew Smyth in cool shades of blues and browns, could adhere less to custom. In some cases, the slim dimensions of the house may have been limiting; here, they only add to its allure and charm. Rooms, at once well proportioned and livable, are accessibly sized to a young and growing family. Following the plan of a typical English basement townhouse, a single room opens to the front and to the rear with the stair—which PPA relocated from the side of the building—at its core. With this repositioning came the hinge of the design and, unpredictable from the brownstone’s facade, the architectural surprise. From the ground floor foyer, an atypical double stretch of stair ascends to the parlor level. Here it leads into a vaulted library, inspired by James Wyatt’s Heveningham Hall, which runs along the transverse axis and is flanked to the north by a formal sitting room and to the south by a living room with three arched French doors leading out to the terrace. With its stylish Art Deco circular grilles, walls of books, glossy ribbing, and series of three arches along the east wall that articulate the stair sequence, the library becomes the unexpected aesthetic treat and the heart of the house. As the stair extends to the bedroom levels under a pared-down laylight, the architecture of the upper floors becomes more stripped down and almost abstract in effect, reflecting contemporary tastes.







SECTION

The stair, relocated to the core of the house, ascends under the fifth-floor laylight.

BELOW

The east wall of the second-floor library is articulated as a sequence of arches that embraces the stair.







LEFT

Oversized arched doors bring light and views into the living room and open out to a glass-floored terrace overlooking the garden.

TOP

The kitchen and breakfast room face onto the garden.

ABOVE

The cornice in the sitting room is fluted to capture the soaring height of the space.