

INVESTING A BEAUX ARTS STRUCTURE WITH A MODERNIST SPIRIT

continued from page 107

once observed, architecture is really a sartorial matter, a question of cuffs, collars and other terminal points. "Gary's interest in design really opened up a whole range of opportunities," says Hauptman.

Like many of the great Neoclassical buildings in France that are grand without being large, the former American Security branch bank had—when the architects got down to their calculators—only 1,600 square feet of floor space (about the size of a smallish loft). Subdividing that space into three areas, and halving the ceiling over the kitchen to accommodate the study above, risked diminishing its openness. It also risked conventionalizing the interior, breaking it into the normal rooms of a normal house.

To maintain the volume and create the illusion of spaciousness, the architect resorted to a device used in Japanese gardens: borrowing interior views. Between the living room, kitchen and dining room, he left out walls altogether or built partial-height partitions to allow each room to open into other areas. Still, he left just enough wall area so that spaces are not so porous that they compete visually with the art: There is never a visual pileup of paintings receding in the distance. Hauptman also detached nearly everything from the walls. "What is new inside should be separate and distinct from the envelope," he says.

Mintz favored a neutral palette, which helps discipline the interiors so that the layered spaces do not become busy. Despite its neutrality, the palette is rich, with three shades of gray paint on the stair railings alone. Floors in the kitchen and dining area are a matte gray ceramic tile, and in the kitchen, the front of the fireplace is an unfinished but oiled industrial-grade diamond-plate steel. The interiors, then, defer to the colors of Mintz's art, which is dominantly abstract and ranges in hue from Fauvist to subliminal. A row of Josef Albers's color studies marches from kitchen to dining room without being overpowered.

In this context, the cherry Shaker

cabinetry the architects used throughout the house does double design duty, acting first as a clean-lined bridge between the traditional style of the bank and the modernist interiors, and then warming the grays and blacks with rich hues of natural wood.

It has been said that the test of an architect is his staircase. The prominent staircase Hauptman located in a window bay of the dining room elegantly and eloquently introduces the high-tech components and details that typify the adjoining study and the bridge to the master bedroom. Materially, the staircase, bridge and frame for the study are all of a piece, built in steel painted electrostatically. Nickel-plated sleeves with plated cap nuts cover the ends of the railings—the treatment lightening the appearance of the structure.

In order to avoid an awkward stair landing, Hauptman angled the back edge of the study and the bridge itself. This single expedient establishes a geometric exception that plays—like a joker—in episodes throughout the otherwise geometrically consistent house: Shifted angles appear in the entrance floor, at the kitchen counter and in a bluestone terrace set in the garden.

But the wit in the design lies in the steps of the staircase and the floor of the bridge and study, all of which are made of perforated metal and supported by open-web steel trusses. The holes in the metal give the surface just enough transparency to convey the sense of walking on air: At night thousands of tiny lights project through the metal and dot the floor and the ceiling, creating a surrounding constellation.

"Nobody could build this kind of classical structure today," Gary Mintz concludes. "Adapting a building forces you to think imaginatively—usually a leftover like this would be turned into a 7-Eleven or be torn down."

"I had two reactions when we finished," he continues. "I was sorry that it was completed, and I couldn't quite believe I owned it." □



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Michael Hauptman (opposite below), a specialist in adaptive reuse, converted a 1906 Neoclassical bank building on Capitol Hill into a residence for Gary Mintz. LEFT: The limestone façade, wood-framed windows and metal cornice were preserved. BELOW: The original front doors were "too imposing for a small house, and their placement didn't work with the new interior plan," Hauptman says. Glazed doors open to the garden; a "simpler" entrance was created at the side.



BANK BAIL-OUT IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

INVESTING A BEAUX ARTS STRUCTURE
WITH A MODERNIST SPIRIT



ARCHITECTURE BY BRAWER & HAUPTMAN
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Gary Mintz, a cardiologist, had already lost his design innocence to historic preservation and designer furniture by the time he saw the run-down, unoccupied Neoclassical bank building in Washington, D.C. Back in the early 1980s he had moved into a converted candy store in Philadelphia and furnished it with such classics as Marcel Breuer's Wassily chairs. So when he relocated to Washington and started looking for a place to live, he knew what he wanted: "I told the realtor to try to find an industrial building that I could turn into a house—you get such great spaces in that type of construction. She said she had 'just the building,' on Capitol Hill; people who had the money couldn't see its potential, and people who could didn't have the money. The bank had been sitting empty for two years."

Ensnared in his living room on a black, subtly contoured Onda couch cradled in a stainless-steel frame, Mintz states (in case you hadn't noticed), "I'm very much a modernist—as a kid I was raised at the Museum of Modern Art in New York." A Rauschenberg occupies half the white, two-story wall behind the doctor, next to a tall black-and-white lithograph of gestural circles by Terry Winters. On the grate in the fireplace, black ceramic solids—cylinder, cone, cube, pyramid, sphere—are waiting to play platonically in a blaze.

It was the space that Mintz liked about the bank, and more specifically



"Some buildings have such little charm they're not worth keeping," observes Mintz. "But if a good building outlives its usefulness for one purpose, you find another function." ABOVE: Behind Mintz in the living room is, at right, Robert Rauschenberg's lithograph *Soviet American Array V*, 1988.





Before

the volume contained within its twenty-foot-high banking hall. "My art needs big walls," he explains. And it didn't hurt that this jewel of a building, with classical details carved into the limestone façade, traces its pedigree to such architectural icons as the Petit Trianon at Versailles. Palatial classicism eventually became the official style of banks, so devolving the bank back to a luxurious house only called on the building's second nature.

In Philadelphia Mintz had worked with local architects David Brawer and Michael Hauptman (Brawer was a freshman in the dormitory at the University of Pennsylvania when Mintz served as a graduate counselor) on the design of both the ex-candy store and his offices. He asked them down to Washington to confirm his opinion: "It seemed obvious the bank could be something good—unless I was missing something."

He wasn't: They came; they saw; they designed.

After clearing out the suspended ceiling, vinyl-tile floors, carpeting and flimsy partitions, what the architects found was a solid masonry building with a high ceiling, molding where it counted, windows on three sides and noble proportions—space, in a word, but space whose grace was supported by ample natural light filtered by

"All the details," Mintz says, "were thought out and rethought out." LEFT: The steel fireplace, which serves the living room as well as the overhead study, evolved through a series of sketches by architect and client. BELOW: The ceramic-tile floor extends from the kitchen and dining room to the living room, where it becomes a hearth. Shaker-style cabinetry and Vermont soapstone countertops are also features common to both areas.



After



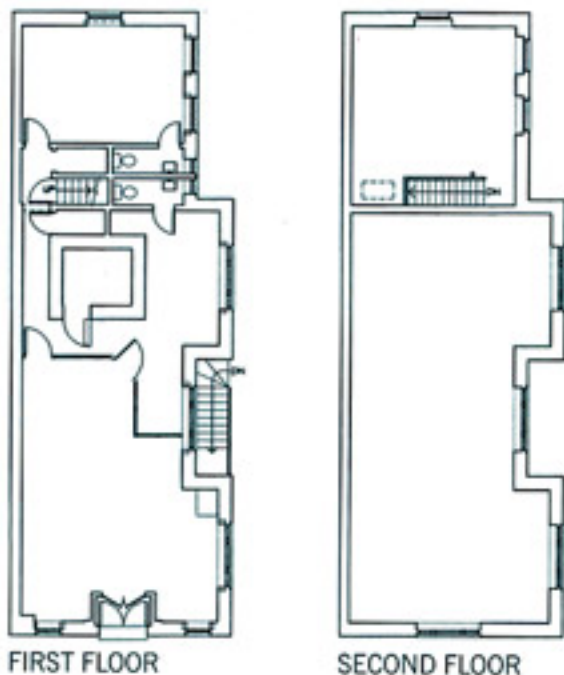
surrounding trees. The double-height living area was ringed with a composite dentil and egg-and-dart molding that required some repairs. The distinguished limestone façade, with rare ogival arches, needed only a little scrubbing, and the night deposit box could be turned, coyly, into a mailbox. Mintz, who once took classes in architecture just because he liked the subject, remained actively involved throughout the project: He

and Michael Hauptman, the partner in charge of design, burned up the wires between Philadelphia and Washington with their faxes.

The organization of the interior fell into place once they decided where to locate the front door in the corner building. The old door to the bank faced the boulevard, but keeping it there, with an entrance hall leading directly into the tallest, most open living space, meant breaking up the vol-

BELOW: "I'd feared destroying the effect of the Palladian window," says Mintz. "In fact, the steel is complementary." The dining room bay is the house's circulation axis. The stair leads to the study, while the bridge doubles back to the master bedroom. Schumacher fabric covers Robert Mallet-Stevens chair seats. LEFT: The solid masonry building was reinforced by steel beams; the front door replaced a small side window.





Before



ABOVE: As shown in the floor plan, the bank was a divided double-height space with rear offices. BELOW: Hauptman's reordering of the volumes established an open plan with low walls that act more as lightweight partitions. "I saw it as raw space," Mintz says of viewing the building for the first time, "very nicely proportioned raw space."



After



The exposed steel construction, says Hauptman, is meant to be a "detail-intensive contrast" to the building's historicism. OPPOSITE: The kitchen was previously an undefined central space. BELOW: Painted steel open-web joists support the study above and create a ceiling for the kitchen, where a partial-height wall allows in natural light from the living room. KitchenAid microwave.

ume and diminishing its grandeur. Architect and client agreed to site the entrance along the length of the building, on the side street. Mintz did the first sketch for a floor plan: He suggested entering at the side of the building and then moving into the dining room and past the kitchen to the living room. The double doors at the previous entrance would open onto a garden made from the former front yard.

"The dimensions of each bay dictated the dimensions of each room," notes Hauptman, a fortysomething architect whose beard and longish hair hint at a sixties vintage. In a bold step, he placed a study over the kitchen, allowing the living and dining room ceilings their full height, though the areas are separated by a second-story platformlike structure. A guest bedroom was situated in the old bank





“The existing structure determined the plan: It wanted to be a house in only one way.”

Mintz notes that the addition of a second floor puts him near the ceiling, “a great part of the original architecture that you’d never experience otherwise.” LEFT: The new construction was intended to maintain the spaciousness of the banking hall. BELOW: The steel floor of the bridge and study is perforated, lending a transparency to the upper level. At the stair is David Shapiro’s *Seer, Actor, Knower, Doer*, 1985; on the wall below is *Port aux Besques*, 1971, by Frank Stella.





"A rehab forces you to use the building more imaginatively than if you'd built the space from scratch," Mintz says. LEFT: The master bedroom was placed at the rear of the bank in what had been an unfinished attic. BELOW: The dentil and egg-and-dart molding at the bedroom entrance has been restored. Facing the etched-glass wall of the spa is a 1988 painted fiberglass work by the Boyle Family; the large mixed-media piece on the far wall is by Steven Sorman, 1984.

offices at the rear of the building, and a master bedroom located above.

Hauptman was familiar with Mintz's tastes from the Philadelphia renovation and also remembered his attention to detail: Doctors, typically, have a different sense of dimensions ("I think in terms of a tenth of a millimeter," admits the cardiologist). Hauptman also knew that Mintz would like a bridge because he had left a trail of his interests in his library of architecture books—a Post-it marked a red bridge in Gae Aulenti's apartment. "A sophisticated client always helps create a much better project," comments Hauptman, wondering absent-mindedly, "Did we ever give you back your books?"

"The existing structure determined the plan," Mintz remarks. "I think it wanted to be a house in only one way."

"Gary's collection dictated right off the bat what the house was going to look like," says Hauptman. The design would be an essay in subtlety—serene and discreet enough to emphasize the presence of the art without upstaging it. But for a perfectionist client in a building that already boasted fine moments, the issue was to find complementary contemporary materials and invent the kind of detail that would capture the doctor's eye. Mintz was not only a modernist but an unreconstructed one: God is still in the detail, or, as an eminent architect

continued on page 178

