

SPRING 2021

DEPARTURES

HOME + DESIGN



The Time Traveler's Apartment

When a devout antiquarian moves into a midcentury modern masterpiece, things get interesting.

by Stephen Wallis. Photographs by Pieter Estersohn



In the bedroom, a 1832 oil on canvas hangs above a Min bed from Design Within Reach, with a custom headboard in Holland & Sherry wool.

A BRUTALIST apartment block in midtown Manhattan was not the kind of place Richard McGeehan imagined he'd ever call home. Having begun his career as a dealer of 19th-century antiques before transitioning to interior design, he had spent most of his adult life, he says, "living in the faded grandeur of Brooklyn brownstone floor-throughs."

But several years ago, with his business expanding—notable clients include Robert Duffy, business partner of Marc Jacobs—he decided to look for an apartment that would put him closer to his

office and the city's design showrooms. He ended up renting a one-bedroom in Kips Bay Plaza, a pair of 20-story, 560-unit cast-concrete slabs designed by I. M. Pei and built in the early 1960s.

"They're ugly beautiful," McGeehan says of the buildings, whose gridded façades have generously scaled windows that offer great views. He loved the layout, featuring a sizable living area and a dining room, neither a given in a typical 900-square-foot one-bedroom in the city. So when the owner decided to sell, McGeehan jumped at the chance to make the place his own.

"I'm pretty sure I've done the most elaborate renovation in the building," says the designer, who gutted the space with the help of



In the living area, a vintage Knoll sofa in Pamir velvet in Pistachio from Scalamantré sits on a Shogi rug by Stark. Below: An Eric Karlén settee in Skye wool from Lee Jofa.

"I got dragged into the 20th century living here. I felt strongly that it called for a core of objects that suited the period of the architecture."



friends and sometime collaborators, the architects Steven Roberts and Richard Moschella. "Whatever walls could be moved, I did."

They were able to carve out precious extra inches for the dining room and replaced the wall between the living area and bedroom with folding doors that can be opened to create a continuous, loftlike space. "Everyone said, 'Oh, you don't want to look at your bed,'" recounts McGeehan. "But I really like having the openness and the light."

McGeehan finished some walls in putty-colored plaster and clad others with panels of pale celadon-stained ash. To add panache, he commissioned artist Matt Austin to embellish the new five-inch oak floorboards with a stenciled squircle pattern. "The squares with rounded corners are a subtle nod to the shape of the windows, which have an arch at the top," McGeehan says.

The apartment's curated furnishings and objects span centuries and styles. "It was hard to limit myself to one period," says the designer. While his tastes have always been eclectic, they skewed pre-modern before his move. "I got dragged into the 20th century," says McGeehan. "I felt strongly that it called for a core of objects that suited the period of the architecture."

Anchoring the living room is a Paolo Buffa cabinet whose graceful lines and doors inset with etchings of Italian noblemen

exude a midcentury-meets-classical refinement that encapsulates the spirit of the space. The antique vibe of an 1820s Danish daybed is balanced by the rectilinear modernism of a 1960s Knoll sofa, while a sitting area features a 1940s settee by Elias Svedberg, a vintage Fritz Neth Egg chair, and a circa-1910 German vanity chair arrayed around an English root table.

"It's the juxtapositions that are interesting to me," says McGeehan, who also installed vertical supports along the windows to display works of art without impeding the views. Most evident is a translucent screen of nearly 200 colored-glass disks and squares that he commissioned from Higgins Glass Studio in Illinois. There's also a cast of Poseidon set inside a sunburst frame. "It's probably the most overtly theatrical gesture I've ever made," he says.

In the dining room, he ringed a minimal Paolo Buffa table with Dutch plywood school chairs, updated in three different shades of leather. Several 19th-century folding-screen panels (once owned by



Karl Lagerfeld) that depict garden scenes with children provide a whimsical backdrop for dinner parties. While McGeehan hasn't lost his love of antiques, he considers himself converted to the pleasures of living in spare, elegantly modern surroundings. "I see the objects individually in a way that's very pleasing to me," he says, adding, "I'm a changed man."



Left: A '50s Paolo Buffa table is from Compendio Gallery in Rome; the Murano pendant was sourced from John Salibello in New York. Above: A vintage A. R. Cordemeyer chair adds color to the kitchen appliances by Liebherr, Gaggenau, and Bosch. The 19th-century painting is of McGeehan's ancestor, Dr. Robert Hogan.