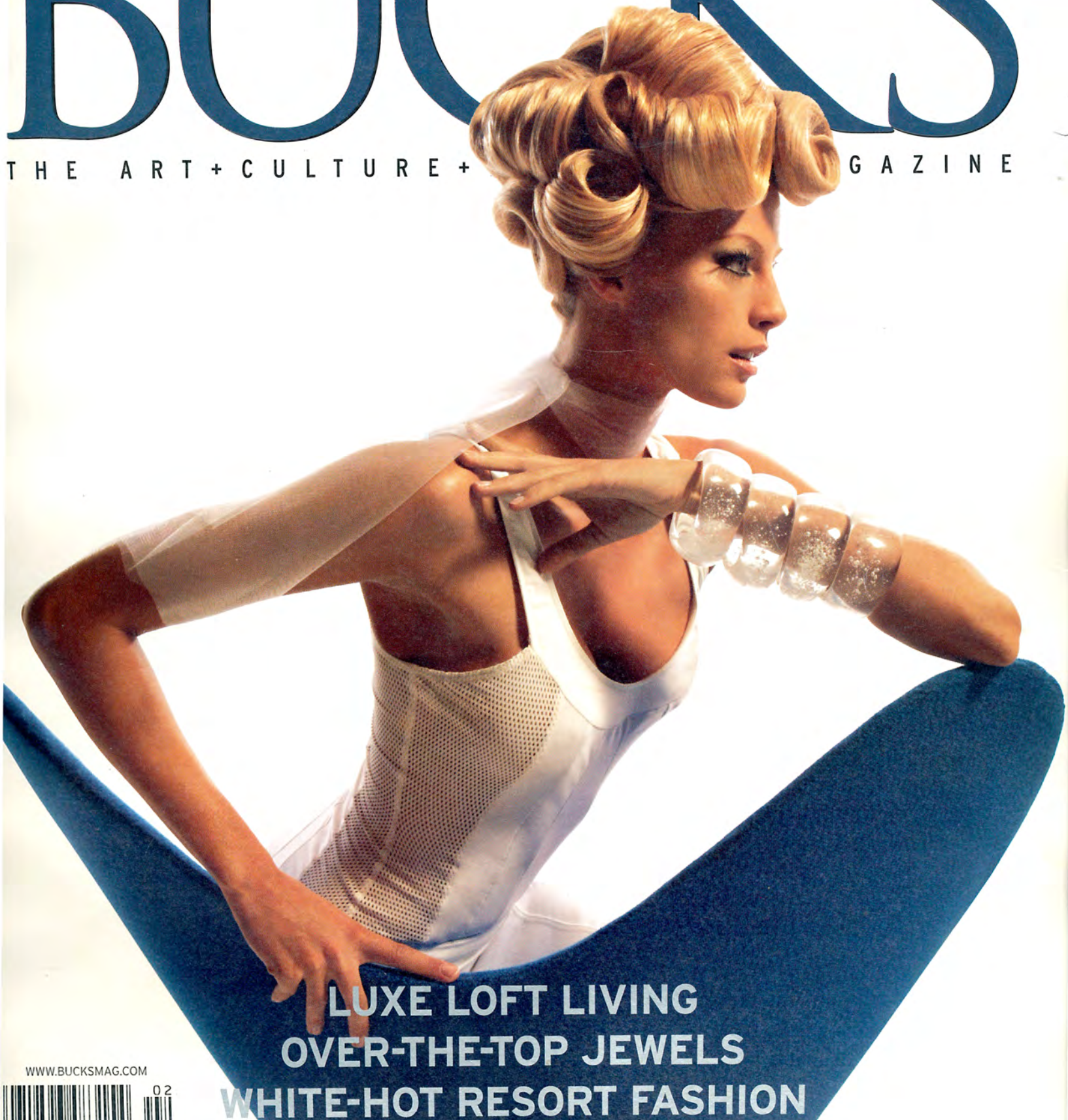


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BACK TO BASICS
AN URBAN LOFT



By Bridget McQuate

Photos by Catherine Tighe

When Julie North decided to renovate her New York City flat, she had no intention of transforming it into a showcase bachelorette pad. Nor was it her goal for her newly refurbished space to win architectural design awards. She was simply in the market for a fabulously designed and functional living space. Yet, when the project was finished and the architects collected a design award for their efforts from the American Institute of Architects, North happily joined them at the awards ceremony in Philadelphia. Standing beside them, she celebrated the moment when her dream space became just as appealing to a jury of design professionals as it was to her.

To guide her through the space's makeover, North turned to Brandt + Ginder Architecture, Inc., a husband-and-wife architectural team based out of decidedly non-urban Mechanicsburg, PA. At the beginning of the renovation process, North gave the architects a very brief vision for the new space. "I just wanted it to be warm and open, not stark," North says. She also wanted to go back to the basics and reveal all the hidden brick as well as plumbing, pipes and radiators that had been concealed, painted or otherwise taken out of the equation.

The building that houses North's co-op is a nine-story, former sewing factory in NYC's Greenwich Village. The over 2,000-square-foot flat now has a loft-like quality. Although, when North bought it, the space was more typically configured with drywall partitions defining each room. The architects had the walls and ceiling stripped back to the shell. Once the drywall was torn down, several coats of plaster and paint still stood between the contractors and the actual brick. Armed with wire brushes, they eventually got to the bottom of it, and reminders of the past embedded in the brick — bolts, fasteners and pieces of steel — were cleaned up and left in the wall to contribute to a nouveau industrial aesthetic. The newly exposed brick became a canvas that would act as a backdrop for the rich new palette of design elements to come.

The existing maple floorboards were torn out and replaced by salvaged heart pine boards that cast a warm rust tone throughout the

entire space. New electrical and mechanical systems were replaced and positioned down the middle of the ceiling. The architects devised a floating white plane suspended from the ceiling to conceal the new utility systems in just one portion of the space. The floating plane also visually united certain rooms and spaces below it, and allowed the rest of the space to rise up to the higher ceiling-height.

The whole project then became one of layering new and old textures against each other: new wood on old brick; the older wood of the floor against the new wood of the cabinetry units; the new floating ceiling plane against old brick on the sides; and new wood underneath. The overriding consideration when bringing these new and old textures together was to maintain as much subtlety and lightness as possible to keep the space from becoming too dark or overbearing.

Because North's flat is adjoined by buildings on both sides — the only windows are located at the front and the back — the space leaves almost 90 feet of windowless indoor room in between. Brandt says, "We worked very hard to activate the center of the space so it wouldn't just become a long, dark hallway. Now it's more like a gallery — a place to linger — because it has the shelves,

a counter top and spaces for exhibiting art-work." The long gallery space is entirely lined with a vertical-grain fir cabinetry wall that incorporates built-in bookshelves and drawers as well as doors leading to rooms and closet spaces. Another double-sided cabinet perpendicular to the hallway divides the guestroom and the master bathroom and provides storage to each room with a single wooden unit.

Brandt says, "Rather than building walls and partitions to divide the space, we developed these very thick cabinetry walls that act as storage space from both sides." The ample amount of storage helps to minimize clutter and emphasize spaciousness. The cabinet walls also double as sculptural design elements that define the various rooms and provide continuity throughout the whole space. Julie says, "When I saw how much wood the architects wanted to use, I thought it might be too much. But when I saw it in the space, I thought it looked great." All of the cabinet pieces were designed by the architects, made by Dan McClellan Craftsman, and later installed in the space.

In the kitchen, another floating plane, this time vertical and made of wood, was placed against the brick wall as another aesthetic, yet functional, layer. The kitchen appliances and hanging cabinets were then grafted onto the wooden backdrop. An L-shaped cabinetry piece with a raised breakfast bar juts out into the wall-free living/dining space to mark the boundaries of the kitchen. The kitchen fixtures are custom German-manufactured Bulthaup hardware. The architects intended to cover all the kitchen counters with soap stone, but couldn't find complete slabs large enough, so they chose an Italian



DESIGNING NORTH'S FLAT WAS A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT. HUSBAND-AND-WIFE TEAM, BRANDT+GINDER WORKED WITH HER FOR OVER TWO YEARS TO REALIZE THE AWARD-WINNING SPACE. DURING THAT TIME THEY BUILT CHAIRS, HUNTED FOR FURNITURE, STRIPPED THE WALLS AND BUILT A LASTING FRIENDSHIP WITH THEIR CLIENT.



The newly exposed brick became a canvas that would act as a background for the rich new palette of design elements to come.



NORTH'S DINING/LIVING AREA MAINTAINS AN OPEN AND BRIGHT ATMOSPHERE THAT CASTS A WARM TONE OF HEART PINE THROUGHOUT THE SPACE.

"pietra cardoza" limestone with the same matte black appeal.

Two massive pivoting doors separate the dining room from an office. The doors can open in or out to add depth to the dining space and filter in light from the living room windows. Translucent glass panels divide the office from a guest bedroom to let the light penetrate deeper inside the space.

In the master bathroom, the floor and shower walls are completely covered with green Venetian glass mosaic tiles. Thankfully, each tile did not have to be set in separately. The tiles come in one-square-foot sheets and are held together with paper on the face instead of



mesh on the back. "It's tricky lining them up correctly, because you're looking through paper as you press it into the mortar," says Brandt. The architects designed a bathroom drawer unit that appears to be built-in but has wheels to make it portable. Because so many of the larger cabinets are built-in, the architects wanted Julie to be able to take some smaller pieces with her if she ever decided to move.

The wooden wall separating the master bedroom from the hallway stops short of reaching the ceiling to let light from the bedroom windows permeate the hallway. Leading to the bathroom from the bedroom is a "dressing hall" lined with closets in the same wood as the hallway cabinets. Across from North's closets is a laundry room, subtly hidden with wooden sliding doors. "There's a continuity throughout the space," says Brandt. "Each room is different but the textures and materials are consistent."

To hear the architects talk about how much effort and attention they invested in North's renovation, one might think they were designing their own home. After completing the basic renovation plan, they went on to design moveable and stationary furniture, choosing fabric and materials that complemented the newly configured space. They laid out the lighting plan and selected the fixtures. Ginder, who is also an artist, even painted three companion art works that now hang in North's living room. When faced with exclamations of how multi-talented they are, the architects humbly reply that they are just "very detail oriented." All together, they spent two years working on various aspects of the project. North says, "The architects pushed me to a place that I never could have gone without them." Brandt returns the compliment, "Julie was one of those dream clients. She would consider things very carefully, make decisions and give us guidance." •

ACCORDING TO GINDER, THE CHALLENGE TO MAKE SOMETHING FIT IN A SPACE, FROM BUILDING MODELS, TO RECONSTRUCTING A WALL, ARE REWARDING ASPECTS OF ARCHITECTURE.

