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GENERATION NEXT

Courtney and Nicholas Stern enlist his father, architect Robert A.M. Stern, to help reconfigure their 19th-century Greenwich Village townhouse as an exquisite family home

TEXT BY HENRY URBACH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON UPTON
PRODUCED BY ANITA SARSIDI

BEFORE

When Courtney and Nicholas S.G. Stern set out to redo their New York City townhouse, there was little question about who would be on the renovation team. Nicholas is the head of Stern Projects, a high-end residential contracting company, and Courtney is an interior designer with her own firm, while Nicholas's father is renowned architect Robert A.M. Stern. "It's nervous-making to work for one's son," admits the elder Stern, "especially since he's a contractor. You're not just building a house, you're making a home for family."

The couple bought the four-story 1847 Greek Revival building in an estate sale in 2002, not long before they married. Despite its somewhat ramshackle condition, the structure was situated on one of the most charming blocks in Greenwich Village and had a number of winning features, not least its expansive 25-foot width, twin parlors, and large garden. After developing a master plan, the Sterns refurbished the garden and parlor levels for their own use while drawing rental income from the upper floors. However, in a few short years, after the birth of the first of their three children, the Sterns decided to complete the remodel of the house as a single-family residence. →

Left: Contractor Nicholas S.G. Stern and his wife, Courtney, an interior designer, renovated their Manhattan townhouse with Robert A.M. Stern Architects, Nicholas's father's firm. In the streamlined front parlor, a Jansen-style sofa and armchair made by Jonas and covered in a Jasper silk velvet are grouped with a club chair clad in a Manuel Canovas fabric. Artworks by Christian Haub (left) and Cecil Touchon hang on opposite walls; the curtains are of a Scalamandré taffeta, and the tree-form occasional table is by Mattaliano. For details see Sources.

CHRISTIAN HARDER

Clockwise from left: The Sterns opened up the back of the house and removed a section of the parlor level's floor to create a double-height sitting area that leads to the revamped garden; the outdoor fabrics are by Perennials. In the parlor-level dining room, a series of Josef Albers silkscreens (left) and a painting by James Nares survey a vintage table surrounded by chairs in a Lelièvre fabric; the carpet is by Patterson Flynn Martin. A Vik Muniz diptych presides over the new sitting room, where a Dune sectional sofa, a CB2 cocktail table, and a vintage armchair from Neo Studio are arranged atop a **carpet from FJ Hakimian.** The Sterns at the base of the staircase that links the sitting area and parlor level. The kitchen features a Wolf cooktop and hood.

Randy Correll, a partner at Robert A.M. Stern Architects who has known Nicholas since he was a boy, served as project architect. "Nick and I weren't entirely sure how to approach the house at the beginning," he recalls. "There were many physical issues but also historic ones, and we wanted to make something that would respect history yet not feel like a period home."

The first phase of the remake dealt with some fairly major structural issues. Party walls with missing patches of brick were rebuilt, and the cellar was excavated about a foot to gain height for a basement rec room and laundry. A portion of the rear façade was also demolished and reconstructed several feet out, adding space on the garden level for an expanded kitchen as well as a dramatic new double-height sitting area that was created by removing a section of the parlor floor above.

"Words cannot describe the insanity of renovating an old house like this," says Nicholas with a chuckle. At the outset, he remembers, "There was an undercurrent in every conversation: If it's old, we must save it!" Yet elaborate moldings, ornate marble mantels, and other ostentatious decorative elements didn't sync with the couple's unfussy tastes and casual lifestyle. Then one humid summer day—the home's central air had not yet been installed—a chunk of ceiling came tumbling down. "I called my dad and asked, 'Do we really have to save the moldings?' He said, 'No. They're horrible. Get rid of them,'" Nicholas recounts. "That moment proved liberating for us—we decided we could do something that was sympathetic to the original structure and also attuned to our family."

The transformation of the back of the house held particular interest for Stern père. A passionate historian of New York City architecture, he was fascinated with the typology of the Victorian-era tea porch—a semi-enclosed space overlooking a garden where people would take afternoon tea. The Sterns' double-height update introduced a curved staircase, based on a 1930s French design, that cascades down from the parlor floor to the lofty new

sitting room. This soaring space brings daylight into the center of the townhouse and also keeps family members connected across different levels. "We had to convince the landmarks commission that this new area was in effect a large tea porch," the elder Stern explains. "Fortunately, they got it."

During the renovation's second stage, the entry sequence and bedroom floors were reconfigured to meet the needs of the Sterns' growing family. The main staircase was turned 180 degrees, away from the front door, which heightens the distinction between social spaces on the garden and parlor floors and the family quarters above; storage areas and an ample bar were tucked beneath the first flight of steps. Upstairs, the master bedroom's walls are finished in a hand-painted scenic paper that evokes the garden beyond, and an antique Chinese glazed-stoneware garden stool underscores the allusion. On a more practical note, motorized screens allow bug-free ventilation on temperate nights, while windows in the bath change from transparent to opaque at the touch of a switch for instant privacy.

The children's rooms, meanwhile, are appropriately whimsical, with a windowed turret overlooking the stairwell and a large play space near the sleeping quarters. And the home's crowning glory is the 300-square-foot penthouse guest suite the Sterns built on the roof.

In terms of the decor, the residence strikes a balance between formal and casual, with a range of traditional and modern furnishings orchestrated in spare yet comfortable ensembles. Seating in the vibrant front parlor is clad in sumptuous fabrics in rich shades of teal, fuchsia, and gold. Contemporary artworks flank the tailored marble mantel, which is topped by a 19th-century lacquer-and-gilt mirror that reflects the classic crystal chandelier overhead.

"Old townhouses like this are bossy," Courtney says. "Every time we tried something that was too modern, the house kept pulling us back to traditional. But we've gotten rid of the Miss Havisham mood—now it's traditional in a bright, happy way." □

DESIGN WISDOM

BE SYMPATHETIC, NOT RIGID: The Sterns replaced fussy mantels and moldings with less ornate designs that still respect the house's pedigree. The new double-height sitting room off the garden, meanwhile, gives the home a breezier, more contemporary air.

CREATE CONTRAST: Modern and contemporary artworks by Jasper Johns, Josef Albers, Frank Stella, James Nares, Vik Muniz, and others serve as foils for vintage crystal chandeliers and select antiques, opening up a dialogue between eras and adding visual punch.

BUILD CHARACTER WITH COLOR: While the furnishings throughout are predominantly traditional, the Sterns updated the residence's ambience with vivid shots of fuchsia, coral, persimmon, teal, and celadon in the upholstery fabrics and wall coverings.

BRING THE OUTDOORS IN: Bedroom wallpapers with natural motifs—a hand-painted scenic pattern in the master suite, a jaunty contemporary design of flowers, pomegranates, and leaves in a children's room—nod to the Sterns' verdant garden.

Clockwise from top left: A children's room springs to life with a vivid Osborne & Little wallpaper. In the master bedroom, an artwork by Frank J. Boros, hand-painted Gracie wallpaper, and curtains of a Brunschwig & Fils satin join a minimalist mantel. A Frank Stella lithograph is displayed on one of the nightstands. Art Deco–inspired THG tub fittings gleam in the serene master bath.