

Elemental Hues

Afloat on a clean and classic wave, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz's blending of wood, stone, and a pervasive and much-loved glass-green refreshes a Victorian townhouse



A monolithic gray mohair chaise (both views) "receives you as you enter the living room," says the designer, and not coincidentally, neatly divides it into two seating areas. Natural maple flooring flows up the walls to become wainscoting and, in some areas, cabinets. Bathed in floods of daylight, the room has window shades of gray plastic scrim backlit for nighttime privacy.



The icon for this elegant townhouse duplex, if it had one, would be that bottleful of New York City H₂O on the mantel—clear and still, like this fluid, crystalline neoclassical space. With *bruma* painted plaster walls (Spanish for our more prosaic “seafoam green”), a froth of ornamental plaster moldings picked out in curve-defining lighting, and maple floors merging into maple wainscoting, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz has designed a space as cool and bracing as a dip in a fjord.

Although designer and clients got along swimmingly, Noriega found himself challenged by certain abstract needs: “Make it hard-edged but soft and warm,” for example. Yet all agree that he achieved this seemingly contradictory goal. The designer also paused at a request for a television in the living room, but is content with the new slab screen model he installed. In addition, the kitchen was not to look like a kitchen, and the bathroom though small had to include an island for sinks.

Architect Brian E. Boyle translated the designer’s

sketches into working drawings and made complex features like custom cabinetry, workable new fireplaces, and glass balconies—if not quite a synchronized swim, then feasible at least.

Noriega could easily live here himself, he says, for “sandblasted glass” is his own favorite hue. Accordingly, he has lavished it on master bath walls, table tops, and inserts for old pocket doors. And in an act of admirable discipline, he has left those seafoam walls (which sparkle at night) utterly bare. “They are a work of art themselves,” he says, referring to their numerous, satiny skim coats. No satins sheathe his furniture, however. Light from soaring windows drenches a soft gray sofa and chairs and a strict but luxurious mohair chaise. When the gentle grays and “flamed” (rough-textured) black granites meet with glass and wood, they meld in a neat cohesion of stone and warm maple and aqueous light; of earth and air and sky. And water, of course—a distillation of Manhattan’s best.

The pass-through slot to the kitchen in the maple-veneered dining room wall (below) has an austere granite counter; two armchairs are covered in a practical Teflon-coated fabric that feels like silk. Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz designed the four-foot “cylinder of light”—an acrylic tube sheathed in wired-together, hand-faceted crystals and calls it “magical at night.” Opposite: In the dazzle of the balcony’s French doors, translucent sandblasted glass pocket doors frame the titanium-base dining table with its similarly treated glass top, and plastic sixties chairs.





The minuscule powder room (top left) is enobled by a tall Victorian mirror behind a granite sink. Above left: Glass-tiled master bath's limestone island contains two sinks and one double-sided mirror. Right: The ground-floor master bedroom, which opens to the patio, receives natural light through the glass floor of the balcony above. Outside stairs lead to the duplex's main floor.

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