

FITTED *to the* OCCASION

*San Francisco-based designer
Douglas Durkin crafts his
Manhattan pied-à-terre with a rigorous eye and
scrupulous attention to detail*

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Douglas Durkin left New York for San Francisco in 1989. But since then, his renown as a designer—and his client list—has grown so exponentially that he recently decided he needed a second home back in Manhattan. Durkin considered some 30 places before settling on the smallest one for his New York pied-à-terre, a 1,000-square-foot one-bedroom in the London Terrace Gardens (as the Chelsea complex, which dates from the 1930s, is officially known). Decades ago, someone created the space by combining two studio apartments. The doubling gave the apartment the luxury of a second bathroom, which makes having out-of-town guests easy, and an extra-wide alcove in the living room, where Murphy beds once folded down into each studio. But what really sold him was the light. The corner apartment has a southeastern exposure that's four floors up, at tree-top level. "It's like having a park out your window," he says. "You see the seasons change right before your eyes."

Durkin's projects trend toward the contemporary, with his love of travel reflected in his fascination with objects and fabrics from all over the world. He has a special feel for collectors, as you might guess from the art that fills his walls. "But as a firm," he says, "we're very serious about getting rooms to work on an architectural basis first." Here, the challenge was twofold: to make the limited space seem bigger and to make it efficient. The efficiency he achieved by installing closets everywhere conceivable. What had once been the second studio's kitchen became a dressing closet, and there's yet more room for clothes in the bedroom's 10-and-a-half-foot-long desk; Durkin designed it in the form of a simple white matte lacquer box encasing a large leather cabinet, with drawers for a printer and a fax machine as well. Wherever there were low ceilings, he raised them.

The living room of designer Douglas Durkin's Manhattan apartment, which he renovated with architect Kurt Melander. The 1948 leather armchair and ottoman are by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, the sofa by Carlyle is covered in a Rose Tarlow Melrose House linen, the cocktail tables are 19th-century Chinese lacquer tops on French 1940s steel bases, and the 1970s occasional table is by Willy Rizzo; the painting is by Charley Brown, a watercolor by Andrew Belschner rests on a cabinet by Paul Frankl, the Eames armchair is from Design Within Reach, and the rug is by Beauvais Carpets. See Resources.



Collages by Leigh Wells and a sconce by Blackman Cruz hang above a custom banquette in the living room. See Resources.



The kitchen features cabinets lacquered in a custom shade by Donald Kaufman Color, a range by Bertazzoni, a microwave by LG, and sink fittings by KWC. **CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Artworks by Leigh Wells (left) and Jack Stauffacher in the dressing room. A 1950s armchair by Pierre Guariche and a collage by Leonardo Drew in the living room; a 1940s table holds glass bricks by Russel Wright. Custom bookcases in the hallway; the floor is oak. See Resources.



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Two features in particular added to the sense of expansiveness. One was the living room alcove: Durkin immediately loved the sensation of depth and drama it brings. The other was an idea that was there, but halfheartedly rendered; improving on it, he took four feet from the bedroom to create a hallway between it and the living room. The idea, he acknowledges, is counterintuitive—“You would think that making a room smaller would make the apartment feel smaller. But that gallery is actually crucial to the design. It gives you a sense of progression and scale.” One gallery wall he used for bookshelves, painting the backs a dark sable brown to enhance their depth. The small but functional kitchen and the entry hall he painted the same shade. “Dark colors make small spaces feel larger,” he explains. “It’s more visually forgiving.” He sheathed the master bathroom in slabs of polished silver travertine. Because the material covers every wall as well as the floor, it turns the room into something luxurious and extraordinary.

Tying it all together was the easy part. Since Durkin is both a constant traveler and an inveterate shopper—“I tend to buy things that I like as opposed to things for a certain place”—he already had quite a few pieces in storage. (The nine-foot living room sofa, actually a double sofa that converts into two foldout beds, is an exception: It had to be custom built.) He’s especially fond of a soft raw silk ikat fabric that he buys in Thailand, handwoven on small looms and dyed with indigo in the country’s northeastern villages. He used it in throws and on cushions in the living room; for the bedroom, he sewed two large throws together to form an elegant bedspread.

Another unifying element is pairs of objects that he splits up. One white-glass 1960s Italian lamp perches next to the living room sofa; its mate sits on the long desk in the bedroom. The one in the living room stands on a 1940s table with lion’s-paw feet and a black stone top, whose mate stands next to the bed. And everywhere there’s artwork by friends—notably collages by the Berkeley, California, artist Leigh Wells and ceramics by the New York potter Bill Hudnut.

The effect is glamorous but understated. Durkin explains that his intention was to avoid “too many ideas.” He wanted to keep the interiors “clean, simple, and light on the eyes.” The secret is, as usual, in the details. “Even though it wasn’t a large project,” he says, “it was a meticulous project. A molding detail may not look like anything much, but it’s actually critical to an overall feeling when a room is done.” Every detail in this apartment—which, with less imagination at play, could have felt boxlike and dull—is thought out so wittily that what strikes you aren’t the details at all but the buoyancy of the light, the exuberance of the space. ■

The bed in the master bedroom is dressed with linens by E. Braun & Co. and a coverlet and pillows of indigo silk ikat; the vintage stool is by Thonet, and the headboard is upholstered in a Pollack fabric. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** A painting by Thomas Cordell hangs above a custom-made desk; the photographs are by Filip Dujardin, and the rug is by Beauvais Carpets. The master bath is sheathed in silver travertine, and the tub and sink fittings are by Lefroy Brooks. See Resources.

