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A SAN FRANCISCO APARTMENT GETS DOWN TO THE BASICS

Interior Design by Douglas Durkin Design

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A SAN FRANCISCO APARTMENT GETS DOWN TO THE BASICS

Interior Architecture by  
Sandy Walker, AIA  
Interior Design by  
Douglas Durkin Design  
Text by Therese Bissell  
Photography by  
Matthew Millman

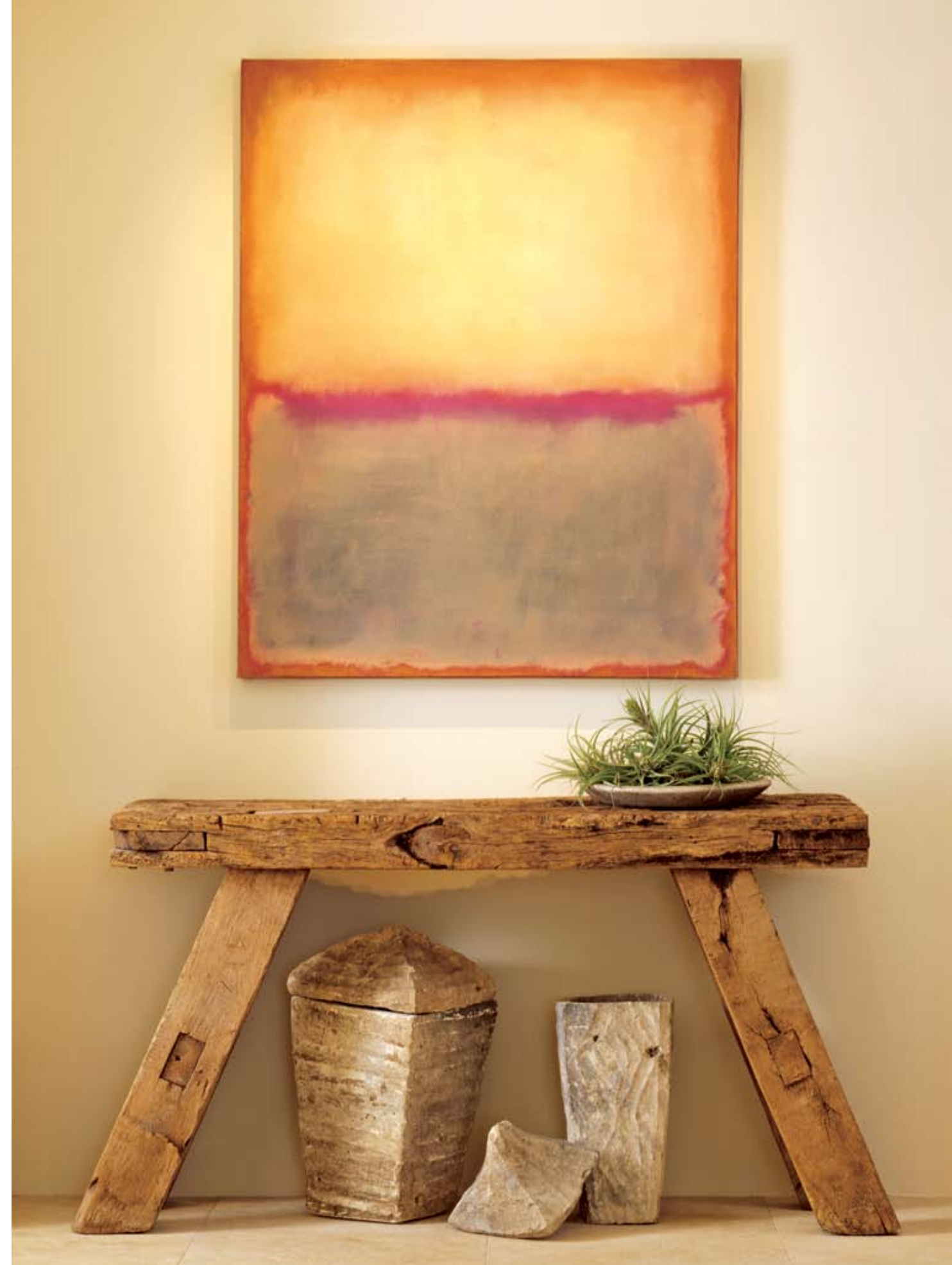
As Douglas Durkin tells it, something happened on the way to his *not* being hired as the interior designer for a sweeping renovation of a 1920s San Francisco apartment.

The owners, a couple moving to the city after long having had a primary residence on the San Francisco peninsula that was designed by architect Sandy Walker with Michael Taylor (they also have houses in Palm Springs and France's Dordogne region), were led to Durkin by Walker. Formerly a principal of a prominent local interiors firm, Durkin was then in the process of starting his own office and was operating, literally, out of his kitchen. "I can laugh about it now," he says, "but they were completely taken aback by my portfolio. They were hardly traditionalists—their tastes were very contemporary—so there was virtually nothing in my past efforts for them to relate to. We decided to end the interview and go to lunch, where we talked about everything except

Architect Sandy Walker conjured an art-filled, contemporary space out of a traditional San Francisco apartment, while designer Douglas Durkin used texture, overscale furniture and neutral hues to give the interiors depth. Ellsworth Kelly's *White Curve*, 1975, is above the living room fireplace. *Ourray*, a 1961 Frank Stella painting, hangs at rear. Stark carpet.



A 1999 sculpture by Anish Kapoor stands before a living room window that looks out to the Transamerica Pyramid. "We found the window during demolition," explains Durkin. "It had been covered, eliminating a great source of natural light." OPPOSITE: *Light over Deep*, 1956, by Mark Rothko is in the entrance hall. Ancient funerary urns, Therien.





In the dining room, as throughout, the furniture's solidity enhances rather than overpowers the artwork, which includes a 1957 Sam Francis oil-and-acrylic painting and a David Smith sculpture. Chuck Ginnever's maquette for *The Three Graces* sits atop a table Durkin designed. Holly Hunt chairs and chandelier.

the project. The next day I got a call from them. They said, 'We don't like the work you showed us, but we like you.' They were going to chance it all on my ability to exceed my range and interpret the kind of space they wanted."

Their faith was justified. Durkin—with his design director, Greg Elich—transformed the dark, imposing 4,000-square-

foot apartment (its great appeal, other than size, being location and views) into a light-hued environment that, in its simplification, became catalytic to a pared-down existence for the couple in general. "They were quite ready," Durkin remarks, "for a more contained way of living."

San Francisco-based Walker ("whose blank canvases let

interiors evolve," Durkin says) gutted the existing paneled walls, taking a period residence down to the studs and refashioning it within the codified restraints of the building. The architect was permitted few structural changes; that there could be no interference with the grid of the structural columns all but dictated the layout. By eliminating certain nonbearing walls,

however, he made some rooms bigger and assigned others new functions. The entrance hall had extended all the way to the rear of the apartment; it now goes roughly halfway across, with the leftover area holding much of the reconfigured master suite. Two bedrooms were combined to make a library, leaving just the master suite and a guest room as the private realm. A small

corner conservatory between the dining and living rooms was removed altogether, gaining view space and allowing for a bar, and the kitchen was entirely reoriented.

Adding definition at the apartment's perimeter, Walker created deep-cavity window walls; radiators built under the windows make a substantial sill, a rich detail that adequately

compensates for the slightly reduced floor space. The idea of thickness carries over into the furnishings by Durkin ("Michael Taylor's natural heir," in Walker's estimation): the tripart oak dining table; the cerused-oak beds and side tables; and the largest custom "piece": the cerused-oak-paneled library. Positioned, sparsely, as bold accessories throughout, reclaimed



"We didn't have to expend any energy drawing the clients out. They had a strong, gutsy point of view," Greg Elich, Durkin's design director, recalls. ABOVE: The library's carpet "is faded and recessive and lets the painting"—a 1958/59 Kenneth Noland—"hold the space," says Durkin (left). Kirk Brummel sofa chenille.



**The linchpin of the design was the integration of the couple's contemporary art collection.**



When his clients began their collection, Durkin notes, “much of the work was by emerging artists,” who would later rise to prominence. ABOVE: A painting from Richard Diebenkorn’s *Ocean Park* series is in the master suite. Durkin’s decisions were dictated by the art: “The interior design is about serving the collection.” Glant chair fabric.

teak timbers from Indonesia respond to the elemental shell—rift-sawn oak and limestone floors, no baseboards, painted plaster walls—with what Durkin calls the “integrity, texture and life” of recycled wood. He and Elich found a Balinese source for teak from abandoned piers and tobacco barns, which had not yet been veneered or made into boards. The infusion of

this “iconic material”—raw, salvaged—was, they felt, essential in establishing the apartment’s character.

But the linchpin of the design scheme was the integration of the couple’s contemporary art, the remainder of a significant collection they had started in the 1960s. Decisions of where each painting and sculpture would be displayed formed

an ongoing, interactive exercise between client, architect and interior designer. During design development, Walker’s group, in a first for them, drew elevations that showed the exact paintings and sculptures so the clients could add, subtract and reposition before the actual installation. “It was that important,” Durkin explains. “The art is who they are.” Although many

of the works went to auction for lack of space, “it’s still a carefully invested collection. Everything we did was subservient to the art, as they wanted nothing to distract from their experience of it.”

Most illustrative of the notion, as Elich puts it, of “the art pushing the design” is the setting for Ellsworth Kelly’s 1975 painted-aluminum wall sculpture *White Curve*. The couple wanted the long, horizontal piece to be where they could most enjoy it: on

contrivance, says Elich, “gives the Kelly its proper base”—it also lends balance to the most visually commanding artwork in the room, Frank Stella’s 1961 *Ovary*. “An existing condition led to a design detail we wouldn’t have attempted if not confined by the dimensions and unfortunate positioning of the old firebox,” Elich says. “That dilemma handed us a very positive result.”

“Good designers,” notes Durkin, who ventured into uncharted

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the fireplace wall in the living room. The problem was one of proportion—the fireplace was too small, relative to the art, and could not be modified. Seeking to tie together as well the wall and the fairly low ceiling, the designers lined the brick firebox with cast-bronze panels that continue outward as flanking elements; with the original mantel replaced by a deep white frame on three sides of the “opening,” the effect is of an elongated fireplace. The

territory with this sleek departure from his interiors repertoire, “mold their talents to the needs of the client. I find a lot of what I see in the Minimalist vein not believable as to how people really exist in it: It’s more often about the designer than the occupants. This isn’t earth-shattering design intended to impress with its edginess but a representation, in physical terms, of a simplified and mature way of living.” □

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