



# BREATHING LESSONS on Fifth Avenue

A FRESH APPROACH FOR AN APARTMENT IN  
A MCKIM, MEAD & WHITE BUILDING





Interior Design by  
Sills Huniford Associates  
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**F**ew buildings in New York have a more distinguished history than the 12-story, Italian Renaissance Revival palazzo designed by McKim, Mead & White on Fifth Avenue across the street from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. When it was completed in 1912, New York patricians were still suspicious, if not contemptuous, of vertical living, and the architects had to compete with the private mansions on Millionaire's Row. But the monumental elegance of the façade, the incomparable park views, the solidity and grandeur of the rooms and the opulence of the amenities converted them to a new style of life.

Every generation, however, redefines modern luxury. A banker, who is now focusing, he says, "on my kids, friendship, cooking, art, baseball and philanthropy," bought one of the finest apartments in the building—7,000 square feet on the equivalent of the *étage noble*, with French doors that open to a stone balustrade and higher ceilings than on any other floor. The previous owner was a grande dame of the old school, and her décor was a predictable stage set heavy on the *passémenterie*, with a stuffy dining room, a drafty entrance gallery, a nondescript kitchen she may or may not ever have visited, with a warren of staff rooms behind it, and—as Stephen Sills puts it—"Louis, Louis everywhere."

Sills and his partner, James Huniford, who met their client through a mutual friend, eagerly accepted his challenge to make the apartment more "casual and family-friendly," as Huniford describes it, while respecting its inherent nobility. "Modern design is a perspective, not a period," Sills says. "If you look at the past with a fresh but well-educated eye, it clarifies your sense of the present. A poetic juxtaposition of colors and textures

"It's really unusual to have such a large space and such incredible detailing," James Huniford says of an apartment he and his partner, Stephen Sills, designed in a landmark Manhattan building. Robert Mangold's *Curled Finger XIV (Version 3)* is in the living room. Bruntschwig & Fils pillow fabric. Stark chair fabric.





Sills and Huniford restored the living room's historic elements, such as the Louis XV-style ceiling medallion and the gilt plasterwork. Sills calls the placement of Regency mirrors on either side of the fireplace "a surrealist conceit—two eyes and a big mouth." Four Elizabeth Eyre de Lanux Art Déco chairs flank a low table custom-designed by Sills Huniford Associates. Decorators Walk fabric on chairs near fireplace.







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with classical furnishings can be more original than the kind of shock-and-awe tactics that strip a room of its soul. The essence of poetry, after all, is revelation. Ford and I aim to orchestrate a subtle composition that unsettles conventional expectations.

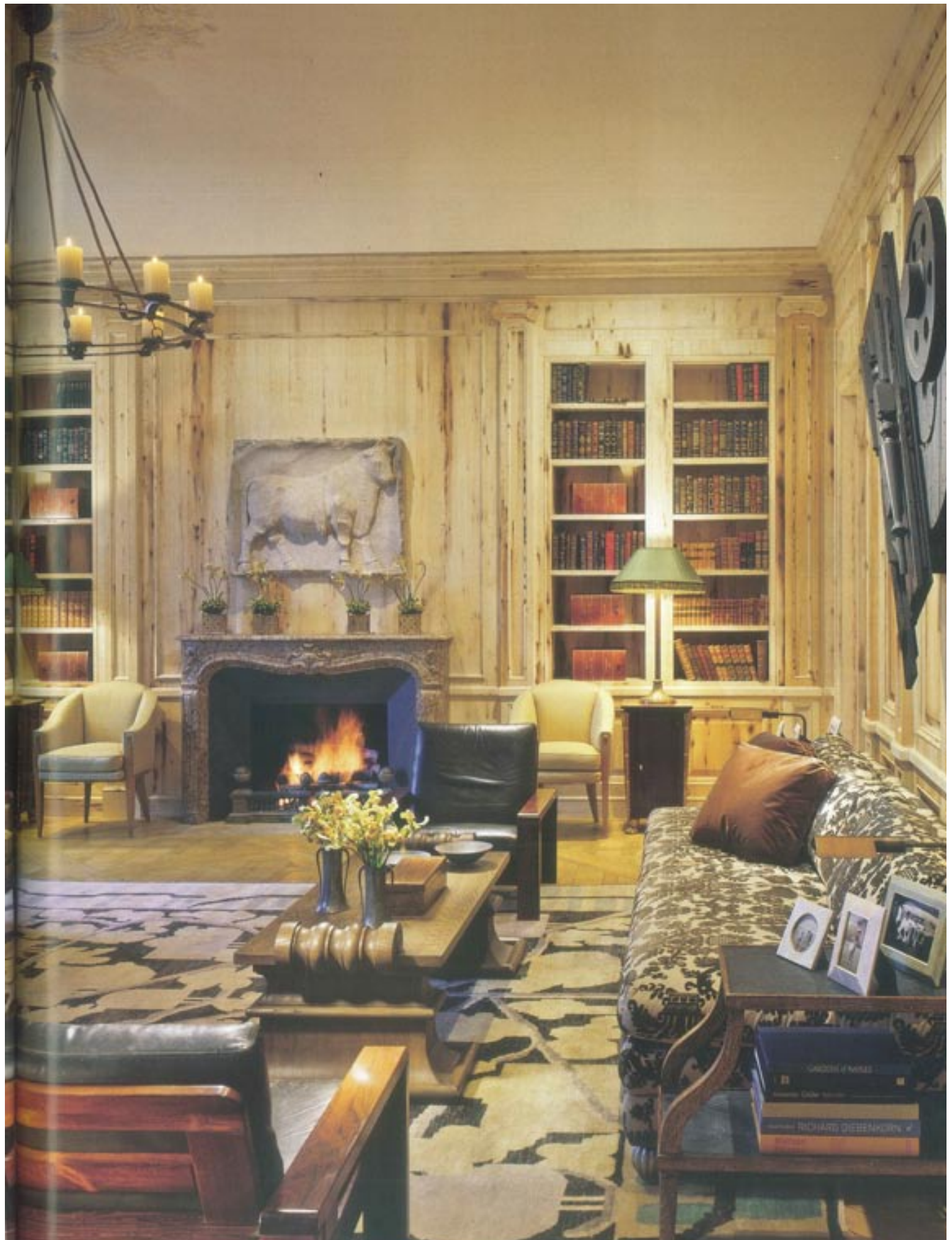
**ABOVE:** A suite of Ruhlmann tub chairs surrounds a table in the dining/family room. A Venetian mirror, between Bugatti brackets, hangs over a French Empire mahogany cabinet. The chandelier is 1930s French. Jim Thompson chair silk, Edelman wing chair leather, left.



The designers felt the apartment merited “a total transformation,” Huniford says. “The bones were great, but the flesh was slack.” Their client agreed. The staff wing was remade into additional bedrooms and a gym. A service corridor was demolished to create a handsome chef’s kitchen and informal dining area. The doorways were raised and widened, and a team of master artisans restored the original plasterwork—“beautiful, Louis XV-style ceiling medallions and Régence crown moldings,” Sills explains. They recast the missing pieces on-site, then limed and

**RIGHT:** Chestnut reclaimed from a barn—bleached and fashioned into paneling—adds rustic elegance to the dining/family room. In a playful touch, the mantel was speckled with paint; above it is a 1st-century Roman relief. *Mirror-Sabatini XXIX*, 1986, by Louise Nevelson, is over the sofa.









ABOVE: The designers transformed the entrance gallery into a stately library. A lemonwood desk made to look like a Greek temple faces an Empire round table. Clarence House sofa fabric. Edelman leather on pair of antique Swedish chairs. Brunswick & Fils balloon shade fabric.

gilded them. They also stripped the oak *parquet de Versailles* of its gloomy varnish and refinished it by hand to let the grain breathe. "Breathing room," Sills notes succinctly, "was our theme."

For nearly a century, however, the entrance gallery hogged a bit too much oxygen. It served no useful function beyond, perhaps, announcing to guests that their hostess had room to waste. The partners reinvented the space as the library for a gentleman scholar, anchored at one end by a lemonwood desk designed to resemble a Greek temple and at the other by a round, Neoclassical table. "Books and reading are central to my life," the owner says, "and much of my philanthropy goes to education."

The refinement of this masculine lair sets the tone for the adjoining dining/family room, which has the artfully rusticated elegance of a ducal hunting lodge. Bugatti brackets burnish the mahogany of a French Empire cabinet; Art Déco armchairs by Ruhlmann, covered in silk, surround a dining table that expands to seat 12 people. An elemental sculpture by Louise Nevelson hanging over the sofa relates, across the millennia, to the 1st-century Roman bas-relief of a bull above the mantel: One is an artist's

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ABOVE: Echoing the Greek and Roman galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art across the street, the designers used marble for the master bath's floors and hung etchings of Greco-Roman pottery on the walls, which are paneled in satinwood.





Sills and Huniford designed a bed for the master bedroom that "is very architectural and strong," remarks Huniford. An 18th-century Italian cabinet stands near a 1977 untitled work from Robert Motherwell's Samurai series. Stark chair fabric, with Scalamantri fringe, Lee Jofa drapery lining.

