

A Thoroughly Modern Marriage

For one New York City couple, a dilapidated townhouse in Hudson, N.Y., served as the canvas for their ultimate dream house

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MYRON AND PEGGY POLENBERG'S transformation of a three-story, brick Victorian townhouse into state-of-the-art loft space in Hudson, New York, is proof of a brilliant, colorful marriage. The otherwise sedate facade of the nineteenth-century building in Hudson's recently revitalized historic district is painted a show-stopping Sharp Cheddar. A massive pair of plate-glass double doors beckons visitors from curbside, leading into an understated, slate-floor vestibule. Other subtle design details soon emerge. A transparent band at eye level in the frosted-glass door panel serves as a modern-day peephole. A glimpse into the interior space reveals an explosion of color.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg. Well-thought-out design details and dynamic play of light, color, and space abound, all results of a successful collaboration between the Polenbergs and the award-winning New York City-based architectural team, Stamberg Aferiat.

The Polenbergs are no strangers to putting design concepts into action. Peggy, now a real estate agent, was formerly a publicist whose clients from her days with Caroline's Comedy Club included Jerry Seinfeld, Jay Leno, and Ellen DeGeneres. Myron is an artist whose Manhattan-based company, Polenberg, Inc., created the Swiss Army Brand for the North American distributor of Swiss Army Knives, including the Swiss Army Watch line and all the accompanying national advertising and marketing materials.

The Polenbergs could live anywhere, but Peggy explains, "Our main objective was to get Myron into a studio. We were looking at many different possibilities. We wanted big. We were thinking loft. We were thinking open space." A lot of people come to Hudson looking for traditional architecture, but Peggy says, "We weren't looking along the lines of historic houses. Hudson's been through



so many highs and lows. Everything we saw had been broken up and switched around.”

Hudson has been described as a dictionary of American architecture, and the Polenbergs’ early Victorian fits nicely into the town’s vocabulary. Streets are lined with examples of Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Gothic Revival, and Colonial Revival styles—a rich inventory that makes this little city nestled along the banks of its namesake river a gem. And, many people can find houses in Hudson for hundreds of thousands of dollars that would go for millions elsewhere.

Hudson’s revitalization has been edgy, urban, and, some say, reminiscent of SoHo in the 1970s. The first few brave souls pioneering property restoration attracted second and even third waves of serious investors. Many small inns and B&Bs have since cropped up. There’s buzz about plans for luxury boutique hotels to meet the ever-increasing demand for high-end tourist accommodations, and the enormous project by the owners of Great Barrington,

Massachusetts’s Club Helsinki to open a restaurant and nightclub just off Warren Street, Hudson’s main drag. Hudson is at the epicenter of the heritage tourism trend, where the Hudson River School of painting, artisanal food production, and top-notch restaurants converge. Two nationally recognized historic sites are nearby: Frederic Church’s Olana and the Thomas Cole House (across the Rip Van Winkle Bridge on the other side of the river). The view of the Hudson River Valley from Olana is spectacular, and plans for an environmentally sensitive, mixed-use waterfront development partners nicely with Hudson’s Amtrak station, where New Yorkers can gain easy access to the Berkshires.

While the couple moved from Manhattan to Hudson in 2002, they weren’t exactly ready for the *Green Acres* version of upstate life on the farm. Peggy recalls looking at a lot of properties across the river in Greene County, New York, and concluding she didn’t want to live on a farm. “We saw some gorgeous places,” she says. “But I need to

have some sort of community. We both wanted to be in a small city. In Hudson, you really feel there’s a city, get the sense of a city center.” Myron agrees, saying, “Every time we came to Hudson, we started to realize there’s a community here. We started meeting people.” Peggy adds, “. . . and interesting people, nice people, and a lot of artists. There’s great stuff going on. TSL [Time & Space Limited] and the Hudson Opera House—many things were interesting to us.”

It took six months for them to find their building. At one point they went away to gain perspective and upon returning heard about a new listing, fresh on the market. “Myron wasn’t available, but I came up right away,” says Peggy. “It was difficult to see the place. It had been divided up into many little apartments in two buildings, six units, eighteen bedrooms. It was creepy.” A friend knowledgeable in real estate confirmed that it was a solid building and advised going for it. And it’s below the three hundred block in Hudson—at the time, in a frontier zone. The Polenbergs, it turns out, are pioneers.

The project was a gut job. The floors and shell are original, but everything else was built up from scratch. Myron recalls filling what felt like thousands of containers during the demolition that took months to complete. (The whole project logged in at about a year and a half with additional carpentry, finishing work, and painting.)

Enter Peter Stamberg and Paul Aferiat, the cutting-edge archi-



Urban Sprawl: Kitchen, dining room, and living space, all in one.

tectural duo who made a name for themselves by combining their devotion to modern architecture and passion for vibrant primary colors. A dramatic, flush-to-the-wall modernist fireplace greets a visitor beyond the frosted-glass door in the front foyer. Myron explains how Stamberg Aferiat builds modules and spaces with different walls to create different volumes so it doesn't appear you're just walking into a box. The dynamic interplay of space and vivid primary colors drawn from Myron's boldly graphic paintings is anything but box-like. The ceiling lighting fixtures are from their New York City apartment. Eames chairs surrounding a table at the base of a reengineered, striking geometric stairwell lend a welcoming note.

Peggy's office and a guest room suite are located beyond the front foyer on opposite



sides of a partition wall, and there's a George Nelson bench at the foot of the bed in the guest room. Past a collection of bird paintings by Hunt Slonem, a door leads outside to the backyard, where the surface is level with a clean, modernist expanse of gravel, and an old carriage house-cum-garage running along the back of the property completes a courtyard feeling. From here the two halves of the U-shape house are visible; the effect is vaguely reminiscent of New Orleans. Exterior staircases and porches clamor up the back of the building to the second and third floors. The plan is to create a continuous deck linking the two houses.

The second floor, accessed from either exterior or interior staircases, showcases a fusion of colors, spaces, and volumes circulating around the kitchen and pantry areas, as



well as dining and living room spaces. As Joseph Rosa, chief curator at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., writes in a Rizzoli publication about Stamberg and Aferiat, "Shifts on perspective and scale abound where a wall stops short of a ceiling plane or fails to meet another wall, or [where] the ceiling plane is dropped or floated over the particular portion of the loft to create a room-like space." Different ceiling heights and walls here create such "rooms" in an otherwise open expanse. In addition, an intentional use of carefully calibrated color interaction, informed through an affinity for Matisse and an association with David Hockney, makes it seem like you're entering a modern painting.

Peggy reflects how in New York City almost every apartment has a small kitchen. "You're always stuck in the corner facing the wall," she says. "So I told Myron I wanted a cooktop and wall oven, I wanted them to be separate, and I wanted to face out." They installed a big window to allow

lots of natural light. Ample space and plenty of seating encourages friends and family to sit around or participate in meal preparation. "The kitchen is the heart of the home," says Peggy.

Peggy's selection of appliances shows her keen sense of form meeting function. The refrigerator—industrial-grade stainless steel inside and out—is made by a Midwestern company called Northland.



Available Seating: The kitchen table is set close to the stove and island so as to invite company during meal preparation.

Unlike most high-end models, the freezer is on the top and the fan and cooler don't take up much space. "It gives us an extra four cubic feet," says Myron. The ovens are made by DCS (Dynamic Cooking Systems). "I fell in love with them because I like the way the racks work," explains Peggy. "They cantilever out and you could put a thirty-pound turkey on it." The cooktop is also by DCS, with 18,000 BTUs per burner.

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Standard upper cabinets are absent in the kitchen, allowing the space a light and airy feeling. Instead, the walk-in pantry or larder is outfitted with stainless-steel racks, providing convenient, open-shelf access. In addition, there's a full butler's pantry with more traditional cabinetry for barware, glasses, plates, cutlery, and the like. Tying the whole area together are countertops made from material used in science labs called Labstone, an epoxy resin cast into enormous sheets and then laser-cut to specification. "We did all the countertops in it," explains Peggy, "the kitchen, butler's pantry, all the bathrooms, and ended up with an extra slab that I use for the table in the laundry room." Similarly, all plumbing is from one source. Undermount sinks and single-mount faucets are used everywhere, a simple American Standard model Peggy thinks gives an overall feeling of clean, modern lines.

In his book, *Stamberg Aferiat Architecture*, Paul Goldberger, an



architecture critic for the *New York Times*, writes, "There is no easily defined Stamberg Aferiat look," but refers to their work as "Gentle modernism, thoughtful modernism . . . all of it emerges out of a certain exu-

berance." In another passage, the architects' own loft is referred to as ". . . a virtual museum of modern chair design, chock full of art and painting against a brilliant palette." This is where their collaboration with the



Minus the Clutter: The master bath (opposite); the office (top) and living room (below).



Polenbergs hit pay dirt: In addition to a museum-grade collection of chairs, the dining table is custom-made from a massive piece of rough-hewn mahogany polished to skating-rink perfection and with seating for twenty-four. It resonates Nakashima, Wharton Esherick, and Wendell Castle, with a base designed by Myron. The brilliant sense of space, circulation, and coaxing complementary colors lures one toward the living room. Here the collection includes pieces by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Mario Bellini. The Massimo & Lella Vignelli Metafora I coffee table, an elegant, solid geometric sphere, cube, pyramid, and cone supporting the glass top, is a showstopper. Pieces by Ettore Sottsass and other important Memphis designers round out the collection.



Myron Polenberg



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Located off the living room is a more intimately proportioned sitting room; beyond, the master bedroom is a symphony in understated contrasts and quietude, with a sumptuous, slate-clad master bath, deep tub, and walk-in shower en suite. Remarkably, the shelving unit comes from the trendy budget home store IKEA.

A final ascent to the third floor via an exterior staircase leads to Myron's inner sanctum: his studio space. An intimate library area along the long hall en route to the main studio contains an inviting reading niche, where a piebald-covered Le Corbusier LC4 chaise longue beckons. Upon entering the studio, bold graphic and expressionistic forms emerge on enormous canvases, as well

as Myron's newest series of highly gestural and figurative nudes adorning the walls.

Myron enthusiastically approaches a series of smaller paintings against a far wall and exclaims, "These are my grandson's." They're actually quite beautiful. Peggy explains, "Myron set him up on a little step and put him here with buckets filled with different colors of paint with a brush stuck in each color. He's the best grandfather ever." **BL**

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