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Kim Sargent

Feature: Au Natural

Andrew Myers
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If Shakespeare had written *Henry VI* today, the motive behind his mirthful, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," would be crystalline clear: He'd have wanted their office space. That is, if he were living in New York and aware of this loft in Tribeca, formerly housing U.S. Attorney offices, now home to management consultant James T. Root, his wife, Eva Chen, and their two toddlers.

Top: The entrance hall. **Bottom:** The living room has an elegant mix of furnishings. (Click images to enlarge)



For Root and Chen, criminal intent was fortunately unnecessary; fast action, however, was. Manhattan's real-estate market was running full gallop, and Chen was nearing the home stretch of her second pregnancy. "I called Sabrina, and she was here in 15 minutes," says Chen, referring to interior designer Sabrina Balsky, who, with husband and business partner Peter S. Mason, designed Chen and Root's previous loft. What Balsky found on that initial visit was a 3,600-square-foot white box with 34 windows facing four exposures, a code-ready tabula rasa awaiting not just an aesthetic imprint but a physical footprint as well.

A mere decorator might have balked, but not Balsky, who studied interior design and fine art at Canada's York University and Mount Royal College before establishing her namesake company in Toronto in 1981 and opening offices in New York in 1999 and Florida in 2006. For she and Mason, who holds a degree in interior architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design and joined the company in 2003, the project's scope was ideal. "With our skills, there's no disconnect between architecture and

design," says Balsky, noting that most of their projects include complete build-outs, and that many of their clients seek the firm's opinion prior to purchasing a new property.



The dining room painting is by Yusuf Arakkal. *(Click image to enlarge)*

In this case, the client's requirements were conceptual as well as concrete. Chen and Root wanted a kitchen and an office that could be closed off from the rest of the apartment, and a floor plan that would feel less like a loft and more like a traditional home. Balsky and Mason deemed all doable, and proceeded to divide the space into two wings—a master suite and home office in one, and the discrete kitchen, conjoined living and dining rooms, and children's and guest rooms in the other. The elegant, not-so-simple solution has proved exceedingly easy to live with. "It's very much our wing and the rest of the house," says Chen. "We can go directly into the office in the middle of the night or early in the morning without disturbing the kids or guests."

The hallway leading to the master bedroom is softened by a sheepskin rug, a favorite of the couple's children. The 16th-century buddha is from China's Yunan province. *(Click image to enlarge)*



That degree of consideration, hardly happenstance, is carefully calibrated. "We think of how our clients live their lives, and create spaces through interior architecture that supports bespoke lifestyles," says Mason. The list of ponderables ranges from the quotidian to the grand occasion. "A wonderful advantage of the office's location is it has become the repository for handbags, keys, wallets, all of which are out of the bedroom," says Chen, the office smoothing the transition from the outside world to the private realm, and leaving rooms such as the bedroom free to perform their intended functions, Blackberry- and briefcase-free—and with better Feng Shui.



Top: A painting by Rekha Rodwitya hangs in the master bedroom. **Bottom:** The master bathroom is outfitted in rosewood and marble. *(Click images to enlarge)*



Flow and functionality are likewise found in the public rooms. "When James and Eva entertain, it's with staff," says Mason, explaining the need for a closed kitchen to confine cooking smells and prep areas. But the couple prefers the parties themselves to be more casual and contemporary than Park Avenue petrified. Hence the combined dining and living rooms, the two areas articulated (but not obstructed) by the rooms' architecture: The dining room's ceiling is flush with the flat, or lowest point, of the living room's coffers. "Whenever possible I prefer to build in architecture," says Balsky, pointing to the coffered ceilings also in the bedroom and sitting room and the substantial, five-inch window frames in the office.

It is the loft's interiors, however, that most clearly illustrate the couple's love of exotic materials and the design team's love of working with them in ways that emphasize authenticity and artistry. "We don't like fake materials," declares Balsky, stating a company credo. "No melamine, no laminate, no false anything if we can help it. And we make every effort to protect a material's natural characteristics." Unstained, richly veined African tigerwood and rosewood are found throughout the loft, from the customized radiator surrounds with their nickel-plated grills, to custom cabinetry in the kitchen, master suite and office—a tour de force of tigerwood walls, bookshelves, cabinets and desks. Not that rarity and luxury are restricted to the woods. In the master bath, the hardware is silver-plated, and the sink surround, floor and walls are Thassos marble, azul cielo marble and mother-of-pearl. Semiprecious tiger eye covers floor tiles and door pulls in the guest bathroom. Onyx and silver-leafed sconces and a sheepskin runner adorn the dressing room and hall leading to the master bedroom. Suede upholsters the living room's walls.

The guest bathroom has a checkerboard floor of white Thassos marble and Spanish tiger eye, a semiprecious stone. Balsky chose a rococo-style mirror and painted it white. *(Click image to enlarge)*



Nor is the furniture less than luxe. With the exception of antiques, such as the teak Javanese cabinet and altar benches in the living room, some 90 percent of the pieces are custom made. "We believe in building and buying once, making and accumulating pieces that can be reused and passed down to another generation," says Mason, emphasizing that the price of bespoke ultimately pays for itself, perhaps many times over: fiscally, in terms of quality construction, and in the satisfaction of having exactly what one wants.

That philosophy can be applied to entire projects as well as individual pieces of furniture. Just ask Chen and Root: Their previous Balsky-designed loft sold within 24 hours of being put on the market, and nearly every stick of furniture, in addition to the lighting, made the move to their new home.

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