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The library of a Manhattan duplex designed by Alessandra Branca for ELLE DECOR's Designer Visions showhouse, a project overseen by Alana Frumkes. The armchair behind the desk and the ottoman are upholstered in fabrics from Branca's new collection for Schumacher; the leather armchair is 1940s French and the armchair next to the desk is Regency. The light fixture is by Jamb, the painting is by Athos Zacharias, and the photograph is by Candida Hofer; the wallcovering is a Branca fabric, and the rug is by the Rug Company. See Resources.



REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

For ELLE DECOR's Designer Visions showhouse, in a converted 1920s Manhattan office tower, designer Alessandra Branca conjures the ultimate urban family duplex

ELLE DECOR: Who were your imaginary clients for this apartment?

ALESSANDRA BRANCA: They're not really imaginary. They're actual clients of mine who live on the Upper East Side, a family of four: two adults, a son about to go off to college, and a daughter in high school. I thought, What if they were to move downtown and embrace a new life in Chelsea? They didn't get rid of everything, keeping their most personal pieces, their inherited furniture, and antiques from their favorite shops like Gerald Bland, Maison Gerard, and David Duncan

Antiques. Then they went to some nearby galleries and gathered some new artwork for the next chapter in their lives.

ED: Can you describe the layout of the apartment?

AB: It's a duplex that faces south and stretches from east to west, with views on all three sides. The main floor has a large living room with a kitchen and dining room off one side and a library off the other. A master suite and a guest suite are at opposite ends of the first level, and there are two additional bedrooms on the ▸





In the living area, the center table is 1820s English Regency, the tête-à-tête is custom, and the banquette, vintage Louis XVI-style bergères, and custom stools are upholstered in Branca's Schumacher fabrics. The photograph is by Lawrence Beck, the side table is by Arteriors, the light fixture is by Crystorama, and the walls are painted in high-gloss Benjamin Moore Advance in Stone Hearth. See Resources.

second. There are terraces on the south and west sides of the apartment.

ED: How do you start a project that's this big?

AB: Well, the apartments are brand-new, even though the building is old. It's a wonderful Art Deco landmark from 1929 that has been developed by JDS Development Group and Property Markets Group. It's by one of the period's best architects, Ralph Thomas Walker, which is why it's now called Walker Tower. The units have unusually luxurious finishes, so we didn't even consider changing the layout or altering the kitchen and bathrooms. And it's been installed with state-of-the-art technology thanks to Audio Command Systems and Crestron. California Closets came in to fit out the walk-in closet as a dressing room for the lady of the house, but that was the only real "construction."

ED: Why did you go with dark floors?

AB: I like their reflective quality. People think that dark floors make rooms look darker, but the opposite is true—they reflect more light, which makes rooms look bigger.

ED: Did you consider trying to camouflage the support column in the middle of the living room?

AB: All over Manhattan, people are bringing industrial elements to apartments that don't have them. Here we have an authentic one that recalls the origins of the building. With a simple coat of paint, it became sculptural. I particularly like >

WHAT THE PROS KNOW

- Branca employed a variety of paint techniques in the apartment. In the foyer, she used Benjamin Moore colors to create her signature stripe. The darker shade, called Stone Hearth, continues on the adjacent living room walls; she used the lighter shade, Steam, on the ceilings and trim throughout most of the rest of the apartment.
- She used a high-gloss finish on the living room walls for reflection. "When your light source is all from one end of a room, as it is here, you get a tunnel effect," she says. "Reflective walls move the natural daylight deeper into a room."
- In the guest room, which Branca envisioned as a lacquered box, she used one of her favorite colors: Twilight, from Benjamin Moore's Advance line. "I used a very flat white for the trim and ceiling," she says, "to contrast with the walls and suggest traditional plasterwork."
- In the living room and master bedroom, she again invoked plasterwork by painting the Crystorama flush-mounted ceiling fixtures, which come in a dark metallic finish, in the same off-white as the coffered ceiling.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Napoleon III-style chairs from the 1890s surround a custom dining table; the lamp is custom made, the barware is from Arteriors, the flatware is by Christofle, and the sisal rug is by Stark. French steel stools from the 1970s, an ice bucket by Christofle, and a vintage console table from Maison Gerard in the mudroom, which is upholstered in a Moore & Giles leather. An 1820s French chair in the entry is upholstered in a Branca cotton by Schumacher; the walls are painted Benjamin Moore Ultra Spec 500 in Steam with stripes of Aura in Stone Hearth, the console table is by the Alpha Workshops, the gold bowl is by Aerin, and the stool is by Tucker Robbins. See Resources.



the way it plays against the Regency center table.

ED: What is it that appeals to you about these kinds of juxtapositions?

AB: I love to mix things up: high and low, old and new, matte and high gloss. One of the purposes of design is to make you see in new ways; anytime you juxtapose two things that you normally don't see together, you create an energy that makes you look at each of the things differently. That's why the porcelain bedside lamps in the daughter's room have velvet shades. It's all about surprise.

ED: How did you arrive at the furniture arrangement in the living room?

AB: I believe rooms are to be lived in. That means they have to be practical. Rooms are not trophies. They're personal spaces that serve the people who use them, and it's my job to make them work. My feeling is that any time you can bring people to a room for multiple purposes, you've succeeded.

So the main seating area in the corner allows for relaxed yet elegant entertaining. An antique table surrounded by tabourets offers a place to play cards or have an intimate dinner. I considered placing a piano in the corner, but then I thought, How lonely is that? Only one person can sit there. So I brought in my tête-à-tête daybed and imagined people talking or reading a book, or teenagers texting.

I felt I had to orient as much of the seating toward the windows as possible, because the views are phenomenal. The living and dining areas and master suite look south, all the way to the Statue of >



WHAT THE PROS KNOW

- Branca upholsters walls to create a cocoon-like feel, as in the library. Upholstered walls are a luxury, she concedes, but are "a great place to splurge for the result you get." They're also low-maintenance. "I've had the same fabric on my bedroom wall for 25 years," she says. "You just need to vacuum them from time to time."
- Leather walls, too, are practical, she says. She created an elegant version of a mudroom in the apartment's back entrance, which is lined with red leather from Moore & Giles. "You have to keep it from drying out," she says, "so it needs to be waxed occasionally, but it will last forever and acquire an incredible patina."
- Branca lined the paisley curtains of the daughter's room with an oversize tartan, both from her Schumacher line. "That's about playing the graphic against the organic," she says, "and mixing cultures, the Indian and the European."
- The designer had the Sferra bed linens in the guest room embroidered with her own initials. "Monograms are a great way to add a visual element to linens. If your room is generally graphic—striped, for example—you can go with a more ornate monogram. If the room has organic patterns, like this one, go for something bold and simple. If you put flowers on flowers on flowers, your eye just stops noticing."



Liberty. You don't get windows like this everywhere. Some great residential buildings in this city have tiny windows.

ED: You've used a lot of red, which is one of your hallmarks. What is it you love about that color?

AB: It feels very much like home to me, although I don't have it in my place in Rome, which is where I was born. So much of color is about place. Red seems to suit an urban environment, especially one with a frequently gray climate like New York or Chicago, where I live. And it's prominent in every culture, from Asia and Africa to South America and the Mediterranean.

ED: You also have great affection for chinoiserie.

AB: I like the fantasy and the colors. It's exotic and chic. You'll find it in the living room and the master suite, which is meant to recall the way Asian design was brought into a European context. I used the Anna Damask from my Schumacher fabric collection and a Chinese-inspired four-poster by Michael Taylor that he originally created for Nan Kempner. I had the two hand-painted silk wall panels next to the bed made up by Fromental several years ago. I never had the right place to use them until now.

Again, it's about mixing, not matching. Often, people are afraid to put personal things into their homes. Life is about accumulating pieces that reflect your interests, your experiences and travels, your idiosyncrasies. A space shouldn't look pre-packaged. It shouldn't be so designed that you can't add anything to it or change it as you change.

ED: You turned the designated dining room into a library. Why?

AB: My clients are not formal dining room types. I upholstered the wall in a faux-bois fabric that looks like paneling because I liked the visual pun. The husband went to Oxford, so I set the tone of this small, modern library with a huge Candida Höfer photograph of the great old library at Trinity College in Dublin. Then I mixed in a couple of fabrics from my new Schumacher collection: an overscale tartan and an embroidered toile. I'm big on texture and objects that are made by hand.

ED: So where does the family eat? ▶

FROM TOP: The master closet was fitted out by California Closets; the clothing is by Roberto Cavalli, and the stool is by Carol Egan. Christopher Spitzmuller lamps and 1960s Maison Jansen side tables sit on either side of a canopy bed in the teenage daughter's bedroom; the coverlet and curtains are of Branca for Schumacher linens, the photograph is by Reinhard Görner, and the walls are painted Benjamin Moore Aura in Coachman's Cape. See Resources.



Scan this image for a video tour of the apartment





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In the guest room, a sofa by Branca is upholstered in a Schumacher velvet, the chandelier is by Crystorama, the photograph is by Erik Madigan Heck, the lamps are by Arteriors, the midcentury cocktail table is French, and the rug is by the Rug Company; the circa-1900 Louis XVI-style armchair and the lampshades are covered in Branca for Schumacher fabrics. The floor plan. The custom headboard is upholstered in Schumacher fabrics, the bedding is by Sferra, and the walls are painted high-gloss Benjamin Moore Advance in Twilight. See Resources.



AB: I used the space adjacent to the kitchen and tried to make it as multipurpose as possible. I wanted a space that would be used by the whole family—not just for meals but also for hanging out, doing homework, playing games. You can do just about anything on the lacquered table.

The room is tented with draperies, so the kitchen can be closed off while you dine. The furniture, the fabrics, and even the marbled-silk chandelier are neutral. The idea was that the clients could dress it up or down for casual or formal dining and make a color statement with the table settings.

ED: You've used a wide variety of rugs in the apartment. What guides your choices?

AB: I like natural fibers, and the simple edge-bound sisals are a nice contrast to antiques and floral fabrics. I live in bare feet, so I care about the way things feel. Wool is great to walk on. And rugs are a great place to introduce color and pattern. The Bessarabian under the daybed in the living room is more like art on the floor.

ED: Are there any rules about using antiques?

AB: No. The key is to have a mix. I don't like a room that has only antiques, and I don't like a room that doesn't have any. I am drawn to functional, practical forms, which is why I like the Louis XVI period so much. I like neoclassicism, but a bit modern- >



The walls of the master bedroom are sheathed in a Branca for Schumacher damask linen, and the bed by Michael Taylor Designs is dressed with Sfera linens; the side tables are by Arteriors, the sofa is upholstered in Schumacher satin and velvet, and the 1950s cocktail table is French. See Resources.



ABOVE: A Waterworks tub and fittings, custom mirror, and Sfera towels in the master bath; the tree-trunk table is by Arteriors. See Resources.

ized. That's why there's a lot of white space in the toile and the chintz I designed for Schumacher.

White space, or empty space, is extremely important. You need to let things breathe. Modern is not always about sharpness. It's also about openness. The classic four-poster *lit à la polonoise* in the daughter's room is not hung with fabric, which the original would have been, but minimally dressed in our L'Indienne paisley linen, so you see the architecture of the white bed against the dark walls.

ED: One of your go-to fabrics is what you call the "Branca stripe." Where does that come from?

AB: From the rooms of the ladies-in-waiting at the palaces in Potsdam, in Prussia. I love that something so humble can be so chic.

ED: Is the Branca stripe the pattern that's on the foyer walls?

AB: Yes. When you walk into the apartment you are almost immediately in the living room. So I wanted the foyer to be a place where you stop and look. I wanted it to be a bit irreverent. We went

with the Branca stripe in the same colors that I used in the living room. I find stripes relaxing, like the chorus in a musical composition.

The foyer sets the tone for what you'll see throughout the apartment. There's a modern faux-ivory console table from the Alpha Workshops that echoes the lines of the Adam-style mirror from Jamb. There's an antique fauteuil covered in my Elizabeth chintz. There's the pop of red on the African-inspired Tucker Robbins stool, the metallic accents, and the juxtaposition of natural elements with great handiwork.

ED: What role do these recurring motifs play in your design aesthetic?

AB: Design is like music or poetry—it has patterns. It's part of the whole composition. Look, nobody needs interior design. We need food on the table. Design is entertainment, and I like to keep it entertaining. The same principles apply whether you're working at a luxury level, like this apartment, or shopping at Ikea. If I'm doing my job, a home is just as practical as it is pleasing to the eye. ■