PROSPECTIVE perspective

It’s Grand! With help from Axis Mundi’s John Beckmann, a Prospect Heights couple gets a new view of Grand Army Plaza from atop Richard Meier’s glass tower.

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After 20 years in a Park Slope brownstone, Sandra Schpoont and Steve Axelrod found themselves with an empty nest—a really empty nest. With their children grown, they had watched a glassy Richard Meier-designed condominium rise above Prospect Park and took the plunge. That plunge was the only thing they took, though. "When we moved into the building we threw all of our furniture out," she says. Schpoont, an attorney, wanted something totally different than townhouse living, both functionally and aesthetically. "I don’t like the Victorian look," she says. "I kept trying to make our brownstone look modern, but I never wanted to rip out any of the original details" that would enable that style. When her modern vision was ready to be realized, "I had this vision of living in a high-end hotel," she says. "I didn’t want a cookie cutter modern apartment. I wanted something a little more unusual." Though she knew what she wanted (and what she didn’t want), she admits, "I didn’t really know what it would end up looking like."

John Beckmann did. Beckmann, the founder of New York-based design firm Axis Mundi, is known for his integration of design and architecture. "The first thing he showed us was the Kennedee sofa," says Schpoont, "and that became the anchor of the apartment." Not, however, the apartment that Beckmann had originally intended it to anchor: since starting work on the project, the couple had traded up from a midfloor apartment to one nearer the top with substantially more..."
square footage and a terrace with a jaw-dropping view of the Manhattan skyline.

The change didn’t mean jettisoning the plan they had envisioned. Beckmann’s focus remained on decoration rather than renovation. “The bones are great,” he says of the three-bedroom layout, with a master bath boasting a decadent view of the Manhattan skyline from the tub. In a building like Meier’s, says Beckmann, “you have to respect the architecture.” That respect would be paid with a neutral base, one that nonetheless accommodated his clients’ wish for something lively. Beckmann grounded the apartment in midcentury classics in graphic black and white. Having traded the original Kennedee sofa for a larger sectional, he added a black Saarinen table and black-and-white Saarinen chairs. Pops of color were added in the form of the orange leather seats on Bertoia stools, Missoni pillows, and vibrant art. To maintain a sleek, clutterfree look, Beckmann added storage with a Poliform unit in the master suite and created a shelf-lined office for Axelrod by partitioning off a small area of the living room with glass walls.

The glass walls of the office echo those of the building which glimmers anachronistically above Grand Army Plaza, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 19th century. “It’s a beautiful building,” says Beckmann of Meier’s work. “I think it brings a new vitality to that neighborhood.” “It’s a different vantage point for us,” agrees Schpoont. A vantage point that feels, as she hoped, like a hotel? “Not exactly. There’s no room service, and we still have to make the bed. But it’s really nice—on Friday night, we come home and have martinis and sit out on the balcony.” Now that’s better than room service.