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WELL PRESERVED

TRA STUDIO ARCHITECTURE WORKS WITH THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION TO TACKLE ADAPTIVE REUSE IN NEW YORK CITY

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If a renovation project is located within one of the city's many historic districts, New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) oversees every step of the process. Buildings cannot be constructed, altered, or demolished without the Commission's approval. The rigorous process is enough to deter some design firms from ever attempting the challenge.

Not so for TRA Studio Architecture PLLC, a Manhattan firm founded by Italian-born architect Caterina Roiatti and her husband, Robert Traboscia, an environmental designer and artist. Perhaps because they also live and work downtown, Roiatti and Traboscia understand well the value of preservation and adaptive reuse, and the couple frequently takes on projects located in downtown historic districts. "We just see [LPC] as another client," Roiatti explains. "You have to be clear, state your case more than once, but it's OK. And working with them often raises the stakes for developers."

Roiatti highlights the connection between TRA Studio's design work and Traboscia's artwork, and explains that the aesthetic found in their projects is the same aesthetic found in the couple's own home. "We don't see the distinction between interior and exterior," Roiatti explains. "We think of each project as a whole."

Despite the uniqueness of the design challenges presented by TRA's projects at 173 MacDougal, 22 Mercer, and the Zimmer + Rohde Group Showroom, the projects are unified by the creativity of TRA's solutions.

22 MERCER

TRA took on the restoration, adaptive reuse, and penthouse-addition work for this five-story, circa-1860 loft building in the SoHo Cast Iron District of New York City, turning it into a mixed-use building. Measuring 50-foot wide and 200-foot deep and serviced by one elevator, the building presented design obstacles with regard to circulation, light, and air. TRA solved the problems by opening the structure's interior light wells. Each floor features four apartments, and each apartment features a central courtyard atrium lined with custom-patterned glass and semi-reflective Trespa panels. On the roof, the four light-well structures open onto a recreation space.

PROJECT

22 Mercer
SoHo, New York, NY

SIZE

5 stories, 60,000 sq. ft.

TYPE

Restoration, adaptive reuse,
and penthouse addition

CLIENT

Property Markets Group
propertymg.com

TIMELINE

2005-2009

“

CATERINA ROIATTI

We just see [the Landmarks Preservation Commission] as another client ... Working with them often raises the stakes for developers.



01-02 FRESH ADAPTATION
Built in 1860 and designed by Griffith Thomas, 22 Mercer gets a mixed-use conversion, which includes ground-floor retail and 16 apartments above, plus two additional penthouse levels. The building's intricate façade (detail on previous page) was also fully restored.

03 LOFT LIVING ROOM
With Brazilian-cherry floors and Bulthaup kitchens, the update of 22 Mercer is full of luxurious amenities, including maximized ceiling height in the living rooms.

04-05 ZIMMER + ROHDE
The individual styles of eight fabric companies remain separate but intersect casually in the Manhattan Showroom of Zimmer + Rohde; the detail shows a clean balance of metal, wood, and glass found at one of the sales desks.



The project also included the historical restoration of the façades, as well as the design of new storefronts on Broadway and Mercer streets. For the side of the building facing Broadway, the LPC required that the original façade be “faithfully replicated,” which proved to be a challenge since the existing Tuckahoe marble was severely damaged. The Broadway façade restoration took several months and entailed a team of four sculptors applying a mixture called Cathedral stone, then resculpting the missing portions before the mixture solidified—approximately three hours’ time per application.

The restoration of 22 Mercer Street is used as a case study for students at the Planning and Preservation School at Columbia University.

ZIMMER + ROHDE GROUP SHOWROOM

As showcased in its adaptive-reuse projects, TRA brings a combination of architectural inventiveness and aesthetic vision to its work. These characteristics also secure the firm design projects like the flagship showroom for the Zimmer + Rohde Group in New York City’s Decoration and Design Building. This project’s main challenge was to physically and conceptually link display spaces of eight individual fabric companies. TRA settled on a design that would encourage movement, with softly curved walls to draw customers around the space while offering a necessary degree of intimacy for each brand. The interior program is spare and employs lacquered millwork, colored glass panels, and walnut flooring and furniture. The design’s minimalism allows for what the firm calls “a canvas, where the fabrics add color and give character to each individual mini boutique.”



PROJECT
Zimmer + Rohde Showroom
Decoration & Design Building
979 Third Ave.
New York, NY

SIZE
11,500 sq. ft.

TYPE
Fabric showrooms

CLIENT
Zimmer + Rohde Group
zimmer-rohde.com

COMPLETED
2008

PHOTOGRAPHY
Reven Wurman

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ORIGINAL FAÇADE, CIRCA 1938



1966 FAÇADE, PRE-RESTORATION, CIRCA 2004

PROJECT

173 MacDougal
Greenwich Village,
New York, NY

SIZE

7 stories, 42,000 sq. ft.

TYPE

Loft-building reconstruction
and adaptive reuse

CLIENT

Property Markets Group
propertymg.com

PROJECT MANAGER

Angela Amola

TIMELINE

2004-2009

173 MACDOUGAL

Originally designed by Renwick, Aspinwall & Russell Architects (built in 1891), this seven-story, large-scale loft building in Greenwich Village underwent a renovation in 1966 to convert the former printing plant into a church. During that renovation, architect Victor Christ-Janer applied a curtain wall of brick veneer to the existing structure and closed off the top three floors, stripping the building of its architectural details in an effort to make it suitable for a religious worship space.

In 2004, TRA was tasked with another renovation of the building, this time to bring back its original architectural details, which required a great deal of innovation on the firm's part. The church would remain the occupants of the building's first floor and cellar, and the remaining levels were converted into nine apartments.

With regard to adaptive reuse, the firm wasn't sure how best to approach reconstructing or possibly redesigning the façade. "The project was somewhat risky," Roiatti says. "We knew we'd have to keep what was behind the 1960s façade, but we didn't know what condition it was in."

TRA found that the brick veneer had been applied to the original façade with masonry ties, and that the center-bay base arch had been removed along with other architectural details. Rather than use new brick—which wouldn't match—a small crew of masons laid a combination of brick from interior layers of the historical façade and similarly molded found brick.

The historical reconstruction also required the design of new window infill by Optimum Window of New York. For the "upper building" (where the apartments are located), those new windows recall the triangular profile of the original design and offer a view of Washington Square Park from each apartment via bay window or balcony, which is rare in Manhattan's historic districts. The glass wall lining culminates in the building's striking cornice, which recalls the grand scale of the original design. That cornice doubles as a clerestory and provides the upper floor with more light, thanks to its high, narrow windows.

"It's a completely new interpretation," Roiatti says, "but keeps in mind what was there before." ●

A MESSAGE FROM OPTIMUM WINDOW

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06 RETURNED TO GLORY

Modern updates, including a glass cornice, make for a beautifully timeless piece of architecture, while the triangular windows are reinterpreted from the original design.

