

NARROW

AN 11-FOOT-WIDE SITE DIDN'T DETER THIS PARK SLOPE DESIGNER/HOMEOWNER FROM CREATING FASCINATION... AND WONDER

BY FRED BERNSTEIN
PHOTOS BY NIKOLAS KOENIG

SLOPE



Abigail Shchat, a graduate of Cornell University and the fabled Cranbrook Academy of Art, thinks architecturally. Officially an interior designer (she is the principal of Manhattan's AJS Designs), her talent is not so much in decoration—though she has an keen eye for furniture and fabrics—but in shaping spaces, performing the architectural alchemy of making sleek, modern interiors gracious and welcoming.

Shchat's work these days includes some very large residences, but the best place to see her talent for space-making may be her own house in Park Slope. Not one of the majestic brownstones in that neighborhood's historic district, mind you, but something humbler: an 11-foot-wide, brick-fronted house built for working class families in the 1920s, without a single architectural embellishment.

In renovating the house, Shchat worked from precise drawings in which every square millimeter was used to maximum effect. The result is a series of rooms that feel notably airy and bright, despite proportions that other designers might have found unworkable.

The designer's one advantage is that the house is on a corner—meaning not only that light enters the building along its 75-foot-long “side” wall, but that visitors do, too. From the entryway in the middle of the long facade, visitors turn left for the living room and right for the kitchen/dining area—so there's no need to walk through one space to get to the other, as in the house's original layout. The entry area includes a rich-hued powder room, coat





closets, and even a bench made of white oak (which conceals storage space for gloves and keys); there's no sense that the designer had to sacrifice amenities to make things fit. The living room has so many interesting pieces (including a sculpture made by Shachat from an old Noguchi coffee table) that the eye is drawn in all directions; the expansiveness of the room, rather than its narrowness, is what people remember.

Shachat's most important intervention may have been designing a stairway to the upper (bedroom) level that is open enough to let light and air through but that, with its blackened steel frame and oak treads, never feels insubstantial. (An enclosed stairway would have narrowed the kitchen to an uncomfortable eight feet.) The kitchen itself uses inexpensive Ikea cabinets, but Shachat chose an Inca gray quartzite countertop and uninterrupted runs of metal trim to make them look substantial (and, yes, pricey).

Upstairs, carefully chosen materials (including tiny round tiles on the bathroom floors) are scaled

to the compact spaces, so nothing feels squeezed in. Built-in furniture saves space, but in Shachat's hands it does more than that: she positioned the built-ins so as to enrich the experience of moving through the house. The master bedroom, for instance, is entered through a hallway that incorporates a small home office, complete with built-in desk and bookshelves. Having to walk down the hallway to reach it makes the bedroom seem utterly private—quite an accomplishment in a house of under 2,000 square feet. And the narrowness of the passageway makes the room itself feel bigger—the “compression and release” effect that renowned architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright used to garner maximum impact from relatively modest rooms.

All over the house, the homeowner chose one-of-a-kind objects, from blown glass fixtures by Patrick Naggar to unglazed ceramic bottles by James Makin to pull focus up, down, and around.

The design recalls a pronouncement by an earlier resident of Brooklyn, Walt Whitman: “I am large, I contain multitudes.” Shachat's house is, and does. ●

Abigail Shachat

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