

ELLE DECOR

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A FASHION EDITOR ABANDONED COLORS AND PATTERNS FOR A SUBDUED, ZEN-LIKE HOME



When, after a dozen years, a fashionable couple trade their apartment for a penthouse upstairs, they turn to Daniel Romualdez for a new vision of urban serenity.

Helen Lee Schifter and Daniel Romualdez were recent college graduates when they first met in Manhattan. The rapport was instant and the setting was classic: the ground floor of Bergdorf Goodman, the specialty store on Fifth Avenue. “You know when you first move to New York and you are very friendly and open?” he says. “And then we kept running into each other, and she

married Timothy [Schifter], who knew former schoolmates of mine.”

The friendship continued over the next three decades, during which Helen worked as a fashion editor at magazines such as *Vogue* and *Lucky*, and Romualdez became an architect and interior designer with a high-society clientele that includes Aerin Lauder and Tory Burch. But it wasn't until recently that Helen finally reached out to her longtime friend to enlist his professional help.

For a dozen years, the Schifters had raised their daughter, Storey, in a sprawling apartment on Park Avenue, on the second floor of a classic prewar luxury building designed in the neo-Renaissance style by architect Emery Roth. But with their daughter approaching college age, the couple were ready to downsize. Timothy, a former CEO at LeSportsac who now works in private equity for a large firm, had been spending increasing amounts of time on the road. Inspired by the relaxed glamour of their favorite suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel, the pair envisioned a home that felt like an urban retreat.

When a penthouse on the 20th floor of the building became available, they took one look at its light-filled rooms with views in four directions and knew it was time to be moving on up. The apartment occupies an entire floor, which is set back from the building's facade (“like the top of a wedding cake,” Helen says) and encircled by a narrow terrace. “To get to it, you have to take this long, slow elevator ride in an old mahogany cab that creaks its way to the top,” she says. “It's very old school, and that's part of the charm.”

Helen had seen images of Romualdez's house in Los Angeles, with its chicly monochromatic and textured interiors, and she knew she wanted to create a Manhattan penthouse with a similar ambience. It was a thrill to collaborate with her friend. “Daniel is such a gentleman, and he just knows,” she says. “He has an uncanny way of coming into a room, quietly and quickly assessing it, then making a brilliant statement—‘We should have one long table’ or ‘Let's do back-to-back Jansen sofas’—and as soon as you hear him, you think, Of course!”

For Romualdez, the goal was to refine the rooms while channeling the vision of his fashionable clients. The Schifters had amassed a small yet highly personal art collection, including photographs by Cindy Sherman; a Hugo Guinness drawing given to them by Helen's former boss Anna Wintour; and a Yoko Ono piece, which consists of a lacquered box and an assortment of lifelike faux houseflies that Helen scatters playfully throughout her living room. She and her husband also collect books and have inherited family heirlooms, including Ming and Tang artifacts she received from her parents, who are from Shanghai. “There's already a story there,” Romualdez says. “You're just editing it. The layering of a life is what's nice.”

He also credits Helen with supplying what he calls the “generating idea” of the renovation: a narrow, windowless passage at the core of the apartment was transformed into a sleek black-lacquered pantry and bar. The mirrored and illuminated shelves hold sterling silver and crystal and tennis trophies from Timothy's great-grandfather, who was a noted doubles champion. “It's dark and sexy and a great foil to the rest of the apartment, which is such a sunny, happy place,” Romualdez says.

In recent years, Helen has become a student of Zen Buddhism. She practices the formal Japanese tea ceremony with a grand master from Japan in the former Manhattan studio of the artist Mark Rothko. She has tried to incorporate the tenets of this spiritual practice into the design of her home, from the minimalist palette of white, black, and silver, to the use of materials—from gray flannel upholstery in the library to the entry's honed marble—that are luxurious yet feel muted and restrained. “It's about less is more,” she says.

One glance at her closet, though, with its sequined and feathered dresses, and it's clear that there is an adventurous spirit in residence. “I remember going to a party and seeing her in Chanel hot pants in the middle of winter,” the architect says. “She lives like a lot of fashion editors, who get visual stimulation all day and want their homes to be very clean and serene. Her home is a frame for her.”