

The New York Times

Soller, Kurt. "Inside the Elaborate, Enviably Design of Three New York Homes." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 21 Sept. 2023, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/09/21/t-magazine/design/new-york-apartment-design.html.

The Age of Embellishments

Just off New York's Washington Square Park, a photographers' agent creates a moody apartment that captures the spirit of a city that's always building on top of itself.

It's really important to move stuff around a lot — even your books," says Justinian Kfoury, the founder of a creative agency that represents photographers, stylists and other artists who make fashion imagery. He's positioned two tattered Hans Wegner Papa Bear chairs near the French doors of his parlor-floor 2,200-square-foot two-bedroom rental on Washington Square Park. It's a rainy April week so, instead of the students and downtowners who usually crowd the lawn, all we can see is wet grass, drooping pines and the sun creeping behind the midrise N.Y.U. buildings across the green. As dusk approaches, the low, crepuscular light seems to collect inside Kfoury's cavernous, wood-covered living area, reminding him of the boarding school dining hall of his New England youth. He'd told his real estate agent Trish Goff, a '90s model, that he wanted to live on a park and have a fireplace: "But no one wanted this place, if you can imagine."

This was a decade or so ago, after Kfoury, now 50, had left an East Village home and the ex-husband with whom he shared it: "Mr. Minimalism," he calls him now, since the man would go into a panic whenever Kfoury rearranged the rooms. "So when I moved into this big haberdashery," he says of his current place, "I went into storage and brought all the knickknacks out." Indeed, we're surrounded by bric-a-brac: carved wooden Bhutanese fertility penises on the mantel; centuries-old wooden ships' gears, found at a Parisian flea market, which now function as side tables; mildewed books; nature prints; and blocky blond oak tables and chairs made by Marc Hundley, an artist and friend whom Kfoury represents.

Along one wall is a sloping 19th-century twin bed partially shrouded by a ceiling-hung raw-silk canopy — "a new concept," Kfoury says. "I call it 'the nonchalant' because it's kind of the



A Paavo Tynell floor lamp and a Marc Hundley stool beside a sleigh bed bought by Kfoury's parents at auction in Kennebunkport, Me., that's tented in a raw-silk canopy.



A chessboard painting by Adriana Lara above a Christian Liaigre sofa and a coffee table by Marc Hundley. The artwork above the fireplace is by Nicholas Krushenick.

opposite of that.” The “gay sleigh,” as he named it, is part of a pair; the other is in what he refers to as “the friends’ room” in the back of “the inn,” the apartment’s unofficial moniker. The beds are two of the many pieces he inherited from his family. His father, a Boston real estate developer, was a second-generation American with roots in Lebanon, his stay-at-home mother from an Italian banking family; they raised him and his sister mostly in small towns throughout Maine and Vermont: “My mom dragged me around as a kid to these auctions,” he explains, reminiscing about the ones at big old Kennebunkport mansions. “She was eccentric, grand, but not afraid of making weird decisions about design.”

As in the homes where Kfoury spent his childhood, none of his things necessarily go together, nor do they belong in this building. Among the oldest townhouses in Manhattan, it was constructed in the 1830s as part of a series of Greek Revival residences along Washington Square North distinguished by their wide, deep lots and stately proportions. (In 1882, Edith Wharton lived down the block, in a stretch of townhouses east of Fifth Avenue famously known as the Row.) Only a few of them remain privately owned today, and the brick dwellings still possess “the look of having had something of a social history,” as Henry James writes about them in “Washington Square” (1880).

The landlord’s family has owned the building for generations — his grandparents lived in Kfoury’s apartment a few decades ago. Before them were countless unknown residents whose marks can still be seen, most impressively in the coffered oak paneling that covers many of the walls and the ceiling in the oversize 25-by-50-foot main room; according to a conservator that

Kfoury once invited over, the wood was likely stripped from a European castle and dates to the 18th century, meaning it's older than the house, although it probably wasn't installed here until the 1880s or so. Despite its age and provenance, Kfoury's not precious about it: Sometimes, he and his boyfriend, a 36-year-old designer named Paul van der Grient, give large parties at which they still let their guests smoke cigarettes inside, finding that the thick cladding seems to magically absorb the lingering odors. "When you're in here, there's this old energy of people and time," Kfoury says. "I feel like the guardian of the house."

Perhaps that's why, in a city of constant and often soulless renovation, the apartment seems like a special kind of palimpsest, a place that both adheres to and refutes its own history. In the jumble of small rooms near the entryway, Kfoury's resisted removing any of the more dated elements, like the midcentury brown floral tiles in the galley kitchen, or the white-painted scalloped shelving and garishly patterned silver-and-blue wallpaper in the double-height hallway closets. He's also constantly adding more contemporary items, from the collection of queer art in his bedroom — a 2014 nude photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans; an undated postcard-size Paul Cadmus drawing of a man sleeping — to the set of scattered snapshots of him and his friends from the days when they'd go dancing at Twilo.

Kfoury's made some more lasting changes, too. "My real big thing I believe in is carpeting your bathroom," he says, showing off a powder room where the floor is covered in a water-resistant wall-to-wall solid burgundy rug originally intended for yachts. "It's just very cozy. Some of my friends think it's disgusting. The boys, especially, are freaked out." But for now, the place is his. And like all those who've come before, he'll do with it as he pleases.