



MAGAZINE

# Tour an Art Deco-Inspired Upper East Side Penthouse, Glamorously Reimagined by AD100 Designer Michael S. Smith

The duplex's sweeping Manhattan views are rivaled only by its sumptuous art-filled interiors

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A flowery Jasper fabric embosses the primary bedroom walls. The canopy bed was modeled on Pauline de Rothschild's at Château Mouton Rothschild. An Antonio Corpora painting hangs above a Louis XVI-style sofa. Bonaccina rattan chair; Hervé van Der Straeten lamps atop custom nightstands; La Manufacture Coglino rug.



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Once an iconic Manhattan apartment building enters the conversation, expect **AD100** interior designer **Michael S. Smith** to fall into a swoon. Not literally, of course, but mentally. A recent project with such an effect was a duplex penthouse atop a soigné shaft of Art Deco limestone on the edge of the Upper East Side. "With the East River below, with its tugboats and pleasure craft, the building has a cinematic quality. You could easily see Fred Astaire living there," the Los Angeles-based talent says, noting that the building once had a private pier for residents' yachts. "It's a pretty magical place—and from the penthouse, you can see the river in three directions: north, east, and south."

His clients, a couple who have relied on his expert eye for multiple residences, initially wanted a perch overlooking Central Park but Smith's romancing won them over. So did the swooning



from overlooking Central Park, but Smith's remaining from their effort to save the sweeping enfilades and loftlike volumes of the apartment, which had originally been a triplex stylishly decorated for attorney Wilton Lloyd-Smith by Elsie Cobb Wilson. (Period photographs by the masterful Samuel H. Gottscho can be seen on the [website of the Museum of the City of New York](#).) Artist and fashion designer [Gloria Vanderbilt](#) and, later, author Jean Stein called it home, too, in its reduced two-story form. Thrillingly enough, given the tear-down propensities of Manhattan residential real estate, the floor plan and the majority of the period details remained as they had been created. Thus, Smith and his frequent collaborator, architect Oscar Shamamian of [Ferguson & Shamamian Architects](#), only had to bring the kitchen, baths, and primary suite up to contemporary snuff.



A [Wilton Ford](#) painting hangs over a [George Nakashima](#) Woodworker cabinet in the dining room. Antique club chairs; custom sofa; set of four Biennale tables by [Robert Marinelli](#); [Doris Leslie Blau](#) rug. Art: © Wilton Ford/Gagosian. © Pedro Reyes. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

That being said, even a prime piece of [Art Deco glamour](#) can be subtly improved, though, as Shamamian points out, "It didn't feel appropriate to stray too far from what was there." The soul-stirring flying staircase's strangely plain railing—"not very Deco," says project architect Tom McManus—was removed in favor of a lacy iron creation incorporating motifs harvested from the building's metalwork. A small anteroom adjacent to the entrance hall, where the coat closet is located, had its doorway expanded into a wide elegant arch—bringing more sunlight into the entry from a west-facing window. The dining room's soaring pilasters got a chic speckled finish that mimics porphyry, and the paneled study's vaulted ceiling has been piped with a crisscrossing pattern in molded plaster that references the passion for Tudor and Jacobean design that ran on a parallel track during the days of Deco. "We loved that, too, but wanted to make it lacier and more open, to employ the fewest amount of lines that would still suggest the 17th century," says Smith, who also upgraded the rooms with handsome custom-made marble chimneypieces.

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When it came to furnishing the penthouse, though, a period atmosphere was not the goal. "It was about taking grandly proportioned spaces and making them comfortable, habitable, and interesting," Smith explains, adding that the apartment had always been "a series of public spaces for entertaining and private spaces for relaxing." Knitting together those two disparate camps involved the development of decors loose enough so that all spaces would feel inviting. Thus, the dining room features not only a 19th-century English mahogany table for meals, unexpectedly combined with metal chairs dressed in blue leather, but also a sofa, dished armchairs,

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and bronze [bookshelves](#) laden with well-thumbed volumes and intriguing objects, all overlooked by a wall-spanning Walton Ford painting of a camel under attack by birds of prey. “Sure, it’s a big apartment,” the decorator says, “but it’s not big enough to have a room that’s used only a couple of times a week. Every space had to be flexible.” Which explains why an exceptionally large room that takes up much of the upper floor and which offers panoramic views of the East River and Long Island serves as a spare bedroom as well as a family room.



A [Robert Polidori](#) photograph presides over the kitchen’s dining area. [Mario Bellini](#) chair; Robert Marinelli bench in a [Dedag](#) fabric; custom [Collier Webb](#) table. Through the doorway, a [Patrice Dangel](#) light fixture hangs above a 19th-century mahogany dining table. Art: © Robert Polidori



A [Christian Astuguevielle](#) chair stands in a corner of the paneled study. [Lamb](#) mantelpiece; [Rose Uniacke](#) scones.

Smith’s aesthetic has always been pretty limber, so a mixture of styles, materials, periods, and provenances happily coexist here, wrapped within an envelope that is largely classical in concept though not particularly classical in its layout.

Vintage and antique furnishings abound—a pastry-like gilded Northern European table from the 19th century, an animal-legged John Dickinson side chair made in the 1970s—yet they are posed amid newly made upholstered pieces and edgy abstract artworks.

Balance is key, but so is eccentricity. Traditional chandeliers were eschewed for sculptural contemporary fixtures, among them a pair of hooplike Philippe Anthonioz pendants in the entrance hall and, for the dining room, Patrice Dangel fixtures that look like big sheets of crumpled white paper. The main bedroom features a canopy bed modeled after a legendary example at Château Mouton Rothschild made in the 1960s for tastemaker [Pauline de Rothschild](#), bowered by a flowery wallpaper and just a few steps from a rattan chair. Walls are bedecked with works by Richard Serra, Santiago Giralda, Lorna Simpson, and other contemporary talents, and tabletops are outfitted with obelisks, ceramic vessels, and other diverting objects.



A [Jean-Marie Fiori](#) chair from [Twenty First Gallery](#) stands in front of the window, and an [Acamas](#) mirror by [Nicolas and Sébastien Reese](#) hangs over the fireplace in the primary bath. Custom pendant by [Roll & Hill](#); [Urban Archeology](#) washstands; Roman shade of [Holland & Sherry](#) fabric.

Headly, it is, and harmonious, too, which is precisely the atmosphere that Smith and his adventuresome clients were after. Though it is an apartment that could skew very traditional, given the architecture, or very hip, the lesson that one takes away is that pitching it somewhere in between, with elements of then and now, makes for a much more delightful experience.

This [Art Deco-inspired penthouse](#) appears in AD’s January 2024 issue. Never miss an issue when you subscribe to AD.



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