

PROJECT:

RENOVATION

Designer **Leonora Mahle** and black and white printer **Laurent Girard** get rid of the old and create their own new

Major leaks, poor wiring, aged pipes, a "stuffy" feel; generally, these qualities would not classify as favorable accessories to a dream home, propelling many a dismayed buyer off to discern the next hopeful query. Yet, situate these qualities inside promising architecture, nestle the space in a sought after neighborhood, and present them to an eye skilled in design and renovation, and suddenly lead pipes transform into something only the trained mind can see - great potential.

Written by SHAWN GAUTHIER Photography by PATRICK CLINE Styled by MICHELLE ADAMS



Two years ago, photographer and printer Laurent Girard and girlfriend Leonora Mahle, interior designer, toyed with picking up a hand in the ultimate New York real estate game – the decision on whether to buy. Both having rented in the city for years, it seemed like an advantageous move both financially and personally; they were planning on adding a fourth addition to their already tight-knit family. The greatest task lay ahead – seeing what Manhattan had to offer. Unfortunately, Girard and Mahle were left unimpressed.

"We were so disappointed with what was out there," recalls Mahle. "Lots of overpriced cookie cutter apartments with 'modern' finishes with were just really ugly, as well as bad quality and poor installation."

Discouraged but not without hope, the search ensued, finding Girard, Mahle and Clayton (Girard's nine year old son from his first marriage) led astray after another disappointing condo viewing. On a whim, the threesome found themselves standing on the disheveled first floor of a home that had been on the market for months, and for obvious reasons – the place was not exactly up to par. The realtor, holding an open house, explained the price had dropped significantly due to its existing poor shape; incidentally, to a price that proved not only affordable, but a steal in that particular neighborhood. With a shared vision and an exchange of glances between Mahle and Girard, interest quickly piqued.

"Between Laurent and I, we had lots of contacts in the building/renovation trade, and we thought this could be a great



project to take on," explains Mahle. "Plus, tearing a place apart and starting totally from scratch can be a lot of fun, not to mention it was half a block from the park and a five minute walk to the subway."

Sold. Renovations began immediately, and they were extensive; the dire condition of the home left little to remain untouched. Energy efficiency important to both Mahle and Girard, they replaced the oil boiler and all radiators with an HVAC unit while the house was being gutted, which in turn led to replacing all windows to ensure efficiency. Future décor of the home was taken into consideration as well; they added blocking to the living room wall during construction so they could later create a leg-less built-in desk. Their favorite addition during the renovation? The prominent floor to ceiling bookcase, which became the focal point of the living room.

"Both Laurent and I are avid readers, and each brought lots of books to the relationship," says Mahle, adding that as soon as they saw the house, they knew exactly where they wanted to construct the bookcase. "It was the first thing we thought about, and the first thing that was built after the demolition."

Besides holding the couple's extensive collection of books (many of which are photo books that Girard himself has worked on), the bookcase also played a notable part in providing inspiration for the living room lighting. Wanting it to stand out as the focus, the couple ensured the lighting would enhance and concentrate on the piece; something they had to understand as the approached the overall design of the room. Elsewhere, they reused light fixtures from previous apartments, and purchased a ceiling fan with a light for their bedroom to help cut down on air-conditioning costs.



Photos Girard printed and framed. Left to right: Jackson Pollock, John Lennon, Lou Reed and Bob Dylan.



Laurent only collects cameras he can use," says Mahle.

Of course, lighting is only one of the many detailed decisions to determine when renovating; color scheme is another, particularly for the walls. Girard and Mahle used furniture and pieces they already owned to inspire their choices, including a gorgeous 10'x13' Persian rug Mahle bought in France ten years ago and has schlept around through five NYC apartments. She pulled shades of blue from its intricate design, resulting in Benjamin Moore's Normandy Blue as the back-splash behind the bookcase, and the

gray walls in both the living room and dining room (Benjamin Moore Stonington Gray) mixes seamlessly with similar hues woven in the rug.

Another source of color inspiration includes Girard's impressive collection of prints, which features pieces he has printed for photographers as well as his own work. A photographer since the age of 12, the art has become his career; most recently, he printed pieces for "John Lennon: The New York City Years", an exhibit featured at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Annex in Soho.

Pieces of his collection can be found hanging in both their living and dining rooms.

"[Something I love] about the new place is the ability to display prints I have made through the years for different photographers, as well as hanging some of my own work," says Girard. "Choosing what to hang turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated," adding they may simply rotate artwork over the years.



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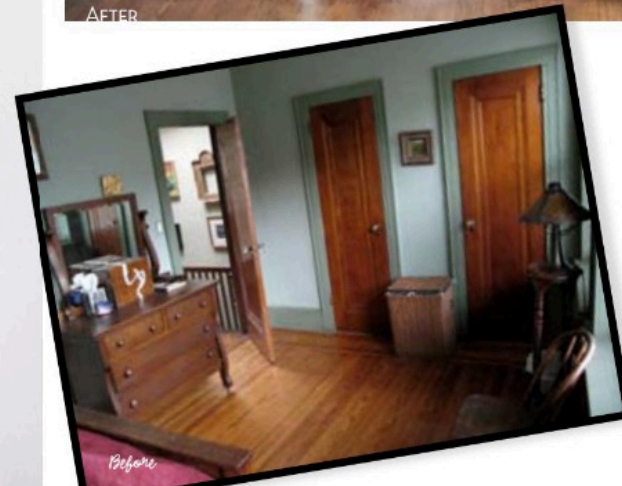
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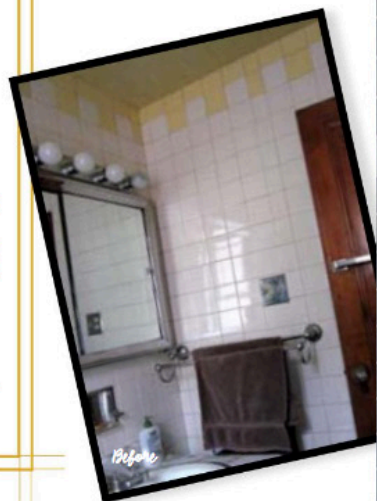


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5 TIPS ON RENOVATING

- 1 Ensure that all work to be completed by contractors is spelt out in detail on both the request for pricing and the signed estimate/contract
- 2 Always budget an extra 5-10% for contingency issues, in addition to all the shipping/delivery costs for furniture and materials.
- 3 If your contractor is supplying stone, millwork or hardware, request samples for approval before it's installed to make sure you're satisfied.
- 4 At the end of a project, prepare a punch list by room of all issues your contractor needs to address before final payment is made.
- 5 If you're managing your own project, be meticulous about keeping all product receipts and vendor estimates in a binder. Also keep a paint schedule, listing both color and finish for the paints and stains for future reference.



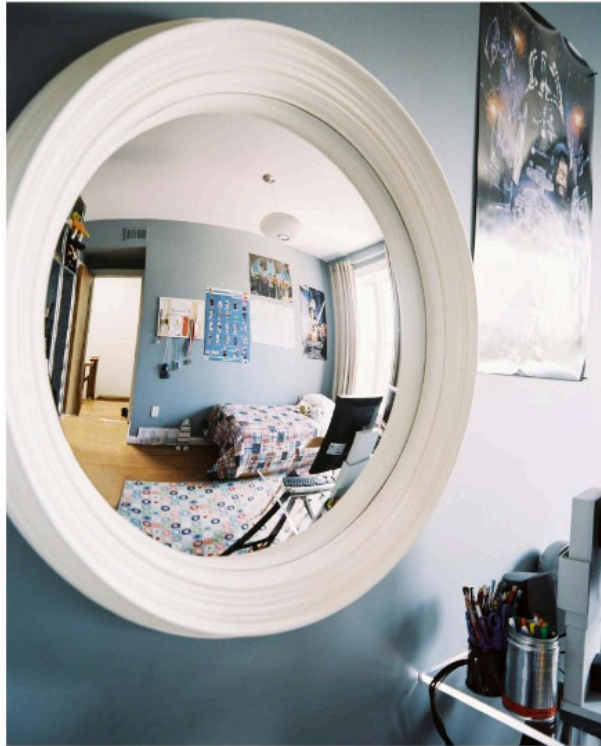
Upstairs, the couple renovated all three bedrooms as well as the bathroom, creating a master bedroom, a room for Clayton, and one for the newest addition - Inés, the couple's daughter who is now 3.5 months old. In the master bedroom, they installed new closets, making the tops of the doors flush with the ceiling, giving the wall a clean, modern look. They re-tiled the entire bathroom, including the ceiling, and replaced the sink faucet, hooks, and towel bar with chrome fittings, completing the look with a chrome medicine cabinet above the sink.

The kitchen is the only room that did not receive a full makeover; it had been redone two years before they had bought the home, and Girard and Mahle felt it wasteful to replace anything. Not to mention kitchens and bathrooms tend to be the most costly in terms of renovations, and they were already full-steam ahead with tearing down the latter. Instead, they gave it an upgrade by adding their own personal touches, such as painting the cabinets blue and changing the pulls and backsplash using leftover tile from another job.

"Eventually, I would like to redo the kitchen," says Mahle. "Do something modern, maybe with poured in concrete, but that's several years from now."

In the meantime, Mahle and Girard feel extremely pleased with the outcome, some of which they have affected themselves (painting and the millwork in the basement, as well as the aforementioned kitchen additions). Stepping into their home from the noisy streets of Manhattan, it feels like an instant getaway from the city; they often find themselves relaxing together





Avoid the urge to accessorize a place all at once, which can lead to a look that feels contrived and impersonal. Instead, add meaningful items over time.



A gift from Girard to Mahle, the Günter Grass lithograph represents a sweet joke between the couple. "While I was pregnant with Ines, I had a very hard time sleeping," explains Mahle.



Mahle, born and raised in Brazil, often travels back to visit family with Girard, returning with keepsakes such as this hammock.



in their open, spacious living room, thumbing through their bookcase for the next read.

After such an extensive project, one must ask, would they do it again?

"Absolutely," Mahle instantly replies. "We had a good time, and we're so happy in the house now." ■

Hide the unsightly AC behind some pretty planters