

# INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

ALL THAT REMAINS: JOHN BENTLEY MAYS  
EXPLORES THE GREEK RUINS OF ITALY

[PLUS] DESIGNING THE MODERN KITCHEN

FALL 2009

# LIVING WITH ART

COLLECTORS SHARE  
THEIR SECRETS

BUILT FOR ART:  
A NEW YORK LOFT AND  
A MONTREAL RENO

WEST COAST PAINTER  
GORDON SMITH IN HIS  
ARTHUR ERICKSON-  
DESIGNED HOME



FALL 2009

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# STREETWISE

SLICK CONTEMPORARY LIFE MEETS ITS GRITTY URBAN ROOTS WHEN GRAFFITI JOINS MODERN ART IN A MANHATTAN LOFT PENTHOUSE.  
BY IRIS BENAROA  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURIE LAMBRECHT





## ARTIST AT WORK

The graffiti is the most captivating artwork in the penthouse. Flagrant and fun in a juicy blue with splashes of orange crush, it roams freely beyond the confines of a canvas. It poetically loops up to the ceiling, over pipes and alongside walls. It was done freehand—not one pencil outline. Blesso chose the artist Doze Green after seeing his work in a design magazine. As Blesso discovered, Doze was a pioneer of early hip-hop and street culture in New York City, and, funnily, Blesso was a fan of his when he was 12 years old. “He was a member of the Rock Steady Crew. I had seen them in movies,” he says. “Those guys were heroes when I was a little kid.”

When it came to choosing a design, Blesso asked Doze to go mellow (the artist normally has a tougher aesthetic). After three weeks, Doze was done. “It was a big party while he was here,” says Blesso. “He would have friends over while he painted, and they’d be hanging out and drinking. We became friends. It was fun to see what had been done each day when I got home.”

Simultaneously reviled and appreciated, graffiti is provocative and candid. It’s a keen reminder that while most of the city sleeps, there are others who are wide awake. Graffiti artists, like superheroes, are renegades gamboling under the radar—it’s rare to witness an urban tagger in his natural habitat. Mysterious and edgy, their work is organic, springing up like weeds from the sidewalk. That was the New York City of the 1980s, anyway.

Today, if you’re in a subway that happens to stop at a closed-down portion of the Brooklyn Bridge, you might catch a glimpse down a tunnel of these modern hieroglyphics, faded and cracked and weathering like strange mould. Or you can simply visit Matthew Blesso’s penthouse.

Perpetually fascinated by this controversial street art, the New York-based real estate developer knew there would come a time when he would incorporate it into his own home. “I

grew up in the late ’70s in Paterson, New Jersey. We didn’t live in the inner city, but we were influenced by it. I’ve always loved graffiti and breakdancing.”

For Blesso, the moment arrived when it came to dressing his Manhattan penthouse, purchased in 2007. Located in a turn-of-the-20th-century building, it has industrial windows and crisp white walls—an ideal backdrop for art. Collaborating with architect of record and interior designer Andrea Steele (the original layout was created by Joel Sanders and Diana Balmori), Blesso transformed his penthouse into an arresting space that is both beautiful and sustainable in its design. Despite its formidable size of 3,200 square feet, it does not suffer from the desolation often characteristic of open-plan lofts.

This is primarily due to the palette of warm wood: the Brazilian walnut floor that folds up the three-sided Lennox fireplace, then slips up the stairs and continues outside to

become the *ipe*-decked rooftop terrace (see *IA&D*, Summer 2009). The open plan is also visually harmonious. In New York City, where space is a particularly precious commodity, “you should be able to experience every square inch—and not close it off behind closed doors,” Steele says.

The abundance of wood is both rustic and refined. Sleek walnut steps seem to float—they’re actually held up by steel stair stringers—up to the roof deck. Equally slick are the wood floors. Abutting the white marble kitchen is a table by Christian Hooker, made of a generous 23-foot slab of oak that was trucked in from Pennsylvania. Its leftover scraps were used to make the benches. “Matt knew Christian and reached out to him to meet with us,” Steele says.

To keep the table from looking too formal, the chairs are a ragtag affair. Some are stumps, others have arms, and together the array suggests a forest of sculptures. “We



The staircase appears as a monumental piece of sculpture in the centre of the loft; yet its sleek steps in Brazilian walnut on steel stringers “float” on their way up to the roof deck. The lush foliage serves to bring nature into the apartment. Plant design, Balmori Associates; planting and installation, Plant Fantasies. Opposite: The dining table and benches—crafted by Christian Hooker of Brooklyn

from a solid plank of oak brought in from Pennsylvania—are augmented by a diverse assortment of chairs, including tree-stump stools by Vancouver artist Brent Comber. The eclectic approach allows pieces to migrate around the loft to be used as tables and sculptures. Fuschia conical glass pendant lights, Flos. Window coverings, International Blind Contractors.

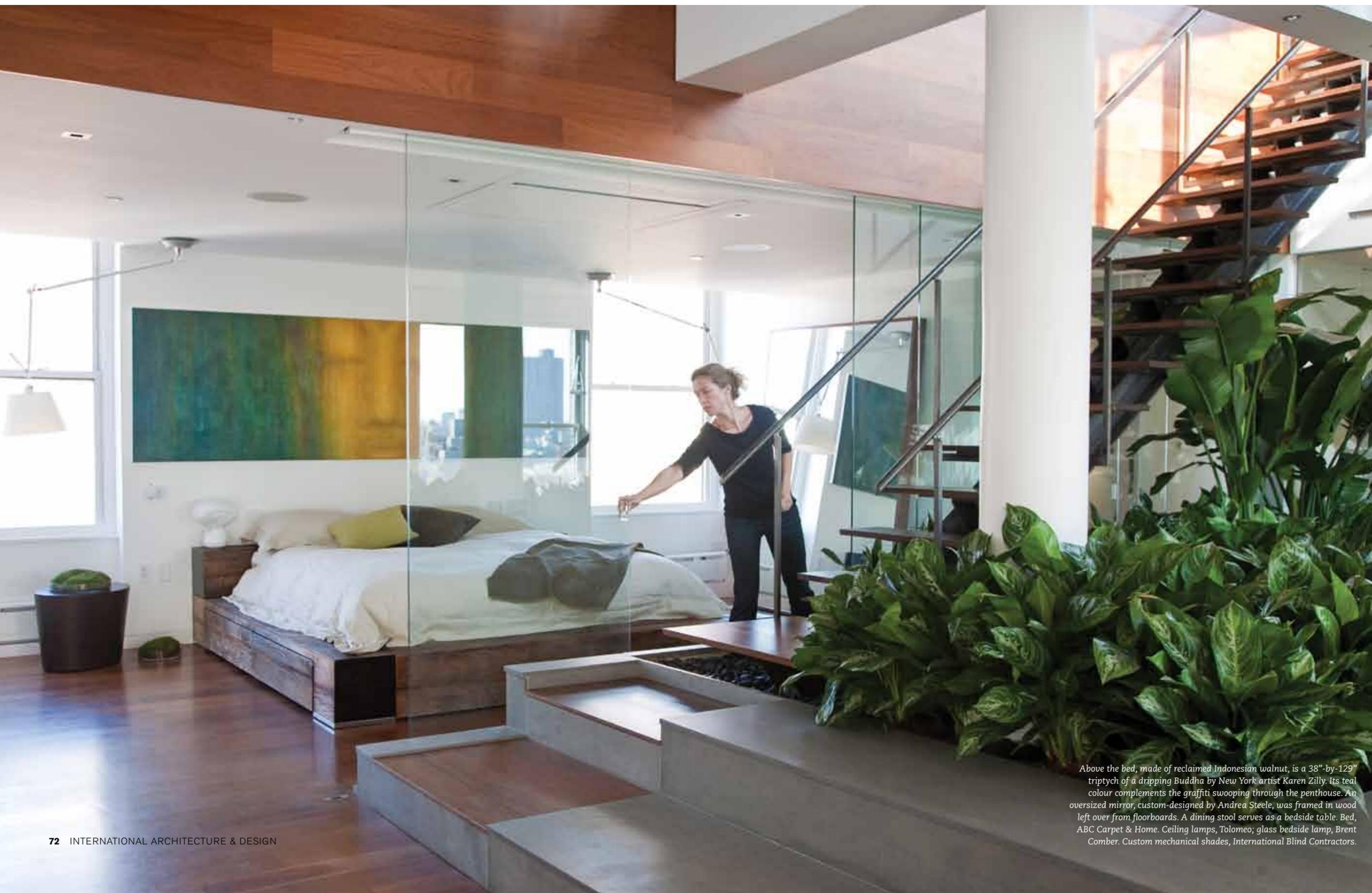
**‘I LIKE AGGRESSIVE ART...THINGS WITH A LOT OF TENSION—BUT NOT IN MY APARTMENT. I WANT IT TO BE HARMONIOUS AND RELAXING.’**



New York City



**AN OPEN PLAN AND GLASS WALLS SUGGEST THAT THE ENTIRE LOFT IS PART OF THE PUBLIC SPACE WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE SENSE OF INTIMACY.**



*Above the bed, made of reclaimed Indonesian walnut, is a 38"-by-129" triptych of a dripping Buddha by New York artist Karen Zilly. Its teal colour complements the graffiti swooping through the penthouse. An oversized mirror, custom-designed by Andrea Steele, was framed in wood left over from floorboards. A dining stool serves as a bedside table. Bed, ABC Carpet & Home. Ceiling lamps, Tolomeo; glass bedside lamp, Brent Comber. Custom mechanical shades, International Blind Contractors.*

debated about how crazy we'd get," Blesso says. "I like the idea of every single chair being different and mixing up materials, but I also worried it would be too jarring so we decided to only use wood." The wood motif carries through the living room: you'll find the mid-century modern Hans Wegner Shell chair and Gerrit Rietveld's Zig Zag. "They're commonly seen, but I love their simple, beautiful design."

Simplicity continues to reign in the private quarters. The sliding glass doors that separate the bedroom from the interior garden and the rest of the space can be made private with the aid of a mechanized shade. A north-facing position saves it from becoming a sweltering hot box as it only gets direct sun in the early morning. Furnishings in the restful cocoon are few and low to the ground. A reclaimed-wood platform bed from ABC Home is a nod to the pad's eco-friendly nature.

Most of the art came about by happenstance, usually after Blesso stumbled upon the artist's work. At the penthouse entrance, tucked into the skylight, a mobile dangles eight feet from double-height ceilings. When the afternoon sun streams in, it catches the mobile's metal raindrops, casting shadows across the fireplace below. The mobile, by New York artist Rodger Stevens, plays off the home's industrial vibe as seen in the exposed pipes and valves.

No one tells Blesso what to buy. He balks at the notion of hiring a tastemaker. "The idea of a dealer telling me what I like doesn't make sense to me. I go to the NYC art shows every year and I spend two or three days looking at tons of work, and generally find only a couple of things I'm interested in."

What is he drawn to? "I like aggressive art...things with a lot of tension—but not in my apartment. There's a big difference between looking at a piece in a gallery and at home. At home, I want it to be harmonious and relaxing."

But when you think relaxing, graffiti is not what springs to mind. Score a dinner invite to one of Blesso's famed shindigs and both the hallway and front door outside his apartment might confound you. At first, the door looks like it was tagged by a street punk. There, amid the rawness of wires, holes, and a buzzing fluorescent lamp—the previous owner never renovated the hallway and Blesso chose not to, either—is a hummingbird trailing a totem of faces on the door.

"It's one inch wide and gets bigger and goes up the wall and travels and grows," says Blesso. "I love the space it starts in. It's a reminder of how the building used to look. I view the graffiti as the link between the hallway and the apartment."

Indeed, the graffiti adds that edginess oftentimes missing in luxurious contemporary spaces. It imbues wit, wildness, and wonderment to a space that, despite its contemporary slickness, never forgets its New York City roots. ●

*For floor plans, see page 112*