

ON LOCATION

Only the Best Parts Of Life in the 1940s



1. Hilary Botein moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Clinton Hill to prepare for her adoption of a baby.

2. Her challenge was to create a contemporary feeling on a tight budget, without losing touch with the history of the 1940s building.



3. The kitchen ceiling was lowered to make the dining and living areas feel loftier. Custom cabinets are made of Tabu, a teak composite. The Bell Jar pendant lamp (\$850) is from Niché Modern.

4. The Scotia cantilevered wash basin (\$495), from Duravit, is paired with a custom-made vanity.

5. A custom desk and shelves are set into a living room niche lined with reclaimed pine from Pioneer Millworks. The backsplash is a Maharam fabric called Fragment.

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By MICHAEL CANNELL

THE Park Slope brownstone, with its carved decorative panels and inviting stoop, may be many people's idea of New York charm, but it is not Hilary Botein's. "It was a beautiful apartment, but so oppressive and dark," she said of the one-bedroom on Second Street in Brooklyn that she owned for seven years. "I could never go back to it."

Ms. Botein, 44, was looking for more than sunlight when she moved out in October 2008. She hoped to adopt a child, and she wanted the baby to have his or her own bedroom.

With motherhood in mind, she traded her brownstone apartment for a 900-square-foot two-bedroom (cost per square foot: \$445) on the eighth floor of the Clinton Hill Cooperative Apartments, a cluster of 12 brick towers in the Clinton Hill neighborhood designed by Wallace K. Harrison, an architect better known for his work on Rockefeller Center and the United Nations headquarters. Harrison designed the towers in 1943 as housing for workers employed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. This was as good as it got for modest-income housing, with parquet floors and double-wide windows.

But the apartment's features were obscured by decades of neglect and "piles of stuff all over the



place" left by the previous owner, she said. "It was completely disgusting."

The challenge was to bring a contemporary feeling to the rooms without losing touch with the building's history, on a budget of just \$130 a square foot. "I didn't want the apartment to overreach," Ms. Botein said. "It's not a fancy building, and I didn't want an over-the-top apartment."

Ms. Botein, who has a Ph.D. in urban planning and teaches housing policy at Baruch College, knew enough about design to know the task was beyond her. "I don't teach design, but I circle around it," she said. "I knew enough to know that I would end up saving money with an architect."

That architect was Brian Ripel, a partner in the young Brooklyn firm RSVP Architecture Stu-

dio, who welcomed the constraints of renovating a space with low ceilings and little flexibility on the location of plumbing and other services. "It was both limiting and liberating," he said. "It forced us to be creative."

In the 1940s, developers still subscribed to a Victorian separation of public and private rooms. Mr. Ripel tailored the place to a small family by pooling the kitchen, dining and living areas in one open space bathed with light from the generously proportioned windows.

Many people like Ms. Botein moving into brick housing towers face the same problems: how to update midcentury housing to contemporary needs and relieve the monotony of the rooms. "They were generic, to say the least," Mr. Ripel

said. "The real challenge was to make them more interesting." His answer: judicious use of color (each room has one wall painted a distinctive hue) and texture (bleached wood paneling, high-end fabric wall covering, bare cement surfaces with a thin layer of skim coating). He also varied ceiling heights: the compressed kitchen makes the dining and living areas feel spacious by comparison.

Mr. Ripel is well practiced at childproofing. He is the father of a 4-year-old and says that 80 percent of his clients reconfigure homes for growing families. "We're constantly thinking through how a space should change to accommodate a child," he said.

The child was still a hypothetical throughout the planning and construction. On May 12, with the renovation work winding down, Ms. Botein finished her adoption application, in the hope that she would have a baby within a year.

Seventeen days later, she brought home a 2-week-old named Isaac.

On a recent afternoon, Isaac napped in his bedroom while Ms. Botein worked at a desk built into a niche in the living room, Prospect Park visible in the distance.

"It feels like home," she said. "It reflects the way I live, but it also honors the history of the place."