

Brian Messana declares a hate for the word *contemporary*. When asked to describe the architectural style of Messana O'Rorke, he doesn't care for *minimalist* either. "It's too Zen," he says. "We're much more pragmatic." Clearly, he and Toby O'Rorke found their ideal client in an Irish banker who'd purchased a four-bay redbrick 1853 town house in New York shortly before being transferred to Hong Kong. For the ensuing 12 years, he rented the house to a series of tenants—the last being TV personality Charlie Rose—and time, alas, took its toll. A renovation, the first since 1981, would be essential.

The owner, who'd meanwhile returned to Ireland, wasn't sure if he would sell the renovated property, rent it out again, or keep it as a second home. But he harbored no ambivalence about the desired aesthetic. "There's a Spartan-ness about how he lives," O'Rorke says. Achieving simplicity, however, would be complicated. Though the house is 2,800 square feet, that generous amount of space is divided between three upper stories and a basement, and each of those was subdivided into four little rooms, a claustrophobic condition exacerbated by a trapezoidal footprint narrowing a full 8 feet from front to back. "Out of this hodgepodge, how can we create



a sense of spaciousness?" Messana and O'Rorke wondered.

Their approach was to capture as much usable square footage as possible, to rigorously limit the number of interior elements, and to extract maximum impact from the chosen interventions. After gutting and restoring the dilapidated structure, Messana O'Rorke was ruthless in the pursuit of optimal functionality and clarity. The house used to have two covetable fireplaces per level, but one of each pair came out to make way for the closets so essential for clothing, audiovisual equipment, and mechanical systems. Not least of all, the closets also conceal the house's distracting diagonal sidewall. With essentially rectangular volumes now established, Messana O'Rorke left the basement, the parlor floor, and the second story largely open—dominated, respectively, by the





Previous spread: In the living room of a New York town house by Messana O'Rourke, wool-covered sofas, marble-topped cocktail tables, and a silk rug, all custom, meet a lantern by Isamu Noguchi and a photograph by Edward Burtynsky.

Left, from top: The living room's vintage swivel chairs sit with their backs to a wall of closets that conceal audiovisual equipment and square off the house's diagonal sidewall. Messana O'Rourke designed the tub and sink in both guest bathrooms. Above a guest room's custom walnut bed is a photograph by Giles Norman. **Right:** Wire-brushed, lightly limed oak was used for the floors and staircase.

