AUGUST 2013 USA $9.50 CAN $9.95

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MEETING OF MINDS

When married psychiatrists David and Michelle Merrill bought a disordered flat in the Upper West Side of Manhattan they each already had strong aesthetic identities: she channels Matisse, while he takes charge of 'skins' and 'skulls'. So adding two more voices into the mix – a young architect and an untried (if recommended) decorator – would surely lead to dysfunction, no? Carol Prisant conducts the case conference. Photography: Simon Upton

In the dining room, on the 'tropical teal' walls, hang two of the original dozen plaster feet that David Merrill bought for a quarter when he was a teenager

Left: Mid-century Danish chairs mix with pseudo-Chinese Chippendale armchairs and a reproduction beaded galleon chandelier. The wallpaper frieze is from Osborne & Little. Top: beneath the framed, vertically hung EEGs in the living room sits a West African stool. Above: cushions on the chocolate-brown-velvet sofa include a pair in teal silk faille and one covered in a vintage *suzani*

LYING THERE

in your shrink's generic office, have you ever found yourself wondering – guiltily perhaps – about the décor of her home? Wondering if it's bust-of-Freud or Hummel figurine; Rorschach-black or sanatorium-white; cluttered, like your mind, or sparse, like her comments? If so, here's your breakthrough. And two for the price of one, besides. Because this flat on the Upper West Side of Manhattan belongs not to one, but to two psychiatrists: David and Michelle Merrill. And their perfect – of course – children.

In most of his colleagues' homes, David says, 'You can't swing a cat without hitting the DSM [the diagnostic bible of the profession].' But as you see, they live pretty much like the rest of us. You know, the kids' crafts projects in the kitchen, Grandma's latest artwork in the hall, framed EEGs of seizure brainwaves hanging in the living room. No, wait. Maybe that's actually Asian calligraphy. Or Asian calligraphy that looks like vertically hung brainwaves. Or… if you stand to one side and swallow your meds slowly, with vodka, like art.

When Michelle discovered the flat, it was your classic-but-thrilling wreck. Her 'before' pictures reveal a solid nine on a scale of ten, mainly because it appeared not to have been touched or cleaned since it was built in 1912. It took real nerve to buy this place, along with blind faith that its clichéd 'warren of little rooms' – which included Edwardian plumbing and a through-the-wall cold pantry (on the tenth floor) – could actually be usefully reconfigured. But that's why we have architects, after all. And why they engaged Anik Pearson to rethink the living and dining rooms and salvage the period panelling and raftered ceilings before indulging in New York's favourite pastime: gut rehab. The fun part.

When the plaster dust had settled, designer Nick Olsen arrived at a pristine space that was primed and ready to paint. 'Well, no-one ever gives me a blank canvas,' Nick says, relishing the novelty still. But he'd arrived in the nick of time, so to speak: the place was about to be painted a hue he's termed 'depressing grey' because – and you can appreciate her logic – Michelle had assumed that her pet Matissean hues would blaze against plain grey. Nick, however, isn't a colour maven for nothing and he calmly asked his psychiatrist/client what she really thought about that. Which is how the living room came to be ivory with a pale-blue ceiling, and the dining room 'something the cheesy paint store called tropical teal'. It's more than a little shocking, this shade, and when shown the paint sample, Anik's husband could only say: 'Be bold or go home!' But no-one went home, as you see, not even when Nick installed the chinoiserie wallpaper on the frieze.

The Merrills moved into their clean, fresh digs with a few furnishings: an American knock-off of a Scandinavian dining-room table, the beaded ship-shape chandelier above it and Michelle's grandmother's eye-catching, homemade ceramic

Previous pages: spiky yarn winders from Pennsylvania crown the bookshelves. Michelle's grandmother created the quirky ceramic chess set. This page, top: on a Gustavian side table stands a brass lamp from Circa. Above: on the kitchen's far wall hang charcoal abstracts by John Rosis. Opposite: in the hall, a lacquered waterfall table encloses a pair of Chippendale-era stools. The zebra was bagged by David's grandfather while on safari with Hemingway's son

chess set. Also, with what remains of the dozen plaster feet David bought at a yard sale for 25 cents while he was still in high school. These hang (stand?) on the dining-room wall. And, of course, those EEGs. Columbia University's medical library sells them off after an unspecified while – hopefully long – but otherwise, many of these things were purpose-bought. While the sensibility here is pretty much Mid-century with a touch of ancestral lore, and the dining-room chairs are Danish (found in Brooklyn), Nick didn't hesitate to pair any of it up with things like sort-of-Georgian chairs or the Gustavian consoles in the hall. There's almost no style of furniture he can't work with, he contends, except for Grand Rapids American Victorian, maybe. Which is entirely understandable and which is why the Merrills' motto is now INWT: In Nick We Trust.

It's unusual that this quartet – Dave and Michelle, Anik and Nick – are all young, all met for the first time on this project, and are all still speaking. When you consider how difficult it can be to work with simply an architect – then add an untried if 'well-recommended' designer – it's astonishing the flat's come out so well. The secret may be that each member of the group has a speciality. (Or that two of them are shrinks.) But it was Anik, for instance, who advocated the mother-of-pearl light switches instead of plain boring old black, and the knurled-acorn hinge finials on the bathroom doors. It's hard to put money into such tiny details, but Anik convinced the Merrills these were key, as were elements like the honed (not polished) marble in the kitchen and the unlacquered brass switchplates, already patinating nicely. Dave is responsible for all the skins, the skulls, the faux-antlers, and the prints and drawings thereof. A myrmecologist (ant specialist) in his spare time, he comes by his keen eye for detail honestly: see the elegant radiator grillwork. Nick is the décor master, of course, adding toiles and dashes of sexy aubergine and amazing ruffles, while Michelle's the artistic one, channelling Matisse, setting the tone and tabbing choice photos in her *Wols*. The one thing they completely agreed on? No perfection. Which might be why this flat looks so very un-American and fresh.

And decidedly of the moment, too, because an unusual number of the rugs, art and furnishings were purchased from big-box stores and online, from etsy.com. Kind of unusual, but commendably thrifty. Canny, too. Because the good thing about buying online, says Dave, is that you can give your mistakes to the school fair.

So, in these times of rampant dysfunction and ADHD and ADD and OCD and BADD (bad décor), it's encouraging to see how well a place can turn out when non-disordered folks work together: to see how functional, admirable and, let's just say it, normal our interior worlds can be ■

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Opposite: in the master bedroom, a Pierre Frey aubergine toile covers the headboard, while a Clarence House sort-of-Klee encases the large pillow. The abstract painting is by Gabriel Godard. This page, top: at the window hang aubergine silk curtains with finely pleated ruffles. The black phone reminds the owners of Boston and their shared time at Harvard Medical School. Above: in the bathroom, custom-placed black 'flower' tiles dot the American Olean floor