



Loft Life

On Manhattan's lower west side, a New Zealand tech investor teams up with expat architect David Howell to create a luxe loft retreat.

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PHOTOGRAPHY / *Emily Andrews*

Built as a warehouse in 1889, Cobblestone Lofts was converted into apartments in 2000. The red brick façade faces south and the building is located where Vestry St merges into Laight St in TriBeCa.

The aspect through the living room windows looks east towards Soho. The original warehouse beams have been painted white, a contrast to the gleaming black floorboards. Somewhere in between that palette lies the polished grey-stone fireplace. The oil-on-burlap artwork on the dining room wall is 'Doble Imagen' by Manolo Valdés. The dining table from BDDW has a walnut-and-bronze wishbone base. It's surrounded by dining chairs by Milo Baughman (circa 1970s), reupholstered by John Hutton Textiles. Above the table is a tear-drop chandelier from Info Lighting in Los Angeles. The 'CB-50' leather lounge chairs are by Craig Bassam and Scott Fellows from Suite NY. The sectional sofa is from the 'Jagger' series by Minotti. The coffee table is by BDDW.





Above The floating side tables by the custom-made bed in the main suite are by BDDW. The silk carpet is custom-made from the House of Tai Ping. **Right** From the shell of a soulless developer fit-out, the collaboration between client, architect and interior designer has produced a home with warmth and character, one that suits the owner's tastes and lifestyle. The artwork above the sofa is 'Micrografia' by Juan Genoves.

When some people hire an architect, it's to begin cautiously realising a long-held dream.

Within the dynamic of New York's high-stakes real-estate culture, however, some hire architects to go further, faster.

The polished loft apartment on these pages in the Manhattan district of TriBeCa belongs to expat New Zealander Grant Biggar, and was renovated by his compatriot, David Howell, founder of New York-based architecture and interior design studio DHD.

The "triangle below Canal" is, in reality, more of a parallelogram of prosperity, a slice of Lower Manhattan residing within an intersection of money and fame, with Wall Street financiers sharing the dream of affluent bohemia and top-billed celebs as they stroll its photogenic cobbled streets.

With its jaw-droppingly huge former artists' lofts, TriBeCa commands the city's – and therefore, the country's – highest real-estate prices. Prices even resumed their upward trajectory, says Howell, a mere month after 9/11, the bleakest event in the city's history, which occurred on the neighbourhood's doorstep.

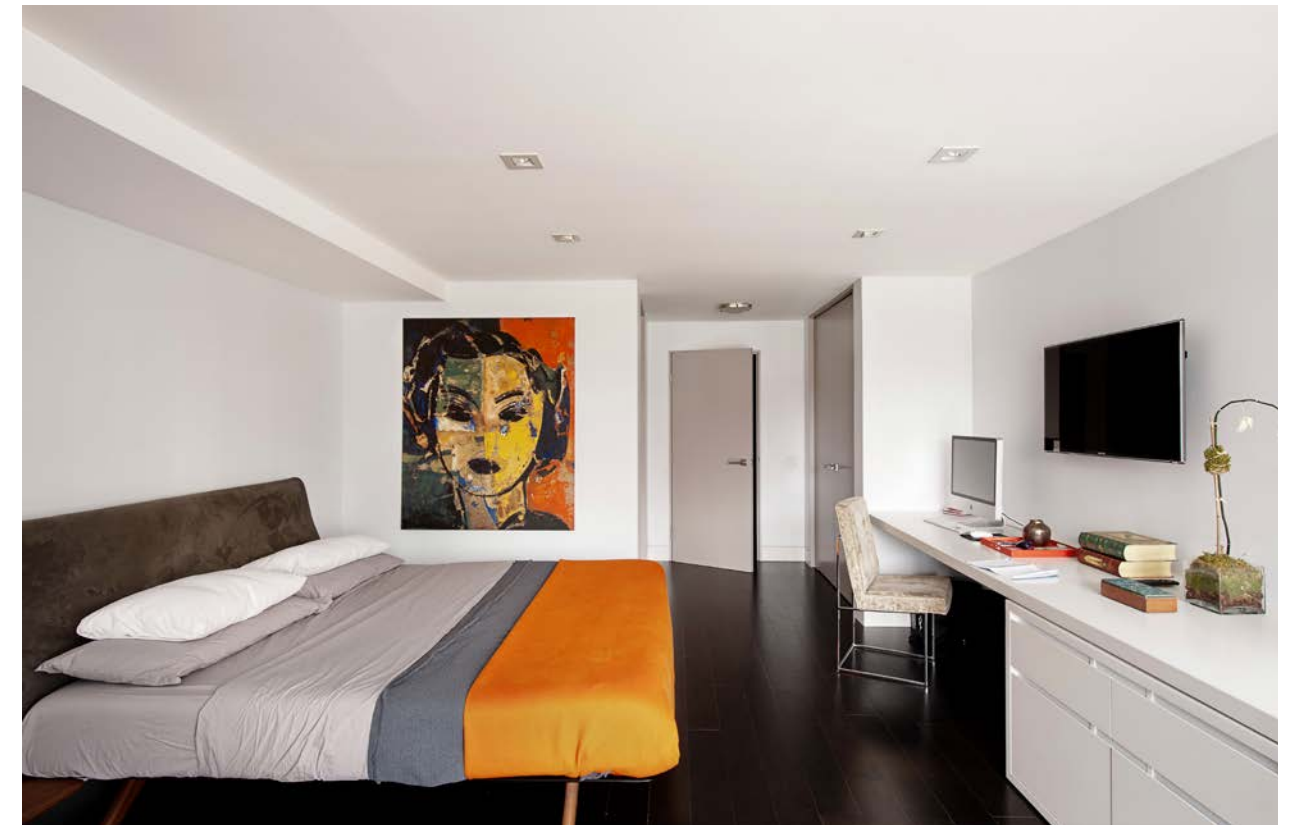
Biggar, a financial technology investor and advisor, graduated from Auckland University and lived in Sydney and London before moving to New York in 2010. When he bought the apartment it was liveable,

as you'd expect a pricey loft to be, but its developer fit-out left much to be desired. Howell, who was introduced through a mutual friend and originally came on board to help Biggar re-do the floors, saw that, with the incumbent architect based outside New York and unfamiliar with the city's Byzantine approvals process, the rest of the job was going too slowly. The architect, who originally hails from Havelock North, has a 20-year track record largely spent working on the luxury townhouses and lofts of Manhattan. A new project to gut-renovate the loft was born.

"What I liked about David is that he's an artist and an architect," Biggar says. "He was also very much the project manager on this – it's right in the sweet spot of what he does. My taste is modern, uncluttered and clean – but equally you want an apartment to feel warm and inviting, so that was his skill, to balance both of those aims."

There were two sides to their venture. The first was the human story of one man creating a home to meet his particular needs. "He loved the things about the apartment we all love," says Howell. "It was an open space, and it had a rawness and a Manhattan sophistication – but it needed help. It didn't have the soul it needed. It wasn't cosy, and it didn't represent his lifestyle. It was an empty shell."





Above The silkscreen-on-linen artwork is 'Matisse Como Pretexto' by Manolo Valdés. The 'Hepburn' bed is by Matthew Hilton for De La Espada. **Left** The 'Canopy' lamp over the island is by Francesco Rota for Oluce from Karkula and signals the 'kitchen zone', which sits between the loft's entrance and the living areas. The kitchen's location informed a design that makes it integral to the living areas, yet still very much its own zone. The 'Alto' counter stools are by Powell & Bonnell for Dennis Miller.

The layout, in particular, was flawed. The first thing Howell did was to analyse the oval floor plan and sight lines. Originally, the door to the master bedroom was halfway through the kitchen, effectively splitting it in two. Moving it gave the kitchen area cohesion and opened up the entrance to the apartment, but also gave an unimpeded view diagonally across the apartment to the light pouring in from its broad banks of windows.

This ostensibly small adjustment dictated the rest of the plan. Howell's other key move was to create a circular path through the apartment. "Wherever that exists, I want to enhance it, so when you're walking through your apartment you're never getting to a dead end or retracing your steps," he says. "This happened to have that flow where it was possible. It's always a journey. It's a nice way to occupy space."

Working with interior designer Steffani Aarons, architect and client added the aesthetic elements: a material palette of exposed wooden beams painted white, gleaming black-stained floorboards and an oversized fireplace of highly polished grey stone – a grand feature repeated in one of the entrance walls. Biggar was particularly involved in this process, hitting the taste-making luxury furniture showroom BDDW in Soho most Saturdays. "It's a nice time,

because the client can share the process and do their own selecting and buying. That was very much Grant's experience – and he wasn't timid about it, he was up for anything," says Howell. "It was like he had a birthday every weekend. One day, he carried back this enormously heavy bronze table with a buddy – physically carried it across the bottom half of Manhattan. I loved that."

The second side to the renovation process was the investment angle. Renovations in most other cities, says Howell, exist as an expense item on the balance sheet. In this astoundingly resilient market, they pay for themselves, and then some – and therefore make perfect sense for his business-savvy clients. "These projects are possible because once you renovate them they're simply worth so much more, so our model is to provide really good design ideas the client can enjoy while they own the apartment."

Wall Streeters generally arrive around age 25, sow their oats, develop a career and start a family before they're out of the city in their mid-40s, he says. "Everyone inevitably sells the apartment. They're custodians of the space, not an owner. It's the culture of New York. It's not a heritage home in the Hawke's Bay for three generations of your family – it's a temporary dwelling in an evolving society in an exciting city." **H**

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From the entrance of the home, the journey through the apartment leads into the living area from the kitchen. The 'Captain's' mirror and console table are from BDDW.



DESIGN NOTEBOOK

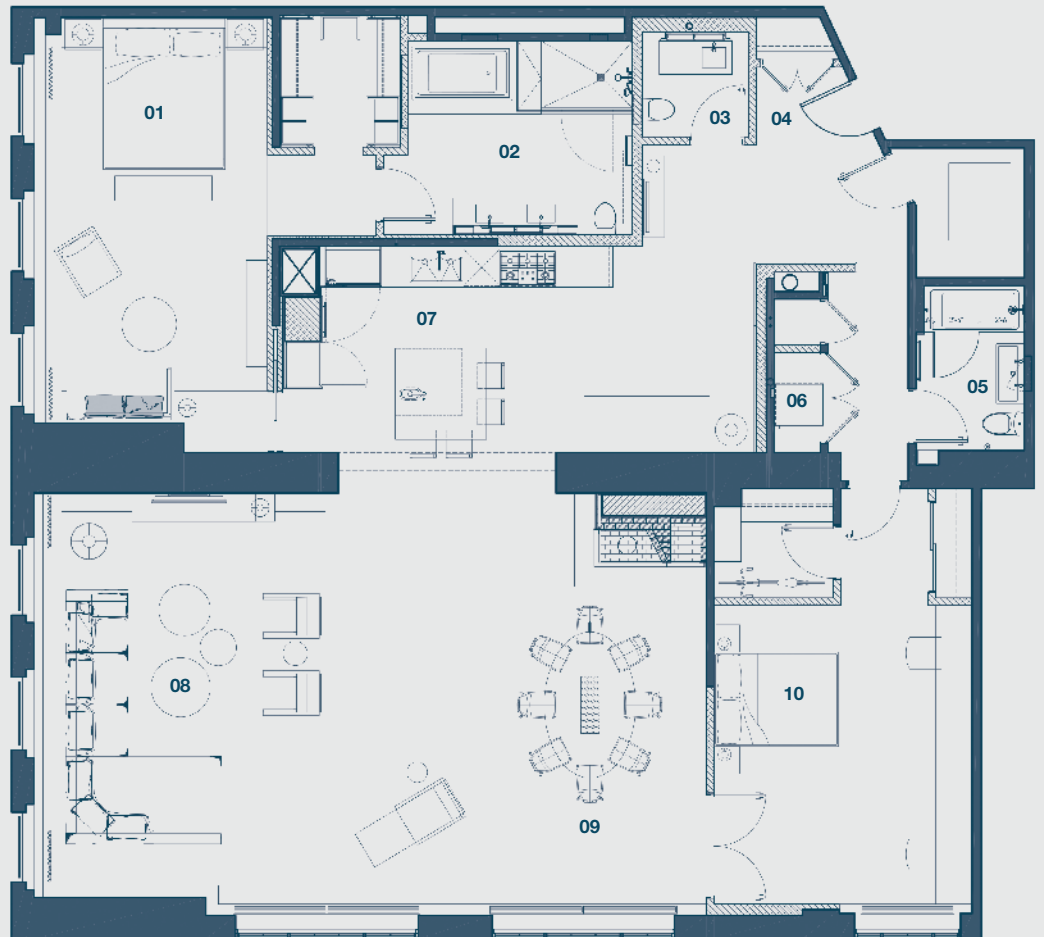
Q&A with New York-based New Zealand architect David Howell.



1. Main bedroom
2. Main ensuite
3. Bathroom
4. Entry
5. Bathroom
6. Laundry
7. Kitchen
8. Living room
9. Dining
10. Bedroom

When you're working with such high-end real estate and large budgets, what's your usual approach? My main concern is preserving the things that made my client buy and occupy this space. My first questions are always, "Why did you buy this? What did you like about it? And how do we maximise that?" I don't come along with any agenda of what it should look like. Observe, listen, repeat.

Are there differences to the design process working at this level? Grant's life is pretty broad, and he specifically asked for his bathroom to feel like a spa in a hotel. [You can see more of the bathroom in our special bathroom design section, starting on p.150. The kitchen also features in our kitchen design focus, starting on p.130]. One of the common traits with all my clients is that they often send me images of hotels, hotel lobbies and hotel bathrooms where they've really enjoyed staying. That's where they get their shared experiences. It's not an experience of owning properties, so much as travelling extensively, and experiencing the residential luxury which is hotel living.



Right The living area is flooded with light from two sides of the building.

Far right A print by Manolo Valdés sits on top of the built-in desk.

