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NOVEMBER
2010



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Ulises Liceaga revamps a New York town house
for the next generation of the same family, his own

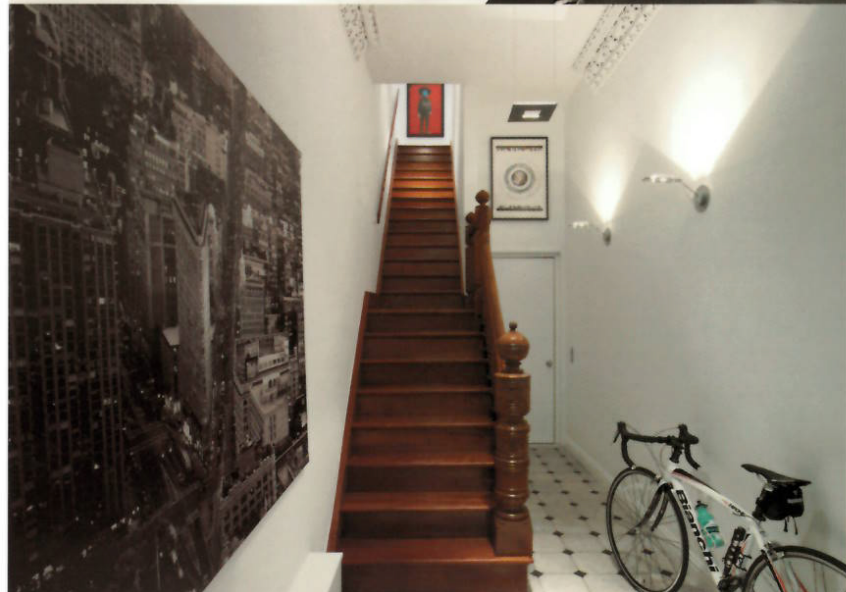
text: jon renzl photography: eric laignel



Previous spread: In the living area of the New York town house where Fractal Construction's Ulises Liceaga lives, 1970's sofas by Ueli Berger, Eleonore Peduzzi-Riza, Heinz Ulrich, and Klaus Vogt encircle a leather rug and design books stacked to serve as a cocktail table. Glass in the steel-framed windows and sliding doors is embedded with dimmable LEDs.

Left, from top: Chairs by Giovanni Travasa sit on the den's floor of ungrouted cement-board. Adjustable reflectors sprout from the top of Ingo Maurer's table in the dining area. **Right, from top:** He also designed the chandelier above, but the chairs are Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. In the entry, Maurer's sconces play off the carved plaster moldings, the turned mahogany newel post and balusters, and the marble floor, all original.

Opposite: The living area's wood-burning fireplace has a granite hearth and a 24-karat gold-leafed surround. Above is a plaster wall installation by Emilio Garcia Plascencia, Liceaga's friend from growing up in Mexico.



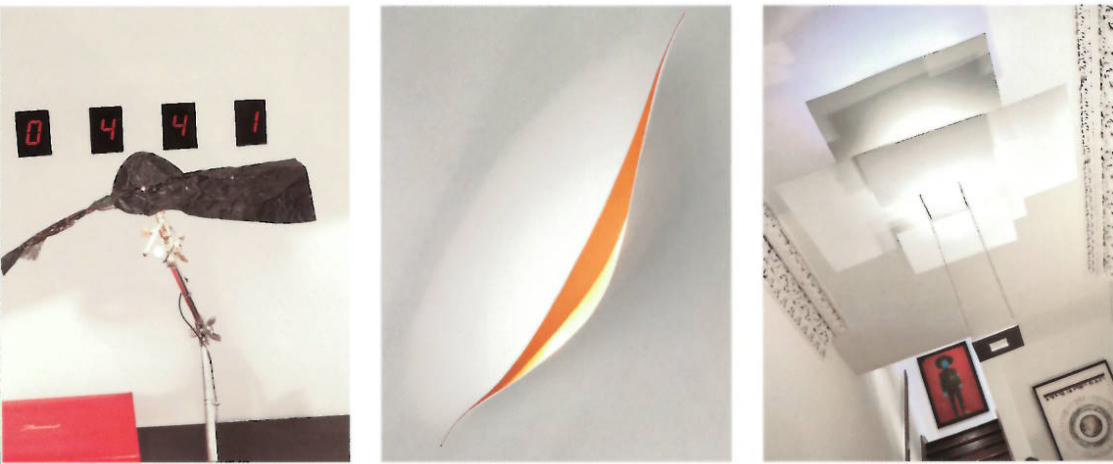
Everyone could use a fairy godmother, and that's especially true for an up-and-comer in the design world. "Architecture can be a cruel profession," Fractal Construction principal Ulises Liceaga says—as the architect son of an architect, he should know. "Most practitioners striking out on their own rely on a generous patron for their first commission." His own big break came from his father-in-law, who not only gave Liceaga the opportunity to renovate the family's Federal-style New York town house but also offered to hand it down to him, his wife, Christina Isaly-Liceaga, and the couple's son and two daughters, aged 2 to 6. "So, really, my wife was my client," Liceaga points out. "Luckily, we agree 99 percent of the time."

The 19th-century house required a comprehensive overhaul. That was a slow process—one that began in 2004, two years before Liceaga left Robert A.M. Stern Architects to go out on his own under the firm name Ulimar. "The project ate up lots of nights and weekends," he says. Further complicating matters, a planned penthouse addition required landmarks approval, a notoriously drawn-out endeavor. Other major improvements would be relegated to the inside, behind a brick facade that had to be preserved.

"Working for Stern taught me to respect traditional envelopes, which is the philosophy of my practice—integrating new design into old spaces," he explains. Showcasing that is the entry, where the restored mahogany staircase and plaster moldings are juxtaposed with forward-thinking light fixtures by Ingo Maurer. Ascend a flight to the main level, however, and the balance skews decidedly contemporary. Faux concrete floor tile flows through the space, from the white Italian kitchen at the front, through the central dining area, to the double-height living area. The latter is a virtual conversation pit, thanks to C-shape 1970's sofas that came with the house. They encircle a cocktail table that Liceaga built by artfully arranging stacks of books. ➔



The lofty living area's rear wall is glass embedded with a constellation of glowing LED pinpoints—a system devised by Maurer, who provided many of the house's signature touches in his role as lighting consultant. Fixtures recessed in various parts of the white ceiling make it look like it was slit with a knife to reveal an orange layer behind. The dining area's chandelier is his explosive Porca Miseria! Below it, can lights are embedded in the Corian top of his table, a prototype made for the Museum of Modern Art's 2004 reopening party.



Liceaga first encountered Maurer designs at an exhibition in Milan, where he interned one college summer. Although he didn't catch the *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member's name at the time, his fixtures left a lasting impression. Later, working as an architectural animator in his native Mexico City, he was entranced to discover that a friend collected Maurer's work. After moving to New York in 1999, Liceaga finally had the chance to visit the Ingo Maurer showroom and to meet the maestro in person. That connection paved the way for their subsequent collaboration. "Ingo visited once the house was gutted and suggested where to put certain pieces," Liceaga explains.

Maurer's lighting meets its match in assertive artworks, many by Liceaga's Mexican friends. In the dining area hangs a diptych sculpted from sheets of German silver. Two large-scale pieces by another artist bookend the living area: The wall above the fireplace is dominated by a plaster installation, while a lyrically abstract acrylic on canvas hangs opposite. Both can be enjoyed from the balcony of the den above.

The den's floor is inexpensive ungrouted cement-board animated by striations that lend the look of carpet. "The material is holding up quite well, although the edges chip a little," Liceaga notes. "The dings bugged me until one of my friends quoted this great Spanish saying: 'It's better to have imperfection with gracefulness than perfection without grace.' I agree." This family hangout shares the third

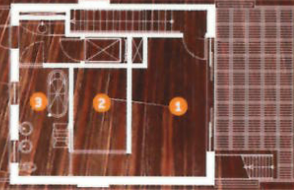


Opposite top, from left: A Maurer table lamp in the master bedroom. One of his ceiling fixtures, which appear on three levels. His pendant fixture in the entry. **Opposite bottom:** The living area's Bruno Fattorini credenza stands beneath Garcia's acrylic on canvas.

Above: Garcia sculpted the elements for the master bedroom's wall installation from a type of resin used to make car dashboards.



0 5 10 20



- 1 MASTER BEDROOM
- 2 WALK-IN CLOSET
- 3 MASTER BATHROOM

PROJECT TEAM

OGAWA/DEPARDON ARCHITECTS: ARCHITECT OF RECORD. HAGE ENGINEERING: STRUCTURAL ENGINEER. CHARLES G. MICHEL ENGINEERING: MEP. ROSS LEE RENOVATIONS: GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

PRODUCT SOURCES

FROM FRONT PACHAMAMA THROUGH ABC CARPET & HOME: RUG (LIVING AREA). INGO MAURER: WINDOW, DOOR PANELS (LIVING AREA), BALUSTRADE PANELS (DEN), CEILING FIXTURES (DEN, KITCHEN, BOY'S ROOM), CHANDELIER (DINING AREA), SCUNCES, PENDANT FIXTURE (ENTRY), LAMP (MASTER BEDROOM). VITTORIO BONACINA THROUGH PROPERTY: CHAIRS (DEN). RIMADESIO: SHELVING. KNOLL: CHAIRS (DINING AREA). COR: STOOLS (KITCHEN). VALCUCINE: CUSTOM CABINETS. GAGGENAU: HOOD. SUB-ZERO: REFRIGERATOR. MDF ITALIA THROUGH DDC DOMUS DESIGN COLLECTION: CREDENZA (LIVING AREA). NEO-METRO: TUB, SINKS (BATHROOM). HANSGRÖHE: TUB FITTINGS, SINK FITTINGS, SHOWER FITTINGS. ISLAND STONE: WALL TILE. FRITZ HANSEN THROUGH DESIGN



WITHIN REACH: CHAIRS (BOY'S ROOM). ODBA: TABLE. THROUGH LAND OF NOD: RUG. WEST ELM: BED. POTTERY BARN KIDS: DUVET COVER, PILLOW SHAMS. RAUSCH CLASSICS: FURNITURE (DECK). HORSO: CHAIRS (TERRACE).



story with the children's bedrooms. Artwork in the son's room is by Liceaga himself; it's a diptych that he "painted" on his computer and printed out on canvas.

Husband and wife sleep in the penthouse addition. Restricted by zoning in terms of square footage, Liceaga maximized spaciousness by eschewing large furnishings and pivot doors. While the bedroom embraces openness, the bathroom is inward-looking. A trip to Peter Zumthor's Therme Vals spa in Switzerland inspired the slate walls, and inset strips of red glass mosaic tile contrast with the gray stone. "I'm usually terrified of color," Liceaga admits. "But I liken the tile to the pulse of the room. As one of my professors used to say, 'There's no architecture without metaphor.'"

Speaking of metaphors, the house itself symbolizes the evolution of Liceaga's practice. Tackling his first large solo project made him realize the advantages of absorbing the general contractor's role, and Ulimar, just an architecture firm, morphed accordingly into Fractal Construction, which specializes in design-build. "I can go from demo to detailing in three weeks," he says. "You save a lot of time when you know what you're doing." Leaving more of it to spend with family. —

Opposite: The master bathroom combines walls tiled in Indian slate, porcelain floor tiles, and stainless-steel fixtures.

Top: In the son's room, a pair of junior Arne Jacobsen chairs face a computer-generated diptych by Liceaga. **Center:** The deck off the master bedroom is ipe. **Bottom:** Chairs on the living area's terrace are by Tord Boontje.