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HOUSE PROUD

Photographs by William Waldron for The New York Times

INGENUITY AND THRIFT A once bland apartment sleekly renovated by Irwin Weiner has plaster dentil moldings painted a soft pale gray, a wall lamp by Pierre Gauriche from Gueridon in New York, mohair upholstery and curtains held back by a remnant from a Venetian glass chandelier.

Sinking Roots in a Rented Space

By MITCHELL OWENS

IN the beginning, it was a series of featureless rooms bereft of moldings, free of style and afflicted with bland herringbone parquet floors. On the positive side, however, the one-bedroom apartment that Irwin Weiner found on West End Avenue at 104th Street hit the trifecta of Manhattan housing: It was well proportioned, relatively sunny and, best of all, astonishingly affordable. An inspired makeover was all it needed. And who better to accomplish it than Mr. Weiner, an interior designer who once dared to upholster a staid camelback sofa in artificial mink? (The client loved it.)

Decorating a rented apartment in Manhattan has always been a challenge, especially because leases typically prohibit structural improvements and discourage many decorative ones. Painting walls a color other than standard-issue landlord white can involve anything from pleading with the management to dead-of-night subterfuge, sneaking cans of Benjamin Moore



latex up the service elevator. But for people willing to make the effort, there are ways over these hurdles. Mr. Weiner is a prime example of how a little money and a lot of thought can transform an uninspiring space. His apartment is a lesson in how to treat a rented space like a lifelong home.

Nothing at Mr. Weiner's place is what it seems. Glamorous mirrored wainscot, which paves one wall of the plum-dark entrance hall, is nothing more than inch-wide strips of painted garden-style lattice glued to sheets of inexpensive reflective glass. The ceiling glistens with more than 150 hand-applied four-inch squares of silver-bronze Dutch metal, the bargain hunter's substitute for gold leaf.

"It's a long, narrow space, so it needed something to undercut the claustrophobic aspects," said Mr. Weiner, 42, a calm, slender man who projects perpetual bemusement. Picturesque kitchen cabinets that look like hardy Depression-era survivors were made to his specifi-

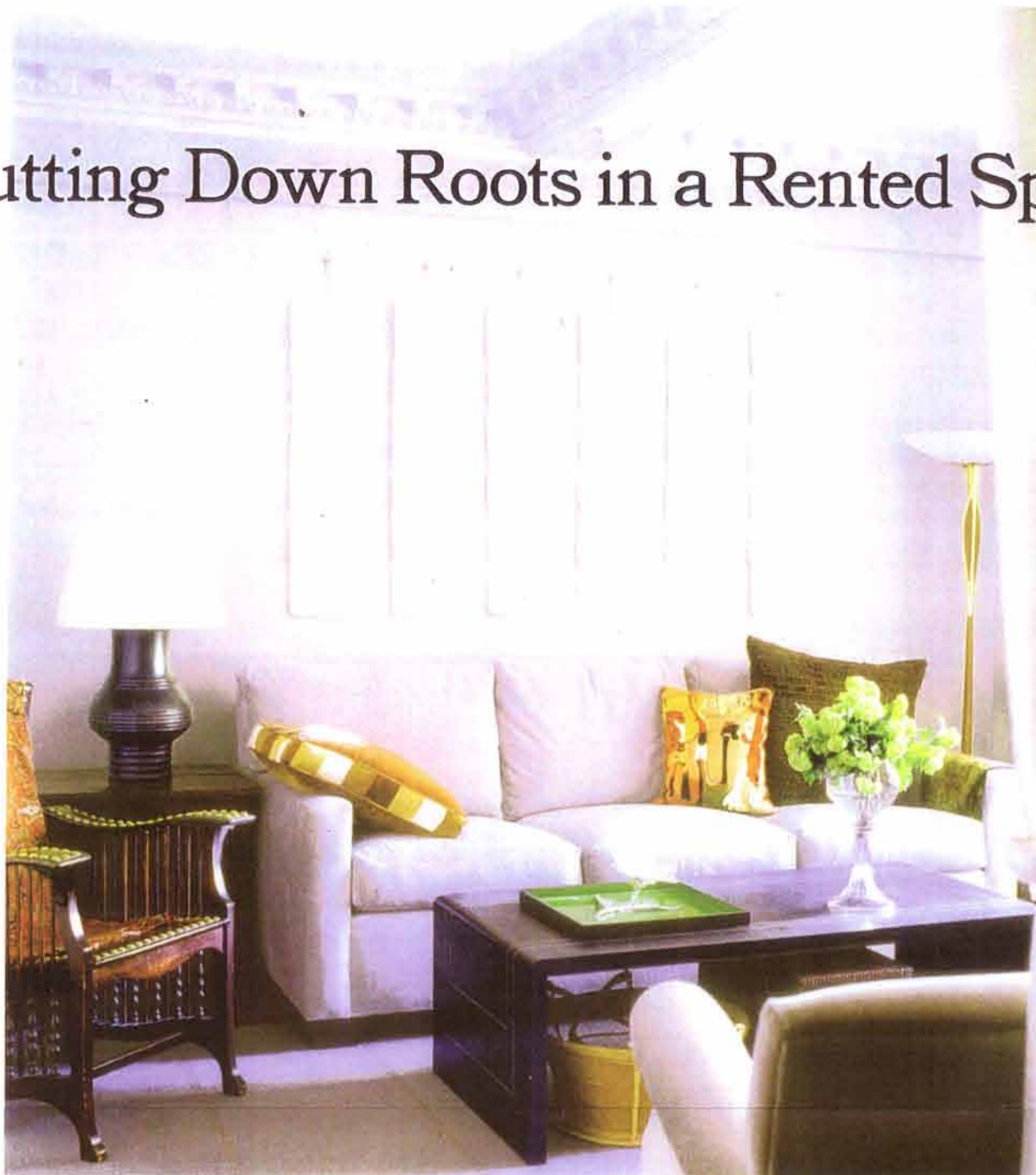
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HOUSE PROUD

Putting Down Roots in a Rented Space



ZOOMING IN After framing a doorway with curtains, Irwin Weiner used a glass chandelier arm as a tieback, top. Above, an angel in a plaster niche set into the wall of one corridor.



Photographs by William Waldron for The New York Times



DISPLAY SPACE Mr. Weiner, left, and Jay Johnson, right, in their art-filled entrance hall. Over their sofa, left, is a work by Xawery Wolski. The cornice was painted one shade lighter than the pale gray walls.

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cations, but by Gothic Cabinet Craft instead of a high-priced artisan. (The cabinets, plus flooring in the kitchen in yellow and white square tiles, cost about \$4,000.)

And the elaborate wood and plaster moldings that frost the ceiling of the living-dining room are brand new, though they would not have been out of place in 1926, when the neo-Renaissance apartment building was built of brick and stone and dappled with Moravian art-pottery tiles.

"Irwin's apartment absolutely amazed me when I saw it," said Jay Johnson, 52, a children's book publisher, who is Mr. Weiner's companion. "I'm from the Midwest, where if you rent a house or apartment, you resist making any major improvements because it's not really yours. It impressed me that he was the kind of person who would put down roots in a spot people like me might see as temporary."

Mr. Weiner (pronounced WEE-ner), born and raised in South Africa, the son of a real estate developer, attributes his nesting instincts and some of his well-tailored sense of style to his parents' low-slung 1960's villa on a slope of Table Mountain, the cloud-clad mesa that towers behind the coastal city of Cape Town. A bit like Ewan McGregor's cool-cat digs in "Down With Love," it had chocolate-brown carpeting, ribbon-mahogany details complemented by matching wood-grain Formica, built-in furniture by a student of Germany's modernist Bauhaus design school and, naturally, a kidney-shape swimming pool. "It was swinging," said Mr. Johnson, who saw the homestead firsthand when he went to Cape Town to meet Mr. Weiner's family.

The house was also very well constructed. "It was difficult to knock a nail in any wall," Mr. Weiner said, adding, "That's one of the reasons I like this apartment so much. It has a similar sense of solidity."

The apartment has a serene air of permanence, but when Mr. Weiner moved in a decade ago, its plaster walls were layered with nearly 80 years of cracking, chipping paint. He had it freshly skim-coated, top to bottom, and the broad window frames and paneled doors stripped to reclaim their crisp details. "Getting the bones right is often overlooked in New York," Mr. Weiner said. "People spend lots of money on a fantastic B&B Italia sofa and then wonder why it looked so great in the showroom and so awful when they got it home. It's because the background is all wrong."

Improving backgrounds is Mr. Weiner's obsession. On his first night in the 1920 Bucks County farmhouse that he and Mr. Johnson bought in January, for example, he broke out a can of Spackle and started sealing the previous owner's nail holes.



TEXTURED Above, Mr. Weiner used horizontal moldings on the bedroom walls and painted one wall white to exaggerate the size of its windows. The living room, right, has Victorian-style tufted chairs, a 17th-century Flemish table and an industrial felt carpet.

As soon as the apartment's new plaster was dry, Mr. Weiner painted each room bright and bold. "Well, that was a mistake," he said dryly. The cheery colors were especially jarring with his Mixmaster collection of strong-silhouette furnishings, which includes a 17th-century Flemish table with startlingly bulbous legs and vintage Murano-glass doorstops in the shape of giant snails.

Mr. Weiner has an eye for a bargain, too. A late-19th-century wooden chair, whose ribbon-candy curved arms are studded with

'Behind every piece of kitsch lurks a good design.'

chunky brass nailheads, cost him \$70 on an antiquing trip through Farmington, Conn.

"Rooms can be eclectic but not hectic," said Mr. Weiner, whose desk displays a Starns Twins photograph of the Parthenon alongside a 1960's vermeil wedding diadem made by Cartier. Camp? You bet, especially in a room that is anchored by a massive antique ebony-and-mahogany Dutch kas, or armoire. But Mr. Weiner has an explanation that says as much about his aesthetic generosity as it does about his sense of fun: "One of my professors at university always said that behind every piece of kitsch lurks a



good design."

The apartment's calm palette of taupes, grays and autumnal browns allows the forthright shapes of the furniture to stand out and draws visitors from romantic gloom (plum-brown entrance hall) into optimistic light (a living-dining room whose walls are a Sherwin-Williams pearly gray). The only power punch of color is private: the Cream-sicle-orange bedroom, which Mr. Weiner gave an Art Moderne air by wrapping it with widely set horizontal bands of wood molding painted to match.

Extras like these make the apartment nobler than it started out. A robber-baron-era assortment of picture moldings, diminutive corbels and acanthus-leaf details — some plaster, others wood, all ready-made — ornament the ceiling and beams of the living-dining room, but they have been painted "dead flat," Mr. Weiner said, rather than highlighted with a semigloss finish. (He used the same color as for the walls, but a shade lighter, Sherwin-Williams No. 1003.) "I didn't want them to be noticed especially," he said, noting that buying and installing new moldings cost about \$8,000. "Just to give the place a little extra dignity."

Inspired by sprawling New York apartments that have been chopped up into smaller, more marketable bits, the moldings give the main room, the entrance hall and the corridor between bedroom and bath the rich character of "the tail end of a big rambling place on the Upper West Side," Mr. Weiner said. Lengths of half-inch wood molding are glued inside the panels of the apartment's doors, too, giving them custom-made heft. If that were not enough, Mr. Weiner cut a

small oval opening in the bedroom and bathroom doors, just large enough to inset a medallion of milky glass, which preserves privacy while admitting light.

His style is not only good to live in, but it is also chockablock with common sense. Fine objects, for instance, are not treated with kid gloves. For buffet dinners, the Flemish table is pushed against a wall and loaded with large ceramic cachepots — antique Luneville, Victorian transferware, even a paisley-pattern 1970's rarity by Etrö, the Italian fashion house — which have been lined with clear plastic inserts and filled with salad and other food.

Beside the sofa stands a venerable Korean rice chest of well-battered wood, which holds bed linens for overnight guests like Mr. Johnson's son, a Chicago college student, and daughter, a nurse. The Armani-minimal carpet in the living-dining room is made of hemstitched industrial felt, but its broad gray stripes are precisely the width of a bolt of the material, ensuring graphic glory without waste. And to unify the paintings, sketches and watercolors, Mr. Weiner displays them in mismatched but chromatically coherent black-and-gold frames.

Lessons like that haven't been lost on Mr. Johnson. "Sharing my life with an interior designer certainly has been an eye-opener," he said, settling his lanky frame into a mouse-gray mohair armchair beneath a funky space-age wall light by the 1950's French designer Pierre Gauriche. "Where I grew up, people lived in brick houses, living rooms had celery green walls, and televisions always went into family rooms. Nobody lived even remotely like this."

Specs: Making Much Of Moldings

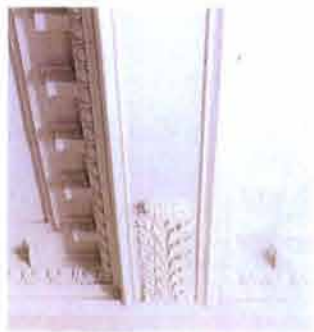
USING moldings can be like drawing with a large pen," said Irwin Weiner, an interior designer, and the proof is in his Upper West Side apartment, a small space given a big artistic bang by adding picture and dentil moldings and acanthus leaves (below) to the ceiling beams. Details, he said, "add rhythm, define a period or create a mood."

So where to find leaves and moldings — along with baseboards, corbels and medallions — stylish enough to transform a lackluster studio into an Art Deco salon? Mr. Weiner went to Hyde Park Fine Art of Moldings in Long Island City, Queens, for plaster dentil molding (www.hyde-park.com; 718-706-0504). The narrow wood picture molding on the beams is from Dykes Lumber in Manhattan (212-929-3580; nine locations in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania). The acanthus leaves, to be glued in place, are made of composition, a putty that dries to a hard surface, from Decorators Supply in Chicago (773-847-6300; www.decoratorsupply.com).

Prices for trim depend on the material, size and complexity of design, with plaster dentil molding costing about \$10 to \$25 a foot and composition leaves from \$4 to \$11 a foot. Mr. Weiner favors plaster moldings, saying they do not expand and contract with humidity and cold and are thus less likely to crack over time. Composition putty is also durable and often costs less than plaster. But beware of plastic or pressed foam, Mr. Weiner warned, adding, "Plastic moldings just seem so, well, plastic."

Mr. Weiner offered another bit of advice: moldings generally look best when painted to match the ceiling or walls, and that means "dead flat" or matte finish paint. He used high-gloss pale gray paint from Sherwin-Williams for the walls (No. 1002) and a flat paint one shade lighter (No. 1003) for the moldings.

"Often clients are disappointed when the moldings aren't further highlighted with color," Mr. Weiner said. "I often tell them that their space will look like a public building if they don't 'paint out' the moldings. Moldings are strong enough to stand on their own." MITCHELL OWENS



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