



ELLE
SEPTEMBER 2010 / GWENWOOD

THE URBAN ELECTRIC Co.



FROM HIS TRADEMARK tangerine-lacquered ceilings to his penchant for overscale-gingham walls, Jeffrey Bilhuber has never been one to shy away from bold statements. But sometimes a project calls for a more nuanced approach. Such was the case with a sun-splashed New York townhouse the interior designer was hired to update for a modern family. "You know those Nancy Meyers movies, like *Something's Gotta Give* and *It's Complicated*, where you're swept up by the sets?" he asks. "From the moment I first saw it, I knew this townhouse had that kind of shimmering, cinematic beauty."

While townhouses can be dark, this one—an 1877 gem on Manhattan's Upper East Side—has the good fortune to be surrounded by lower-lying buildings. "The way the structure is sited allows the house to breathe and literally pulls sunlight and air through it," Bilhuber says. "There is a breeziness to it. It simply feels great."

The home's interiors had been modified over the years as successive generations of owners renovated to suit changing tastes, Bilhuber arrived to find a place with soaring ceilings and a pastiche of design

motifs. Architect Peter Pennoyer, who has collaborated with Bilhuber on several projects, was brought in to harmonize the interiors. "Peter simplified the architecture and made it more cohesive, while helping to bring even more light into the home's core," Bilhuber says.

That luminosity drove the decorator's palette for the project, an airy scheme of celadon, ivory, and khaki, with wisps of amethyst and sky-blue reminiscent of the washed hues of frescoes and aged plaster walls. For Bilhuber, the tones are emblematic of the current mood in interior design. "Clients are asking for a return to neutral," he says. "It's calming and feels appropriate now." The home's palette is a counterpoint to his more exuberant, colorful work—but, he notes, "It's not beige."

Another factor was the sheer verticality of the townhouse. To emphasize the rooms' height, Bilhuber kept the visual interplay low to the horizon, with most of the action occurring at eye level or lower. In the living area, for example, a brown-and-sepia geometric carpet anchors three seating groups, while the ceiling and walls feel sparse and open. "As you climb up, the house simply evaporates around you," he says.