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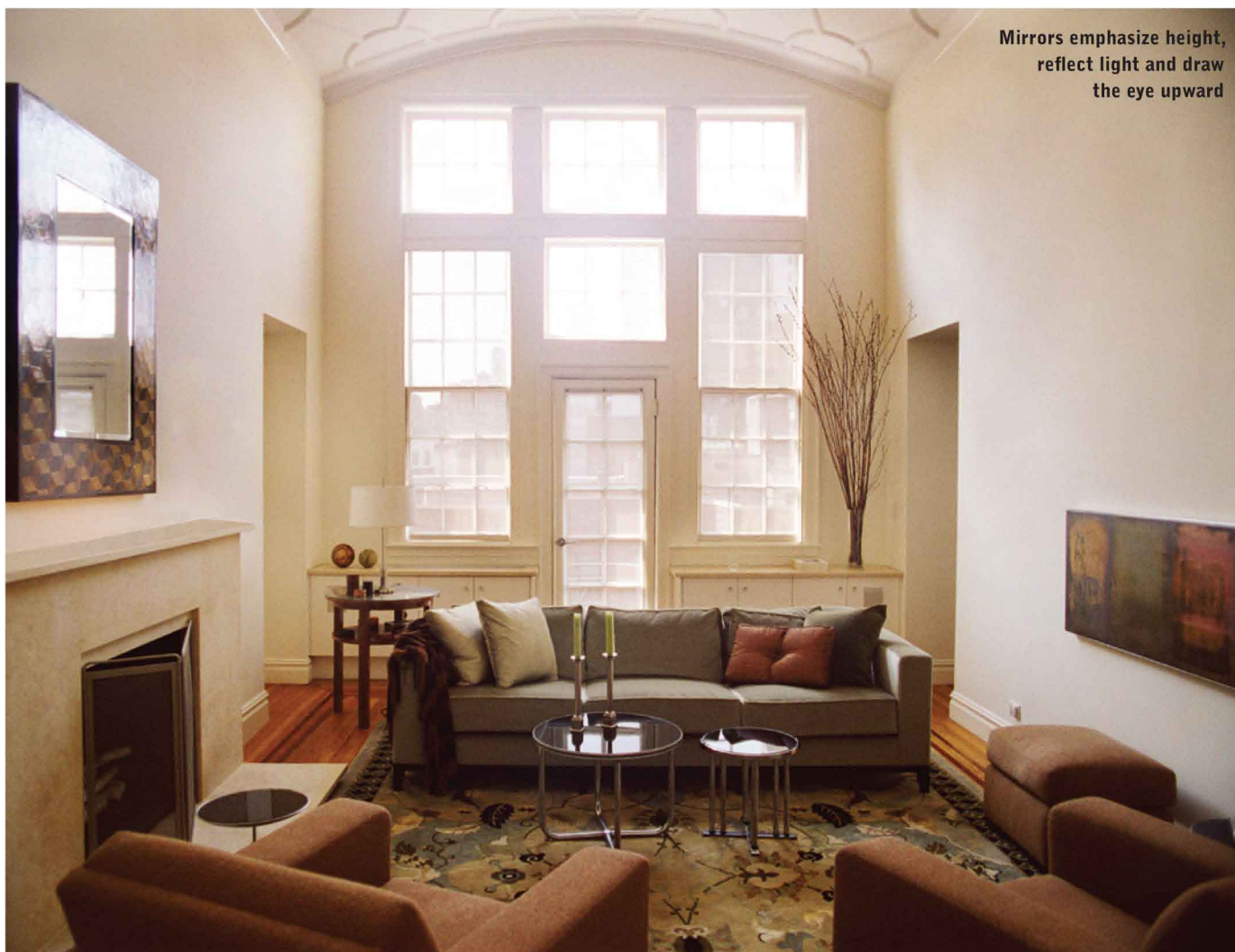
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Mirrors emphasize height, reflect light and draw the eye upward

BRIN WAGG

# PIED-À-TERRE LIVING

*Interior design for the part-time home*

BY IYNA BORT CARUSO

**H**igh style, low maintenance and creature comforts — that's what pied-à-terre owners are demanding these days.

In this real estate niche of part-time residences, interior design isn't just about maximizing square footage and streamlining space. It's about rethinking the layout in altogether different ways than one would in a primary home.

Pied-à-terre is a French term that translates to a "foot on the ground." In many respects, however, it's for folks on the go. The spaces are often used by business executives who'd rather own quarters in an oft-visited destination than rack up loyalty points at a hotel, or by out-of-towners who want to experience urban life like a local. For the latter, it's the yang to a yin lifestyle, an opportunity to enjoy a city's pleasures in a way tourists never fully can. The

demand for pieds-à-terre has been bolstering sales of studios and one-bedrooms in major cities.

## REWORKING THE RULES

Standard design rules of the full-time home do not apply. Indeed it takes a healthy disregard for what convention dictates to make an occasional crash pad feel like a homey habitat. Even thinking of the apartment as a crash pad is an impulse one has to fight. Mismatched furniture and cast-offs can veer dangerously into college dorm territory and have no place here.

Heather Higgins is the principal of Higgins Design Studio, a Manhattan-based interior design firm that specializes in optimizing space and style in smaller living environments. Pied-à-terre clients have distinct needs, she says. Her biggest challenge is clarifying



exactly what those needs are so she can reconceive and reconfigure each home to meet them.

For those who maintain a place for business convenience, “the approach is to make sure the space is in sync with the way they need it to function and supports the homeowner emotionally,” says Higgins. That means understanding what technology is required — computer, video, sound system — because housing and powering it drives a lot of layouts and lighting schemes. She may even suggest that a dining area or a bedroom be converted into more productive office space.

When play, rather than work, is on the agenda, it’s a different story, however. Part-time homeowners looking for their occasional adrenalin shot of city life may not need full-blown kitchens. These second-home owners tend to entertain in more casual ways. Cocktail parties, for instance, typically trump formal dinner parties.

There is also an emotional component unique to pied-à-terre design, an awareness that the homeowner toggles between two worlds.

## CREATING CALM AND COMFORT

Permanent city dwellers are in sync with their surroundings. They’ve acclimated to the rhythms and pacing of the neighborhood. That’s not necessarily so with part-timers. They may be coming from quieter suburbs, across a bridge or even across time zones. Settling in for short spurts at a time calls for constant mental and cultural adjustments. Some people never feel fully comfortable in their environments. The right design approach can compensate. “We need to create a feeling of calm to counteract the stress of fast-paced city life and what’s outside their front door — noise, steel and concrete,” says Higgins. “We want to make sure the level of comfort is high, with soft, inviting seating and carpeted floors. We avoid furniture with hard edges, and use colors that are softer and less intense.”

Color is important since it strongly affects how people feel in their space. Warm colors like reds intensify emotions. Higgins tends to lean toward less intense, lighter colors to cultivate a feeling of expansiveness. She also minimizes the use of cold, hard surfaces. “There are enough of them on the street. Instead we bring in textures like wood and natural fibers to create a sense of calm and a relationship to nature.” Furnishings and fabrics need to be low maintenance, too. Come-and-go residents want no-fuss environments. Furnishings that are easily cleaned, strong and durable best fit the bill.

Keeping clutter to a minimum is important in any home, small or spacious, part-time or full-time. But there’s a visceral response to clutter that is magnified in pieds-à-terre. Walking into a space packed with stuff can feel visually chaotic and emotionally unsettling. It saps energy and overwhelms. Even the display of valuables, such as antiques or prized objects, can stifle when there are simply too many of them. Better to select large-scale, tailored furnishings rather than collections of “lots of little pieces,” Higgins suggests.

Dual-functioning items also go a long way toward streamlining the space. Examples? An oversized ottoman that can be used as a spare seat. A wicker chest as a stand-in for a coffee table. An island that doubles as a table or workstation. These days there are more smart options on the market than ever to take the sting out of stingy spaces.

In a pied-à-terre, this minimalism is a highly regarded approach but also one that needs to be layered with a coating of warmth. Personal touches are key. Artwork and photographs are the kinds of accessories that ensure the space feels like a real home and not a sterile hotel room.

That’s exactly what Robert Hawks and his wife, Wolhee Choe, had in mind when they moved into a sunny 500-square-foot studio coop in Manhattan’s East Village last fall. The couple had been living in the neighborhood full time for years and enjoying a second home in Woodstock, N.Y., as a weekend retreat. With their recent co-op purchase, they flip-flopped the scenario. They now call Woodstock their primary residence and use the New York studio about 30 percent of the time. With interior design guidance from Higgins, they undertook major renovations — expanding the bathroom, putting down new bamboo floors, and adding bookcases, cabinets and drawers along two walls. “You can’t put your finger on anything that was here before. It feels quite spacious

and very livable. We love it,” Hawks says.

Most importantly, they conformed the space to their personal style. “When you’re in a pied-à-terre, you want to feel like you’re at home.” They carved out a computer workstation for Choe, a literature professor, and an area for entertaining friends. To make it feel homey, they furnished it with the art they love and items evocative of their full-time residence. Among these items: a coffee table and rugs purchased in Woodstock.

## ADDING CHARACTER

Janet Lee, Manhattan-based author of *Living in a Nutshell: Posh and Portable Decorating Ideas for Small Spaces* (Harper Collins, 2012), thinks of a pied-à-terre as “an alter ego waiting to come out,” an opportunity to experiment with décor, art, color and textures an owner might not risk in a primary residence. “The part-time pads I’ve seen of late suffer from generic box syndrome, chosen more for location, budget and convenience, without a hint of character,” says Lee, who owned a clapboard country house in Columbia County, N.Y., and kept a modern pied-à-terre in Brooklyn for a “few unforgettable years.” She sees the pied-à-terre as a revolving design lab and prefers to take a more flexible approach to the décor. Call it instant architecture in which little tricks are used for big effect. Among Lee’s favorite ideas: covering an entire wall with salvaged picture frames all painted the same color and mounting a gel-fuel fireplace on wheels so that it can easily be moved to any part of the apartment.

Lee also emphasizes lighting, using a “fill, accent, glow” method. Ambient light is the main layer of light that’s used to fill the room. Task lighting, such as a reading lamp, is for accenting and defining zones. It adds depth and dimension to otherwise flat surfaces. And then there’s what Lee calls a “glow” layer, which can be anything from the shimmer of candlelight to the reflection of mirrors and crystals. It is this layer, she says, that “amplifies the size and glamor of tight quarters.”

Every true home needs one’s personal stamp. Sometimes the less often a home is used, the more it’s needed. As designer Higgins says, the most important part in designing a home is that it reflects who the owner is. “It’s not just about creating a look, but making sure the homeowner feels connected to it personally.”

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*— Heather Higgins, Designer*