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Behind The Façade - Fire Wall

Manhattan's most striking new townhouse guards its privacy with a thin metal skin. On the other side: a half-buried media center, an indoor-outdoor kitchen and a rare rooftop living room.

Every house has a story, some more dramatic than others—like the tale of the brand-new townhouse on Greenwich, which thwarts sidewalk voyeurism with a sheet of steel. “Exactly three years ago, we came out of Pastis—it was my birthday—and we saw a building for sale,” says a fairly recent London transplant to New York. “It was a 50-year-old derelict building; we were literally buying the land.” That birthday girl and her husband bid on it the next day, eventually paying \$1.6 million. A few months later, the shell fell down on its own and had to be demolished by the city. And last week, the couple and their three young children moved into the a 5,000-square-foot townhouse on the site, one of only a handful built from the ground up in Manhattan in the past 50 years.

Architect Matthew Baird wasn't a stranger to small lots—before starting his own firm, he was project architect for Tod Williams Billie Tsien & Associates' American Folk Art Museum—but he saw a family home in the hottest neighborhood in the city as a unique sort of challenge. For privacy and security, the façade had to be largely opaque, but to make the interior airy, he needed big windows. So the front became a single sheet of rolled Cor-Ten steel, 40-by-14-feet, and only 1.5" thick (they had to close the inbound lanes on one level of the George Washington Bridge when it was trucked in). As for the rear, it's all glass, including a twelve-

by-twelve “door” pane that, when folded back, makes the deck and kitchen into one big room.

“One of the great secrets of that house is that you can actually see deep into the space from the street, but only very limited angles,” says Baird. “The big surprise is the bright light coming from the garden.”



The steel facade was installed in a single morning by Alcon Builders Group, which handled all construction. On the ground floor, Baird and the project architect Talia Braude put in a garage.



Above, a rooftop fireplace, almost never seen in Manhattan. “We really wanted to use the outdoors,” even during the winter, says the client. “New York has dry air, not English weather—there’s a blue sky when it’s cold.” The roof also has a hot tub (not shown). The leather chairs and ottoman are from Troy, the silk rug from Tai Ping.

“The clients were so funny about it,” says Baird. “They said, ‘If we are going to build in America, we are going to have a massive barbecue.’” A Wolf grill is built-in, along with an outdoor refrigerator. The deck is ipe, a Brazilian hardwood. Above, the kitchen counter was poured in place from the same polished concrete as the floors and stairs. The cabinets below the counter are Boffi, the leather bar stools by Jim Zivic. (Child-welfare worriers, fret not: A railing was installed by the stairs after this photo was taken.) The clients wanted a kitchen area “where you don’t quite know whether you are in or out.” So just beyond the walnut dining table and chairs from BCCW are the teak dining table and benches designed by Baird to withstand the weather.

