

VOGUE



The ethos of 'more is more' reaches new heights with this kaleidoscopic home in Manhattan's Upper East Side, where every surface is an opportunity for more pattern, more statement pieces and more panache. Photographed by Bénédicte Drummond.

Behind the late 19th-century façade of John Demsey's six-storey house on Manhattan's Upper East Side lies a riot of colour and pattern, where Pop Art collides with pop icons, mid-century modernism with 1970s family heirlooms, geometric prints with wild florals. "I feel comfortable in organised chaos," says Demsey, a leading light in the beauty business. As executive group president of the Estée Lauder Companies Inc., he is responsible for masterminding the success and fortunes of brands such as M.A.C, Tom Ford Beauty, Le Labo and Jo Malone London. "It's just the way I find my zen. I subscribe to [late Hollywood decorator, jewellery and film set designer] Tony Duquette's ethos of 'more is more'."

Located in Treadwell Farm, one of the city's oldest landmark blocks just a few minutes' walk to Central Park, the area is filled with low-rise houses that back onto each other's gardens. "So, you really don't feel like you're in New York City," Demsey says. Having rented a house (once belonging to the late actor Montgomery Clift) just two doors up for almost a decade when the

opportunity arose Demsey jumped at the chance to buy in the area. The house was very traditional, and nothing had been changed for years so the beauty exec dived into a complete refresh. “I could rebuild all the real-life things — the kitchen, laundry, bathrooms and closets — exactly how I wanted them as opposed to just decorating my way around what was already there.”



Working with his long-term friend, interior designer Bibi Monnahan, and architect Joseph Cornacchia, Demsey took two years to strip the house back to its bare bones, with just the façade, an existing glass back to the house, and original crown moulding on the first floor remaining.

He “blew” out each floor to suit more open-plan living, installing a playroom for his 11-year-old daughter, Marie-Hélène, and a utility room featuring a cedar closet equipped with a drycleaner-style conveyor belt for easy access.

Demsey also converted a labyrinth of tiny rooms into a floor for “one giant hotel suite” with a main bedroom and home office. Now, it is a house as perfect for entertaining — squeezing 40 people into the living room for a gathering honouring rising fashion star Brandon Maxwell for instance — as it is for relaxing at the end of the day.

“Like everybody else, I throw myself into bed, stream something on TV and don’t move,” he says. With Monnahan’s help, Demsey has filled the house with a kaleidoscope of high-low fabulousness, where covetable classic gems such as a Willy Rizzo sofa — inherited from his “very hip” parents who bought it in the ’70s from one of Truman Capote’s ‘swans’, CZ Guest, and since reupholstered in a plush blue velvet — rub happily alongside accessories by Fornasetti and Gucci, and contemporary pieces like a Vincenzo De Cotiis coffee table and a Patrick Naggar sideboard.

Lighting by Apparatus provides a layering of continuity between each floor. “The spirit of the house is very much a personal story and a personal style,” adds Demsey. “Some people just choose a designer, give them a budget and move into it. That’s not me.”

Added to this kinetic mix are sculptures, glass and ceramics including an Ettore Sottsass odaliska sculpture from the ’60s and a recent Reinaldo Sanguino abstract glazed ceramic stool. Every surface is layered with photography by the likes of David Bailey, Jean-Paul Goude, Steven Klein and David LaChapelle.

The resulting home is a highly spirited curation of past, present and future. “I could never have afforded to do all this in a day, it has evolved over time,” Demsey says. It has also been designed for everyday life — accommodating the chaos of three cats and seven dogs, and his daughter

playing with slime on the dining room table. “Houses are for living in,” he says. “I like being constantly stimulated and moving things around. Sometimes, when I go out of town, Bibi comes in and switches things around the house to surprise me. I love it because it reminds of things I’d forgotten I had. Suddenly, they look unique and different again.”