

# The New York Times

February 15, 2011

THE APPRAISAL

CHRISTINE HAUGHNEY

## On One Job, Renovating Perspective And Home

In the 25 years Stephen Paul Ackerman has spent renovating apartments and homes, he has formed a few very strong opinions. He knows what he likes in kitchen faucets (Waterworks brand, in particular), and which paint colors work best in small spaces (try Benjamin Moore's Coastal Fog).

He also has learned to politely tune out his clients' gripes and worries about the cost of renovations.

Then, Mr. Ackerman, 61, tried to renovate an apartment with his girlfriend, Marcy Kugelman. He soon faced a construction budget that doubled before him, and a partner ready to question all of his well-formed opinions.

"When clients come to me and have seen my previous work, they say, 'You take the lead,'" Mr. Ackerman said. "This was my partner who had her own taste."

While Ms. Kugelman, 62, is not a professional designer, she has renovated before, and she had her own ideas. She pushed for brown and pink shades over Mr. Ackerman's preference for gray. She also pressed him to spend more to get what they really wanted.

"He's used to running his own show, and he wasn't going to run his own show with me," Ms. Kugelman said. "I had to compromise a lot, and I don't like compromise."

Mr. Ackerman, it seems, has been dealt a bit of justice for all the New Yorkers who have sparred with general contractors and interior designers. He said he had an entirely new appreciation for how difficult the renovation process could be.

Mr. Ackerman and Ms. Kugelman, who does volunteer work, were introduced in July 2007 by two real estate brokers, Mary Anne Cotter and Dee Simonson, now of Prudential Douglas Elliman. Mr. Ackerman was selling his newly renovated East Village apartment, and Ms. Kugelman was buying her first co-op near-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Stephen Paul Ackerman and Marcy Kugelman in their apartment, which they renovated together, on Central Park West. At right, one of their bathrooms features a two-piece sculpture.

by. By the next January, they were living together.

Last summer, they closed on a \$1.85 million three-bedroom apartment at 239 Central Park West that they thought needed little work. They planned to make small changes to the kitchen, renovate a bathroom and restore some prewar details removed by a former owner.

When Mr. Ackerman started the job, he realized that he had opened a contractor's can of worms: he was trying to patch the kitchen's Mexican tile work when a wall collapsed on him. He had to replace terra cotta tiles he thought he would be able to restore. Then he had to factor in Ms. Kugelman's ideas.

"He kept saying, 'This is way over budget,' and I kept saying 'This is our apartment,'" Ms. Kugelman said.

While they stuck to their construction schedule, their budget doubled to a stomach-wrenching \$150,000. Mr. Ackerman estimat-

ed that their renovations would have cost \$300,000 if he had not overseen the job and drawn his own plans.

Ms. Kugelman still has some things she would like to change, like the fireplace. But she has learned to choose her battles.

"We have to take turns winning on something," Ms. Kugelman said.

### Unneighborly Review

Kiri Blakeley expected to receive criticism when she recently published her first book, "Can't Think Straight," about discovering that her longtime boyfriend was gay.

She just did not expect the critic to live in her 80-unit co-op in Windsor Terrace. One reviewer on Amazon who went by the reviewing name Sartre identified himself as Ms. Blakeley's neighbor and accused her of using the building listserv to promote her memoir. He gave her one star

and advised readers, "Don't be fooled or waste a dime on this book."

Ms. Blakeley still does not know which neighbor it might be. But she said, "Once I read it, the first thing I did was lock my door!"

### It's Worth a Try

The conversion of the legendary Apthorp apartment building into condominiums has been marked by foreclosure threats, dueling rabbinical courts, inquiries from the state attorney general and mice sightings that have eclipsed talk about its former celebrity tenants.

That has not stopped Murray Huberfeld from trying to flip an apartment in the building, on Broadway on the Upper West Side, for double what he paid. The financier closed in December on a 4,200-square-foot apartment on the second floor. He paid \$5 million. On Feb. 3, he put the apartment up for sale, for \$10.6 million.

"Space like this would go for \$30 million at 15 Central Park West," said his broker, Ilan Bracha of Keller Williams.



### On the Bright Side

Plenty of New Yorkers say they feel burdened by how much their rent or mortgage payments swallow up from their paychecks. But a new survey released by the brokerage Stribling advises them to quit whining.

Stribling, which worked with its global affiliate, Savills, studied residential property prices in Moscow, London, Hong Kong and New York.

Compared with New York, housing in Moscow is slightly pricier, while housing costs 25 percent more in London and twice as much in Hong Kong.