



O At Home
Spring 2007

N A T E B E R K U S

Manhattan Transfer

Ariel Foxman

Nate Berkus has a new apartment, and he shows Ariel Foxman how he took the place from ho hum to humdinger.

"You've got to try the beet salad. They serve it with this terrific house-made vinaigrette," Nate Berkus says. We're settling in with lunch menus at the New York City restaurant that's kitty-corner to the building where he's just finished decorating his new home away from home. "And they have this really awesome matzo-ball soup, too." Like many of Nate's suggestions, these are delivered with the fervor of gospel, and before I realize it, I am having an "I'll have what he's having" moment.

And while it should surprise no one that a man like Nate offers up design-for-living recommendations on a dime – it's a short leap from window dressing to salad dressing – it is amazing to witness how quickly this Chicago boy has been able to pick up the local slang, blend in, and come across as a true-blue, born-and-raised New Yorker. Not only does he know precisely what appetizer to order in just the right neighborhood spot, but he's also managed to create a home for himself that would have anyone believe he's been living in Manhattan for decades.

"The truth is, I'm really familiar with the city because I've been working here for so long," Nate says. "Between visiting private clients or seeing my attorneys or having meetings with the people at Linens 'n Things [where he has his own line of home décor], I've been coming here at least every other week for the past few years."

The time had come, though, for him to put down roots. So he found a real-estate agent online and called to say that he'd be in the city in a week and would have a day to find an apartment. "I explained to him that people just

don't do that," says Barry Rudnick, a Corcoran Group vice president and Nate's broker. Still, they made it work. "I knew what I could afford," Nate says. "Plus, it had to be old. It had to be a one-bedroom. It had to have high ceilings. And it had to make me feel happy." After spending a full afternoon seeing ten places, he naturally decided the last apartment was the one.

"I walked in and I could just picture it immediately, living here," says Nate, who made an offer that day. A few weeks later, the prewar, fourth-floor, 500-square-foot one-bedroom co-op was his. Mission accomplished.

And if the search and purchase took place in a New York minute, that's nothing compared to the lightning-speed renovation that transformed an apartment into a home in just two months. Major initiatives involved a bathroom gut, a four-paneled French-door installation, and the removal of a wall, not to mention the usual laundry list of painting, tiling, cabinetry, and appliance installation. "I call it renovation by BlackBerry," says Nate, who checked in with his contractors by e-mail whenever he had a free moment. "I think I visited the place only four times during the entire process."

But it wasn't Nate's hands-off approach that made his contractor anxious. "It's that he didn't want the place to look new," contractor Randy Polumbo says. Nate wanted to make sure the apartment didn't seem perfect – that it looked "archaeological."

And Nate couldn't be happier with the end product. As he walks through the apartment today, it's those imperfections he points out first. "I can't wait to see the seams in the wood [of the floor] start to separate," he says. "My joy is old things, the soul of things."

The apartment's soul was intact, but it was time to give the place some heart. Nate was able to do for himself what he has long been doing



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for others: create a home that really reflects its owner. And he didn't let his apartment's modest size stifle his decorating endeavor. "Whatever didn't work or fit here," Nate says, "would just make it back to the Chicago apartment." A decorator's cheat, no doubt, but he owns up to only one mistake along the way (a too-large bookshelf). He mixed new and vintage purchases from his favorite resources. Practically every other object on display is a gift from a friend, something made by a friend, or a souvenir from a trip he took with a friend. The anecdotes alone in this apartment require their own storage space.

"This is more than a pied-à-terre, it's an extension of my home in Chicago," he says, pointing to a print by artist Günther Förg (it's one of a series of three; the two others hang in his Chicago apartment). "It's really important that we always remember that connective tissue."