

ALAN WANZENBERG

THE ARCHITECT HONORS JED JOHNSON'S VISION IN NEW YORK

Text by Steven M. L. Aronson/Photography by Scott Frances



Arts and Crafts furniture and pottery meet contemporary art in the 1906 artist's studio in New York of architect Alan Wanzenberg and the late designer Jed Johnson. ABOVE: *Dandi*, 1997, by Walton Ford hangs over the living room's turn-of-the-

century mantel. "Interestingly, the mantel was a collaboration between an architect and a designer," says Wanzenberg. RIGHT: In front of the north-facing window are a lamp by Charles Sumner Greene and Gustav Stickley wicker chairs.







For the accommodation of the artistic fraternity, whether bachelors or benedicts," pronounced *American Architect and Building News* in its January 5, 1907, issue, "there is coming into fashion in Manhattan a very attractive class of studio buildings, in which the two-story studio on the north frontage is combined with a mezzanine or gallery treatment at the southern end, the mezzanine floor being given over to bedrooms for the artist and his family, if he have one, while the space below, on the main floor, provides liberally for dining room, kitchen and domestics." One such "studio" building, put up at the turn of the century on a small, narrow street in the West Sixties off Central Park, is the neo-Jacobean-façaded retreat of architect Alan Wanzenberg.

His apartment, occupying half of the seventh and eighth floors, was found in 1980 by Jed Johnson, the legendary designer who was Wanzenberg's companion and business partner until his death two years ago. What appealed to Johnson about the apartment was that it had never been altered—its oak floors and paneling and its carved moldings were spectacularly intact. "Jed's attitude was always, 'Don't mess with it too much, don't kill what's already there,'" recalls his friend and onetime decorating partner, Judith Hollander. "He believed that you should let a place be what it

"The art energizes the furniture," he says. A 1986 painting by Gianni Dessi is over the doorway; at right is a 1986 work by George Condo. On a Stickley table is a Mimmo Paladino sculpture. The Voysey carpet "was our first purchase—we based all the colors on it."



The tall living room absorbs Francesco Clemente's *Moon*, 1980. A pair of Edwin Lutyens ladderback chairs are near the Stickley settee. "Jed was a twin, and he bought things in pairs—it became a theme in his work," says Wanzenberg, whose office is on the mezzanine.



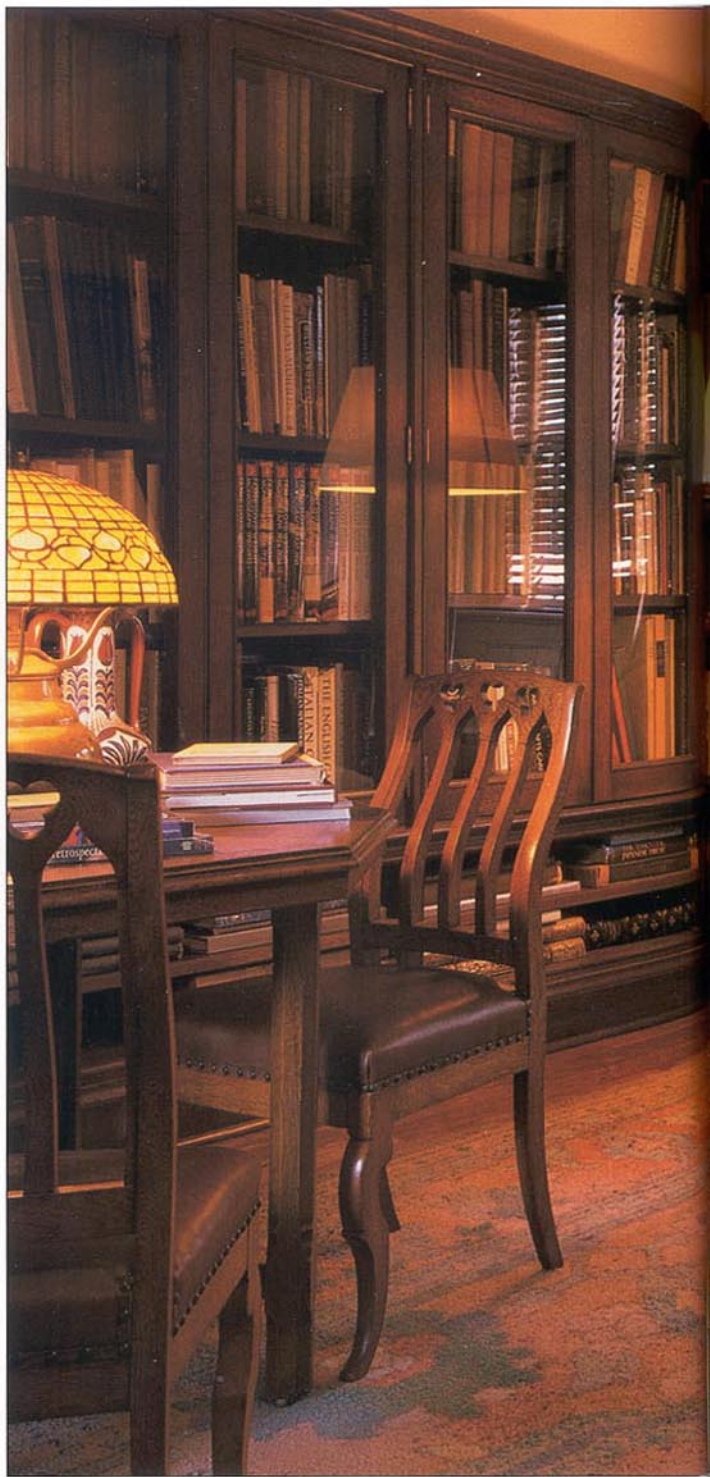


ABOVE: The table, sideboard and chandelier in the dining room are all by Gustav Stickley. "We built our collection over a ten-year period, starting in 1980," says Wanzenberg. Johnson chose the late-1920s French leather chairs "to add softness and take away the angularity."

wants to be, what it was made to be in the first place—just make it the best, the idealized, version of that."

Johnson and Wanzenberg had the imagination to keep the apartment plain while infusing that plainness with the patina of luxury—witness the intricately elegant loose-basket-weave terra-cotta tile in the entrance hall that extends all the way back to the kitchen, or the subtly tinted plaster walls throughout. "Jed had a terrific eye for detail and texture and finish and form," Hollander continues. "But not for structure. Alan understood structure—he provided the architectural firmament. And when they were through, the place looked like *them*, like Jed and Alan: lean and spare, natural and fresh."

The nucleus of the apartment—an environment in which each element works in



relation to an exigent but un-intimidating whole—is a collection of furniture famously free of affectation and extraneous ornament, its joinery, its hardware and the grain of its wood being ornament enough. In other words, major Arts and Crafts pieces by

such avatars as Gustav Stickley, Sidney Barnsley, Ernest Gimson, Dirk Van Erp and Charles Sumner Greene.

"We both had an affinity for this furniture, but it was really the place and the space that dictated the choice of aesthetic," Wanzenberg says.



"We did a lot of experiments. The Stickley pieces from the early 1900s turned out to be too geometric; then we discovered Harvey Ellis, who had worked with Stickley but had a more fluid line. And then we began buying English Arts and Crafts that

went well with the Ellis—the woods tended to be lighter. We found ourselves drawn to furniture by architects, especially for the big room: Ellis was an architect, and so were Edwin Lutyens and Charles Voysey. Voysey designed the large floral living room car-

pet and ended up selling it to Stickley's brother Leopold, who had it in his house in upstate New York."

To hear Wanzenberg talk is to savor a comment by his and Johnson's old friend and client, the writer Fran Lebowitz: "Jed and Alan are

"The low-ceilinged library was meant to contrast with the rest of the apartment," Wanzenberg says. By the draperies, made of William Morris's *Bird* fabric, is a sconce by Sidney Barnsley. Two 1860 Gothic Revival chairs by Roux & Company are near a 1900 Tiffany lamp.



"I wanted a juxtaposition of materials," Wanzenberg says of the master bedroom, where a 1962 George Nakashima walnut bed joins Frank Gehry's late-1970s cardboard tables. The 1996 Christopher Bucklow photo "suggests a person evaporating and a spirit expanding."

among the very few people I've known who absolutely deserve their possessions, because they understand them; their apartment is informed by an actual sensibility as opposed to a sense of longing."

The living room's grand dimensions (thirty feet square and twenty feet high, with

an enormous window whose small panes of translucent glass were replaced with larger transparent ones) afforded abundant wall space for hanging pictures. "At a time when no one else did, Jed saw the connection between Arts and Crafts furniture and modern art," notes

Wanzenberg. "He understood that these pieces would look too heavy and locked-in-place all grouped together and that they needed to be leavened. The George Condo mixed-media collage we bought has incredible energy against the furniture—it's nervy and jumpy." The same



can certainly be said for the sculpture by Mimmo Paladino: An open-air box containing two heads, a horse's and a man's, it awakens the gravely beautiful Stickley library table it rests on. "It's very narrative—the man has a Ulysses quality." A large-scale Francesco Clemente

tempera on paper from 1980, runically titled *Moon*, depicts a man falling. "It turned out to be horribly prophetic," says Wanzenberg, alluding to the circumstances of Johnson's death (he was a passenger on TWA Flight 800 when it fell from the sky).

For years the walls of

the apartment crackled and popped with Warhols—a reminder of Johnson's days with Andy Warhol, first editing and directing films and then decorating the artist's East Sixty-sixth Street town house. Those paintings—of Mao, Elvis, a lone Campbell's

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soup can and multiple dollar bills—all recently went to settle Johnson's estate. "In a way I felt liberated," Wanzenberg comments. "It gave me the opportunity to collect and hang other things." Over the living room mantel, for instance, where the Mao portrait had so authoritatively hung, he placed a large Walton Ford oil. "It has associations," he explains. "It's set in India, which is a place that Jed and I loved and traveled extensively in. And it has metaphors; it's about cultural clash—each of the three birds of prey in the painting represents a different caste." Below this squall of fowl can be found a serene Arts and Crafts fireplace with a quietly stylized thistle motif on its surrounding mosaic tile. It was created by designer Louis Millet and architect George Washington Maher for a house the latter built in Chicago in 1901, and it's fitting that it should have found its current home in the apartment of an architect and a designer.

The library off the double-height living room has a ceiling of only eight feet and is therefore a more intimate, less reverberant room. Johnson and Wanzenberg designed the oak cabinetry, which runs the length of one wall, in keeping with the room's moldings and trim. The

The dining room, which is separated from the modernized kitchen by a long peninsula of simply detailed oak and glass-fronted cabinetry, is a stronghold of Gustav Stickley, featuring his hanging chandelier, sconces, sideboard and table. The oversize-floral-patterned draperies in ocher and rust are by William Morris's daughter May, and the sideboard has lamps by Morris's colleague W. A. S. Benson.

A few years ago Johnson and Wanzenberg combined a simple upstairs bath and a small guest bedroom to make a bath-cum-dressing room that, with its exquisite basket-weave cream-and-green tile, gray-green cabinetry and 1930s French tub with chamfered corners, has to be high on the list of last words in symmetry and glamour.

The master bedroom, like the remaining guest bedroom, has been completely redone since Johnson's death. The bed is now held fast by a George Nakashima walnut frame that has a Japanese shape to it. "Jed and I bought it for a house we never built on land he owned in Telluride," Wanzenberg says. Frank Gehry cardboard side tables, a Georges Jouve ceramic-and-metal bedside table and ceramic lamp, a Paul Frankl chair and ottoman re-covered in

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carpet is a late-nineteenth-century floral Donegal weave. The draperies are by William Morris—his bluish-green *Bird* design of 1877—and the wallcovering, gold fronds on a green field, is Morris also (Johnson once credited the patterns, colors and craftsmanship of Morris's fabrics as being "a big element" in his own thinking). Grouped above a nineteenth-century sofa re-covered in leather are works on paper by Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Ross Bleckner, Philip Taaffe and Frank Moore—"all gifts from us to each other." There used to be an English Arts and Crafts piece here that they used as a kind of extension of their office. "I sold that partners desk," Wanzenberg says.

taupe raw silk, an Addison Mizner iron standing lamp and two Stickley rush-and-oak ladderback chairs all work singly and in combination.

An abstract photograph by Adam Fuss holds suggestive interest. "It looks like something you dream about," says Wanzenberg. "It's like the swirl of creation, which is, after all, the fundamental mystery of life. Since Jed's death," he reflects, "a lot of the collecting I've done and the modifications I've made are the product of a dialogue I feel I've had with him. I talk to him, as it were: Is this right? Is this good, or not? Does this 'sit'? At times it makes me sad, at times it's been stimulating, at times it's been exhilarating." □