

# INTERIOR DESIGN

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## heads up!

Don't be fooled by the 1840's facade—reinvented by Salo Levinas and Jeffrey Thrasher, this may be the most cutting-edge town house in Washington, D.C.

*text: raul barreneche photography: eric laignel*



**Secrets lurk inside the prim and**

proper houses of Georgetown. Veiled by flowering myrtles and magnolias, the stately residences where Pamela Harriman and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis once entertained still spawn their share of Washington gossip. When conversation turns to the former home of Evalyn Walsh McLean, owner of the Hope diamond, people are likely to be marveling less about legendary gemstones and more about the world-class collection of contemporary art hidden behind the white-painted brick and neat deep-green shutters.

The "house" actually started as two 1840's town houses, already joined by McLean's era. When Argentine collector-entrepreneurs Dani and Mirella Levinas bought the property, they called architect Salo Levinas, Dani's brother. It took seven months for the Old Georgetown Board and the federal Commission of Fine Arts to grant approvals for the exterior portions of the renovation: expanding the third floor and repositioning the front entry. "Everything had to look like it had been there forever," he says.

Those strict guidelines negotiated, the architect had free rein inside—where his firm, Shinberg Levinas, worked with Jeffrey Thrasher of Thrasher Design Company. Together, they turned classic Georgetown parlors into airy spaces where contemporary art and domestic life coexist comfortably. The first step was to gut the 8,000-square-foot interior, yielding a foyer, a study, and a guest bedroom on the ground level; a library, a combined living area and gallery, a dining room, and the kitchen on two; and a master bedroom and bath on three. A floating stair connects the different levels. Throughout, white terrazzo and dark wengé floors create a neutral →



*Previous spread:* Edgar De Souza's untitled bronze hides in plain sight outside a town house in Washington, D.C. The house's owner is the brother of Shinberg Levinas principal Salo Levinas, who collaborated on the project with Thrasher Design Company principal Jeffrey Thrasher.

*Opposite:* In the living area, Thrasher arranged Poul Kjaerholm wicker chairs, a Baron & Baron sofa covered in wool flannel, and lacquered tables. Massimo Vitali's Lernpark hangs above the gas fire. Next to it, Keila Alaver's leather Nina con Bebe faces Cildo Meireles's steel Descala.

*Top:* The second-floor wengé bridge flows into the zebrawood library, with its wool-covered Egg chair by Arne Jacobsen. *Center:* The library and living area are separated by a pedestal supporting Daniel Steinhilber's untitled work in Styrofoam plates and plastic forks. *Bottom:* Flanking the library's entry are Matthew Barney's mixed-media work and Lucia Koch's color photograph Tagliatelle. Antonio Citterio designed the wool-upholstered Charles sofa.



foundation for sleek furniture and the vibrant art of Matthew Barney, Anish Kapoor, numerous Latin Americans, and dozens of others.

The most dramatic space, a long 15-foot-high volume on the second level, has some of the best qualities of a museum. And one half, in fact, serves purely as a gallery; the other is a living area. "I controlled the height, so you wouldn't feel intimidated," Salo Levinas says, pointing to built-in cabinets and bookshelves. Meanwhile, Dani Levinas insisted on two sets of retractable glass doors extending the full 70-foot length of the room.

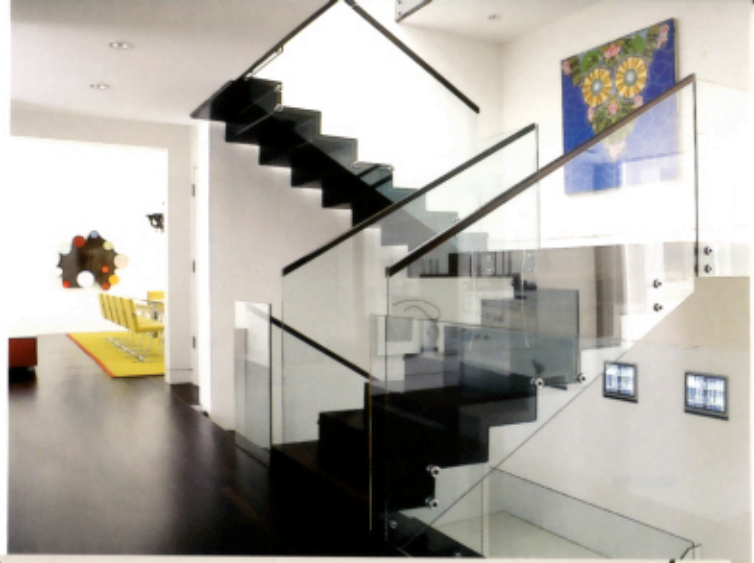
Because the house is set into a hill, these rear pocket doors open at ground level—to a pool terrace, outside the living area, and a formal parterre garden, on the gallery side. The pool terrace's terrazzo paving and canopy of stainless steel and aluminum louvers have a decidedly modernist air, while the parterre retains some of the house's 1840's character. Even so, Salo Levinas added Saint Clair Cemin's bronze →

**Left:** Rubens Mano's *Bascules*, in polished stainless steel, stands in the restored 19th-century parterre garden. **Right:** In the 15-foot-high gallery, a wall of lacquered built-ins holds 39 pieces by 29 artists, such as Olafur Eliasson, Anish Kapoor, and Jorge Pardo. Monique Prieto's acrylic on canvas *Why Wait* hangs opposite, while Rogério Degaki's fiberglass rabbit, Valeska Soares's stainless-steel *Fainting Couch*, and Mano's stainless-steel ball share the terrazzo floor. José Damasceno's steel-and-acrylic *Interface* tops a low wall.





**Top, from left:** Beatriz Milhães's untitled oil on canvas on the second-floor landing of the wengé staircase. Saint Clair Cemin's bronze Iberic Orator in the parterre garden. Alfredo Jaar's light box *Gold in the Morning* and Tunga's three-part ensemble in the gallery. Nearby, Waltercio Caldas's toy soldier with a bird head and wings. **Bottom:** Kapoor's untitled glazed-ceramic piece is set into one of the foyer's pietra serena limestone walls, which act as a backdrop for Arturo Herrera's felt *One Time*, Manu Muniategiandikoetxea's painted-wood sculpture, and Richard Tuttle's mixed-media *New Mexico, New York, E#2*.







orator figure and a pair of iron ladder sculptures by Cildo Meireles.

A steel Meireles ladder hangs in the living area. The space's focal point, however, is a low 12-foot-wide gas fireplace, its line of flame rising from a bed of pebbles at the flick of a switch. Taking in the glow, Baron & Baron's rectilinear charcoal sofa faces what appears to be a black-and-orange checkerboard cocktail table, actually four tables arranged in a square. The forceful forms and colors of these pieces set off the delicacy of Poul Kjaerholm chairs with light wicker seats and spiky stainless-steel legs.

As demonstrated by Arne Jacobsen's orange Egg chair, heating up the library, and Arturo Herrera's equally orange felt installation, occupying a stretch of wall right outside, Dani and Mirella Levinas aren't afraid of a little color. Also consider the dining room, where the charreuse upholstery on Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's classic Brno chairs matches the hemp-and-wool rug underfoot. As Thrasher explains, "Colors and textures are important in a house like this, so it doesn't feel austere." The rich limestone in the foyer and master bath help slice through the austerity, too.

Sunlight is equally critical in this house of art. In addition to the glass doors in the living area and gallery, Salo Levinas strategically inserted strip skylights over the library's bookcases and the third-floor →

**Top:** Thrasher furnished the dining room with Murano glass chandeliers, Carlo Scarpa's glass-topped table, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Brno chairs, their upholstery matching Stephanie Odegard's custom rug of wool and hemp. On the end wall hangs The Radeau de La Medusa, a Vik Muniz photographic diptych of a drawing in chocolate syrup, over the balcony Valeska Soares's untitled stuffed velvet legs with steel feet. **Center:** Jaroslav Rossler's black-and-white photographs and Rivane Neuenschwander's video Love Lettering surround the master bedroom's leather-wrapped bed, placed on a wool rug. **Bottom:** In the master bath, a custom zebra-wood vanity and a floating wall of limestone set off Benedini Associati's Spoon tub.

**Opposite:** With the glass pocket doors open, the living area flows out to a terrazzo terrace shaded by louvers in aluminum and stainless steel.



hallway's deconstructed soccer balls by Felipe Barbosa. Above the staircase, he stretched white vinyl to diffuse the rays shining through a large new skylight.

As for artificial illumination, a thoughtful combination of fluorescent and halogen ceiling fixtures is rendered nearly invisible behind a uniform grid of cutouts. This creates a balanced wash—and the flexibility to rotate artwork without complicated adjustments. “No single light was to be specific to any one piece,” Salo Levinas says. Indeed, José Damasceno’s steel-framed acrylic square moved several times before finding the perfect spot, on top of a low wall by the dining room’s steps. (Valeska Soares’s stainless-steel *Fainting Couch*, on the other hand, instantly found a natural home at the center of the gallery.)

To determine how to install and reinstall the artwork, the Levinases first consulted no less an authority than Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden director Olga Viso, who photographed the works and tinkered with their placement in a scale model. Still—consulting curator or no consulting curator—Salo Levinas says, “This is not an art gallery. It’s a home that holds great art.” 🍷

PROJECT TEAM (SHINBERG LEVINAS): JESSICA BOUGHRUM; JESSICA BURGARD; AMANDA CLARKE; MILTON SHINBERG; ANTONIO VINTRO.

SOFA (LIVING AREA): CAPPELLINI. CHAIRS (LIVING AREA, LIBRARY): FRITZ HANSEN. RUGS (LIVING AREA, LIBRARY, BEDROOM): KASTHALL. TABLES (LIVING AREA), SIDE TABLES (BEDROOM): MOLteni & C. SOFA (LIBRARY): B&B ITALIA. CHAIRS (DINING ROOM): KNOLL. TABLE: ULTRAMOBILE. CHANDELIERS: LA MURRINA. RUG: ODEGARD. BED (BEDROOM): ZANOTTA. READING LIGHTS: CLARUS LIGHTING. TUB (BATHROOM): AGAPE. TUB, SINK FITTINGS: BOFFI. TERRAZZO (TERRACE): DECO SYSTEMS OF MARYLAND. FLOOR INSTALLATION: ATLANTIC REFINISHING & RESTORATION. METALWORK, MILLWORK: HILL ENTERPRISES. LIGHTING CONSULTANT: FERNANDO SOLER. AUDIOVISUAL CONSULTANT: ALL AROUND TECH. STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: SHEMRO ENGINEERING. MEP: SAH DESIGN GROUP. LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: FITCH STUDIO. GENERAL CONTRACTOR: RENOVATIONS UNLIMITED.

