



MOLYNEUX

TEXT BY MICHAEL FRANK



The design work collected in this book, the work of Juan Pablo Molyneux's maturity, dates from the period when he first established himself in New York, in 1985 or so, and continues up to the present. The projects tend to fall into two groups: houses or apartments that Molyneux has restored and reinvented, and those that he has created more or less from scratch. In both cases, Molyneux insists on studying, mulling over, and responding to the existing architecture. His respect, however, is never doctrinaire. Old, he believes, is never worth preserving simply because it is old. Architects, builders, and designers made mistakes in the past, just as they make mistakes in the present. Molyneux's goal, always, is to enter into a dialogue with a space and figure out how he can bring out its best side, or supply a best side if it is lacking. He is seldom interested in strict or literal historical preservation; his interiors have been made in the present, and he wants this to be apparent. Despite his neoclassical vocabulary, there is still a good deal of the contemporary in his work: his floor plans are efficient and practical; his upholstered furniture is comfortable and durable; he is interested in new technologies (poured rather than carved stone, for example) that help him bury the functional (pipes, electrical wires) in the aesthetic (a classical fireplace); he likes to combine antique furniture with contemporary pieces of his own design.

Molyneux is seldom rigid, although certain ideas, approaches, and principles recur again and again in his work. He believes that every house or apartment, no matter how informal, should have a clearly defined entryway. He has created grand ones (the rotunda in Buenos Aires seen here, the gallery on Park Avenue [p. 134]) and more modest versions. Similarly, interiors, especially large ones, require what Molyneux calls a "center of distribution": a space, a hall or gallery, that directs the flow of traffic through the interior, while at the same time serving as an introduction to, and setting the tone for, the rest of the home. Sometimes the center of distribution is the same room as the entryway (Park Avenue [p. 134]); sometimes it is separate, as in Molyneux's own house in Vail seen in Chapter Six, or in the case of the Upper East Side town house (p. 78). Always, it receives some of the designer's most disciplined thinking.

Molyneux insists upon paying close attention to setting. "What's going on beyond your windows is important," he maintains. "You either harmonize with it or position yourself in contrast to it, but you must consider it, no matter what." Fabrics, colors, patterns, materials, finishes, and furniture suitable to the town house on



Molyneux Meets Mizner: Palm Beach

“**I** WAS APPALLED WHEN I FIRST SAW THIS HOUSE,” Molyneux says of El Sarmiento, the 1923 Palm Beach mansion designed by Addison Mizner. It had recently been acquired by a long-time Molyneux client, who told him nothing about the house; he merely handed over a key and asked Juan Pablo to go take a look. Molyneux flew down to Florida. He knew Mizner’s houses only from their facades; he’d never been inside one before. He found the spaces large, gloomy, and in considerable disrepair. Unfurnished, the living room reminded him of a cavernous hotel lobby from the 1940s. “The mixed-up style of the architecture confused me,” Molyneux recalls, “the way the windows, for example, suddenly and for no apparent reason changed from one volume and period into another. The former owner had made all kinds of ‘improvements’: partitions, plastic tile in the bathrooms, lowered ceilings. To be honest, I didn’t much care for what I found.”

Molyneux felt that either he or the house was out of sync. He knew that he had to spend some time with Mizner, whose blending of different styles and periods he found perplexing. He decided to indulge a long-held fantasy of roller-skating through an empty building. “When you are going at a certain speed inside huge rooms, not a walking or a running speed, you start to feel every inch of every dimension in your body. I’m not suggesting that all architects or designers start skating on the job, but for me it was a way of breaking down the ‘Mizner monster.’” After several hours, Molyneux began to understand the architect’s appeal. Mixed up though the house was, somehow the total began to make sense. “The spaces are worked very beautifully,” Molyneux says. “Mizner’s architecture is without fear. Its boldness casts a spell on you.”

Addison Mizner (1872–1933) was responsible for infusing 1920s Palm Beach with its elegant, though largely contrived, “Spanish” flavor, which might more accurately be called “Mediterranean hybrid.” Beginning with the Everglades Club, which he designed in 1918 for sewing machine heir Paris Singer, Mizner eventually master-minded several dozen Palm Beach (and Boca Raton) houses, shops, and office and

The stairwell, featuring trompe l’oeil by Robert Archer and Emma Temple. Its subject is the Spanish School—but as it might be found in an eccentric artist’s (or collector’s) atelier.

LEFT: Exterior view of El Sarmiento, which Addison Mizner designed for Anthony J. Drexel Biddle in 1923.

RIGHT: A detail of the living room, where Francis Bacon's *Figure Turning* hangs over an eighteenth-century Italian commode that is modeled on a sarcophagus. The marble tabletop in the foreground is seventeenth-century Florentine intarsia.



apartment buildings that helped transform the town into the fashionable watering hole it became during the early decades of this century. He built his own factories and plants, where he produced the furniture, roof tiles, ironwork, lighting fixtures, and cast stone for moldings, columns, and balustrades that typified the Mizner look. Alva Johnston, Mizner's early, and rather critical, biographer, famously called his work, "Bastard-Spanish-Moorish-Romanesque-Gothic-Renaissance-Bull-Market-Damn-the-Expense Style" [Alva Johnston, *The Legendary Mizners*, 1953, cited in Donald W. Curl, *Mizner's Florida: American Resort Architecture*, 1992]. This may be hard, but it's not untrue. As Mizner himself once said,

Most modern architects have spent their lives carrying out a period to the last letter and producing a characterless copybook effect. My ambition has been . . . to make a building look traditional and as though it had fought its way from a small unimportant structure to a great rambling house that took centuries of different needs and ups and downs of wealth to accomplish. I sometimes start a house with a Romanesque corner, pretend that it has fallen into disrepair and been added to in the Gothic spirit, when suddenly the great wealth of the New World has poured in and the owner had added a very rich Renaissance addition.

[From Ida M. Tarbell, "Appreciation of a Layman," in *Florida Architecture of Addison Mizner*, 1928; reissued by Dover in 1992 with a new introduction by Donald W. Curl]





The loggia, with a view into the living room. Molyneux chose to furnish this space casually, with a combination of upholstered furniture and iron furniture by Diego Giacometti. Paintings, left to right, are by Picasso, Joan Mitchell, and Botero. The sculpture is by Alberto Giacometti. The wooden ceiling is original to the house.





LEFT: The sitting area in the guest room, with its original Mizner fireplace. The painting is by Soutine, the art deco sconces by Brandt, and the coffee table by Mies van der Rohe.

RIGHT: The guest room is reached by this lively hall, where once again Mizner's mixture of styles are evident in the classical columns, the Georgian-style over-door, and the Italianate rustic wooden ceiling. The painting over the table is by Tamayo; the sculpture in the foreground is Henry Moore's *Seated Armless Figure*.



Certainly this is true of El Sarmiento, which, in addition to its imaginary additions, received many actual ones over the years, beginning as early as 1927, when it underwent a substantial remodeling by Joseph Urban.

Molyneux's challenge was to restore El Sarmiento without feeding the "Mizner monster," while at the same time finding a way to express his own idea of the "different needs" and "ups and downs of wealth"—and fashion—that inform these grand interiors. Then too, there were architectural mistakes in the house; some Mizner's, others made during later renovations. Molyneux wasn't afraid to make changes: his idea of restoration has always been to revive the spirit and meaning of a place, not the actual historical artifact. In addition, of course, he had to take into



account the client's request for comfort and ease—the house is used four months a year by a large family who entertain frequently—and his own insistence on taking a cue, for his interiors, from the location. “Ideally a house near the water is made of a roof and columns and little else,” Molyneux says. “That’s impossible here, naturally, but I wanted that sense, that freshness and lightness.”

Molyneux began by removing all of the previous owner's additions. This was easy enough, as he'd already erased them mentally during his roller-skating tour. Along the way, he discovered treasures, such as a painting of Neptune on the entry hall ceiling, which he took delight in restoring. But there were problems too. The library, for example, felt like an afterthought: it was open to the living room, a dreary





ABOVE: A detail of the entry hall. Molyneux added the marble trim and art-deco radiator cover to the fireplace. The radiator cover and sconces are both by Brandt. The painting is by Lucio Fontana; the chairs are by Diego Giacometti.

LEFT: The library "used to feel left over, the worst room in the house," says the designer, who brought a cosmopolitan mixture to the interior, where an eighteenth-century Boulle *bureau plat* meets a nineteenth-century Chinese rug, Tiffany lamps, and a table sculpture by Marino Marini.





The Invention of an Interior: Buenos Aires

THIS NEXT PROJECT, an apartment in Buenos Aires, draws on a rigorously architectural facet of Molyneux's talent and training. Presented with the decayed *piano nobile* of the Palacio Ortiz Basualdo, a turn-of-the-century Beaux-Arts mansion in the heart of Buenos Aires, Molyneux faced the interesting challenge of inventing a piece of architecture from the outside in.

From the beginning, there were certain non-negotiable—although not unappealing—constraints. The perimeter of the building, a landmark in the classical French style, could not be modified in any way. The interior would have to live up to the dimensions and grandeur of the exterior, while at the same time remaining in some sort of relationship to its setting. (The French embassy lies to one side and the Brazilian embassy is across the street, both in structures of parallel quality and formal scale.) Then there was the apartment's most conspicuous absence: when the building was converted into separate residences, this particular level was cut off from the grand staircase that formerly connected it to the ground floor and the street beyond, thereby losing both a suitable entrance and a functional and aesthetic focus. Finally, there was the mixed blessing of the apartment's condition, one of severe neglect. All of its original details were gone, which was unfortunate, but this gave Molyneux the freedom to introduce his own.

The client, for whom Molyneux had previously designed an apartment in New York, knew that the designer admired the building, and he asked him to visit it as soon as he acquired the apartment. (He, his wife, and their seven children had been living in the country outside Buenos Aires, but with the older children approaching college age, the parents decided it was time to establish a home in the city.) "Afterward I told him that the only solution I had was a restoration job more than anything else," Molyneux recalls. "The shell was just too important to disregard. Happily, for the building and for me, the client thoroughly agreed."

Much of the apartment was dramatically reconfigured. The spaces were large enough that they could be divided up and still leave rooms of substantial propor-

The gallery's three-quarter columns, marble floor, mirrors, architraves, and moldings were all added by Molyneux, who invested the space with a good deal of neoclassical rigor.



tions. The original floor plan included a music room, two dining rooms of different sizes, a living room, and a salon. Molyneux retained what was necessary for contemporary life (the music room went) and added elements his clients required: six bedrooms and bathrooms, a kitchen, and servants' quarters. During the renovation, which took about two years from start to finish, the apartment was taken down to the cement floors and brick walls, and then it was built up again. "This was a real job, no faux," the designer explains. "Real marble, real stone, real walls."

The craftsmanship is undeniably real, but the project is full of clever examples of architectural legerdemain. Consider the entrance. Molyneux settled on a quintessentially classical solution, a rotunda, which he carved out of existing spaces. On first glance, the room appears to be round, but on closer inspection it is revealed to be square. The viewer's eye is tricked by the colonnade, the domed ceiling, and the marble floor, which is inlaid with a sunburst modeled on the pavement in Michelangelo's Piazza Campidoglio in Rome.

From the rotunda, a visitor next enters the gallery, a similarly classical room that serves as the apartment's central artery or center of distribution. Here, instead of a colonnade, Molyneux installed pairs of three-quarter marble columns. And here too the eye is fooled—this time into believing that the room is wider than it is—by the mirrored panels Molyneux set in between the three-quarter columns. They run from floor to ceiling, with no intervening baseboard or crown molding, and open up the space into complex and elegant reflections. The beams above were gold- and silver-leafed, while the marble floor was laid in a severe geometric pattern. "With all this strong architecture, I decided to use very little furniture, sober furniture," says Molyneux. Sober but also—with Jacob chairs and an eighteenth-century gilded gesso Italian mirror—extremely fine.

Following the perimeter of the building as it does, the apartment's living room presented Molyneux with a quirky and somewhat difficult shape. His first decision was to raise the ceiling, which had been lowered in a previous renovation to a level below the fan lights above the windows. He then applied a large crown molding to conceal the heating and air conditioning ducts that were exposed (and had to be rerouted) as a result. To harmonize with the now significantly higher ceiling, Molyneux added dramatic stone architraves to the doors and, around the circumference of the room, a two-and-a-half-foot baseboard, also of stone, which helped unify the new moldings.

A particular problem was the room's fireplace, which was too small, in the wrong place, and could not be moved. Furthermore, the client had a painting in New York, a Bonnard landscape, rather small itself, that he wanted to hang above the

A corner of the living room: the painting, of classical ruins, is by Giovanni Paolo Pannini. The commode (one of a pair) is eighteenth-century Italian, the chair Regence.

FOLLOWING PAGES:

The eighteenth-century French tapestry depicts the Emperor of China with his astronomers. A late eighteenth-century French desk is paired with a Directoire chair by Jacob; the carpet is nineteenth-century Aubusson.









Molyneux solved the problem of the tiny—and off-center—fireplace by creating a strongly architectural surround, rendered in marble to relate to the gallery next door. The painting is a Bonnard.





The library is a complete invention of Molyneux's. The paneling is mahogany. The designer found the mantelpiece at an auction in Argentina; its provenance, remarkably, located it as having come from the Palacio Ortiz Basualdo.



LEFT: The library viewed from the staircase that leads to the gallery above.

RIGHT: The dining room furniture is "rather Victorian," says the designer. "I bought the chairs locally. They were described as 'English style,' which sometimes can mean anywhere from William the Conqueror to Elizabeth II!"

mantelpiece. In yet another example of elegant trickery, Molyneux designed a chimney surround that incorporated the wall and the painting. Made of stone and black marble, it echoes the classical patterns of the adjacent gallery and helps bring the fireplace and the luminous canvas into proportion with the rest of the room.

As for furniture, Molyneux combined contemporary sofas, which were his client's request, with such impeccable period pieces as an eighteenth-century French desk, a Jacob chair, a pair of Italian marquetry chests, and a coffee table he designed during his Chilean period. The carpet is Aubusson, and the tapestry—a Molyneux trademark—is eighteenth-century French, in the chinoiserie style.

The library is one of the designer's most ingenious creations, and it's hard to believe that it doesn't date back to the building's earliest inception. Likening the space to the room of a confused magician, Molyneux explains that he made it all up from scratch, out of his own and his client's tastes, interests, and imaginations. Familiar with the client's collection of books, Molyneux devised two levels of mahogany bookshelves, with the upper level reached by a spiral staircase that leads to an elevated corridor. Knowing that his client was fond of mysteries, he created a



wall of books that opens when you move a certain volume, revealing a secret passageway into the adjacent dining room; the dining room can also be reached by a more mundane route, by returning to the gallery. Molyneux had a stroke of luck when it came to restoring the fireplace: he found the mantelpiece at auction in Argentina, and its provenance located it as having originally come from the Palacio Ortiz Basualdo! Around the reinstalled fireplace, Molyneux designed a reading nook, and throughout the room he used English Regency furniture, old leather club chairs and sofas, eighteenth-century English portraits, carpet layered upon carpet.

Of all the public rooms, the dining room is probably closest, in size and shape, to the space Molyneux found when he first visited the Palacio Ortiz Basualdo. It has been transformed by the designer's touch, however, with its dramatic tapestry, the antique coffered ceiling Molyneux found hidden behind a plaster ceiling and restored, and the fireplace surround he conceived in a spirit congruent with the one in the living room. In every way, this project was a labor of love for Juan Pablo. "I love the family and the city, and as for the building," he says, "I considered it an honor to be able to bring it back to life."



Remaking a Town House on Manhattan's Upper East Side

“**T**HERE ARE OLD PEOPLE who are very nice, and there are old people who aren't very nice,” Molyneux believes. “And it's the same with houses. There's no point in keeping mistakes merely because they were made a long time ago.”

This complex project on the Upper East Side supports Molyneux's long held thesis that restoration for the sake of restoration is an exercise in design futility. When his clients, a European couple who maintain additional residences outside of New York, took him to visit this late nineteenth-century limestone town house, Molyneux inspected the building carefully. Although the house had been remodeled over the years and was in severe disrepair, it still had period details that another designer might have chosen to restore, struggling to wrest the house's earlier and better incarnation out of its later modifications. Molyneux had the opposite feeling. While many of the rooms may have suited the needs of its occupants in the 1890s, they were useless and repetitive in the 1990s. The kitchen was in the basement. The period elements that were extant were undistinguished. In addition, the clients wanted a swimming pool installed on the roof, which necessitated considerable restructuring. Molyneux told them that the only practical and aesthetic solution was to demolish the interior completely, and they agreed. At one point early in the project, the designer remembers, a visitor would open the front door and see nothing but brick walls and sky overhead.

Molyneux kept only the facade, first because the residence was part of the Upper East Side landmark district but also because he modeled the project on certain European town houses whose plain shells conceal wonderfully elaborate interiors. With this project, Molyneux deliberately sought to counteract a way of life that he sees often in contemporary America, a transient or temporary relationship people have to their environment. “I don't know anyone in New York among my friends who lives in their parents' or grandparents' place, whereas it's just the opposite in Europe. What I imagined for this house was a family that had been rooted for generations.”

The irony, of course, is that Molyneux *imagined* this and conceived the house

Installing a swimming pool on the roof of this Upper East Side town house required restructuring the entire building. The mosaic is the real thing, created by visiting craftsmen from Spain.





The entry hall. Faced with low ceilings, bulky columns, and many doors, Molyneux unified the space with a strong but simple marble floor. He fluted the columns to make them appear less massive.



from scratch. His clients made only a few general requests. They wanted a neoclassical living room, a paneled library, and a continental dining room. They expected a level of formality equal to their residences in Europe. They contributed a few paintings to the interiors, but Molyneux supplied most everything else.

He had two inescapable impediments. In order to support the swimming pool on the roof, two steel columns had to run through each floor, from the roof to the basement. Then, given the fixed perimeter of the building, Molyneux could create only two principal rooms per floor, one in front, the other in back, which is customary in New York town houses of a certain scale. "The grander the town house," Molyneux points out, "the simpler it becomes, since you don't want to break up the space you're given." Architecturally, this project was less of a challenge than the Buenos Aires project, where he had almost too much room. Molyneux's solution was to treat each floor as a set of apartments. While the whole of the house expresses a larger relationship, an intimate stylistic rapport was aimed for on each level.

The one exception is the entry, which is the only public space on the ground floor. Here, Molyneux had the additional encumbrance of low ceilings (they're just over eight feet) and, because of the pool, a pair of prominent and rather bulky columns. He fluted them to make them feel lighter, and he marbleized them in order to link them to the real marble staircase and floor, whose simple geometric design set the tone for this crisp, uncluttered space.

Molyneux was able to create a grander hall, or center of distribution, on the living room level. The ceilings rose and could tolerate a more elaborate crown molding; the doors too, were taller, and could support elegant architraves. All moldings were painted to imitate Florentine stone, cool and sober against the warmer *stucco lucido* of the walls. Molyneux left the room intentionally empty: an English Regency table and English Regency griffin stools, all quite formal and architectural, set the tone for the rest of the floor.

The living room, whose three windows face the street, is one of the most formal interiors Molyneux has ever designed. He conceived of it, he says, as "a cocktail room, or a room for after-dinner conversation, very rigorous and very symmetrical." Symmetry, indeed, was key. In this perfectly square space, Molyneux created mirrored arrangements: two sofas, two pairs of English Regency chairs, two nineteenth-century Russian side tables, four Italian wall sconces, and so on. Textiles too, were formal: damasks, silks, and an Aubusson rug.

In the dining room, Molyneux was able to be more inventive architecturally. Though basically rectangular, the town house has an L-shaped extension in back,

LEFT PAGE: The upstairs hall is actually a more suitable introduction to the scale and sensibility of the house. The taller ceilings allowed for more complicated moldings, which conceal stereo speakers and air-conditioning ducts.

FOLLOWING PAGES: The most formal room in the house, the living room is precisely twenty-three feet square, and most of its furniture and objects are neoclassical and paired. The English Regency chaise is the focal point of the interior.







and it was here, on this level, that Molyneux chose to situate the kitchen. But a service hallway was needed for access to the living room—and, of course, there were the two swimming pool columns again. Molyneux's solution was to let the columns frame a niche and to route the service hallway around it. In one stroke, he enlivened the dining room and made the floor efficiently functional.

Because the room was tall, somewhat lacking in interest, and thrown off balance by its single window, Molyneux decided to use somewhat more complicated moldings here. These he painted a sharp white to contrast with the blue lacquered walls, creating a dramatic background for the main table, which is George III (a smaller Regency table stands in the niche and is used for breakfast) and the chairs, which, though English Regency in feeling, are actually late eighteenth-century Russian, as is the chandelier. Molyneux added what is for him an unusually ornate curtain on the window because the room is classically English and grand, and the curtain is typical of such an environment.

The designer relaxed some of the formality as he moved up a level to the library and the master bedroom. The library, which stands over the living room and has a parallel bank of three street-facing windows, is paneled in bird's-eye maple instead of the traditional mahogany one would expect in an English library. Molyneux felt that the lighter wood was in keeping with the relaxed tone of this floor. He conceived of the red, brown, and gold rug, which is his own design, as one of his reversed ceilings: "There isn't that much detailing in the room, so I put the moldings on the floor," Molyneux explains. The furniture, again, is mostly English Regency, with two eighteenth-century German armoires providing bulk and stature. The Prussian war helmets mounted behind the desk reflect the client's interest in military history.

In the master bedroom down the hall, Molyneux continued his red and gold palette, almost as if the bedroom were the sleeping area for a self-contained gentleman's apartment. The bathroom, with its classical moldings and wood paneling, has its own library-like sensibility, and the wood *is* mahogany here.

Molyneux continued his apartment approach on the next floor, with the elegant sitting room and bedroom in suite. Because of the drop in ceilings, Molyneux used simpler moldings, but he compensated for the diminution of architecture by heightening the palette, using generous amounts of red, green, and gold, which he drew from an eighteenth-century Japanese screen. This room, and the adjacent bedroom, have a Brighton Pavilion gaiety about them, a tone set in part by the fanciful eighteenth-century English bed.

Similarly, the two guest bedrooms upstairs share a tonal and stylistic



LEFT: The dining room's round niche allowed Molyneux to create two seating areas.

ABOVE: The view into the upstairs hall creates a sense of continuing space.



Nilhil Obstat



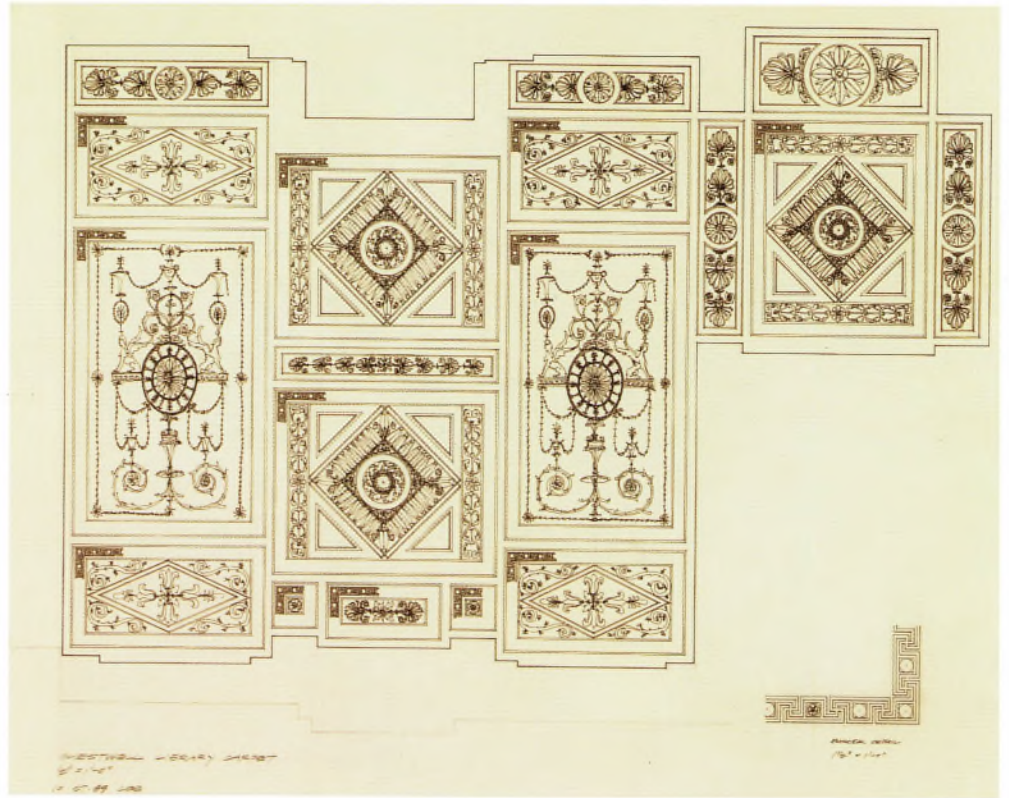


LEFT: The library furniture is a lively combination of styles and periods. Molyneux has combined German armoires, eighteenth-century Russian chairs, a French cabinet, and an English Regency desk.

ABOVE: Behind the desk, Molyneux mounted the client's collection of mostly Prussian war helmets, which reflect his interest in military history.

RIGHT: A drawing of the library rug, which Molyneux designed after classical moldings.

BELOW AND FAR RIGHT: The master bathroom, where mahogany columns open up to reveal medicine cabinets.









The upstairs sitting room features a Japanese lacquer table and six-panel screen, which was part of the client's collection. The chairs in the foreground are eighteenth-century French.



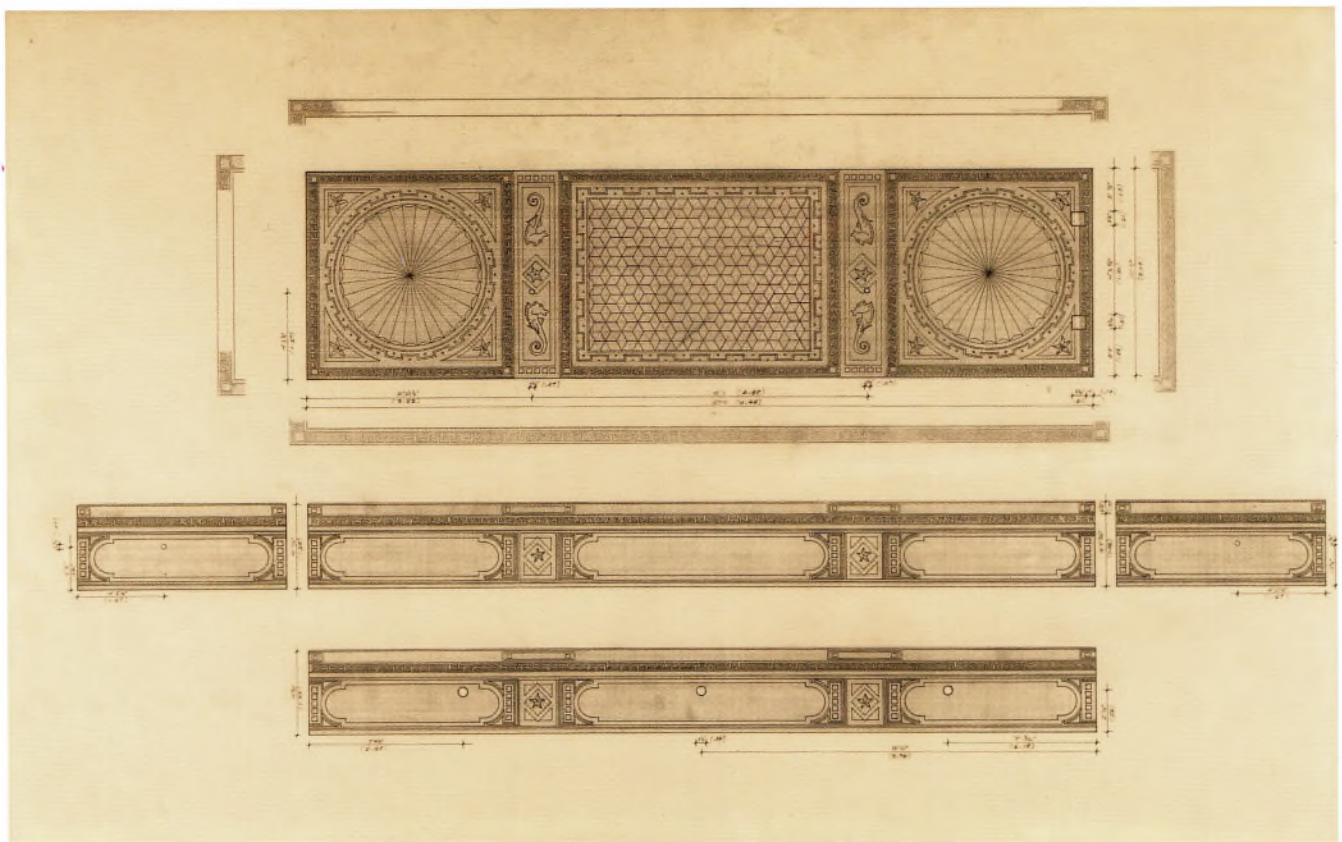
relationship. Molyneux's inspiration for the moss green in one bedroom was a hotel suite at Claridge's. To add character to the room's still lower ceilings and less architectural detailing, Molyneux designed bowed and peaked valances for the curtains and a patterned woven rug for the floor.

The house's *pièce de résistance*—and engineering feat—is the swimming pool, which had to be lifted into place by a crane. The classical mosaic was installed by Spanish craftsmen, who worked on it over a period of several months. The bold panels of Valentino fabric conceal a television and a music system. There is an adjoining dressing room and bath, and the glass ceiling can be opened up to the sky.

Each floor of this ambitious house may feel like its own contained, highly elegant apartment, but the sum reflects a clear relationship among the individual parts. In terms of the level of detailing, the generally restrained use of color, and the formality and quality of the furniture, this is unquestionably a single residence. Only the pool, on first impression, seems to be a fantasy unto itself, but its mosaic and statuary are as classical in their way as the architraves downstairs. "I loved the challenge of the whole project, which is as big an architectural job as I've done in New York," Molyneux says by way of summary, "but I particularly welcomed the challenge of the pool. It affected every element in the house's design, but it was worth it in the end."

LEFT: An eighteenth-century Aubusson carpet sets a rich tone for the master bedroom. The bed, also eighteenth-century, is English.

BELOW: A design for the swimming pool mosaic, seen on page 96–97.





ABOVE: A hall leading from the library to the master bedroom; its neoclassical marble flooring links the space to other common areas in the house. The wall panels are eighteenth-century Chinese.

RIGHT: Molyneux employed a subdued moss green palette in the guest room. The furniture is a mix of English, French, and Swedish pieces.







The pool being lowered onto the roof (above) and (right) ready for laps. The marble fountain (outside, on the terrace) and the statue of Mars, both English, are in the classical manner.



