

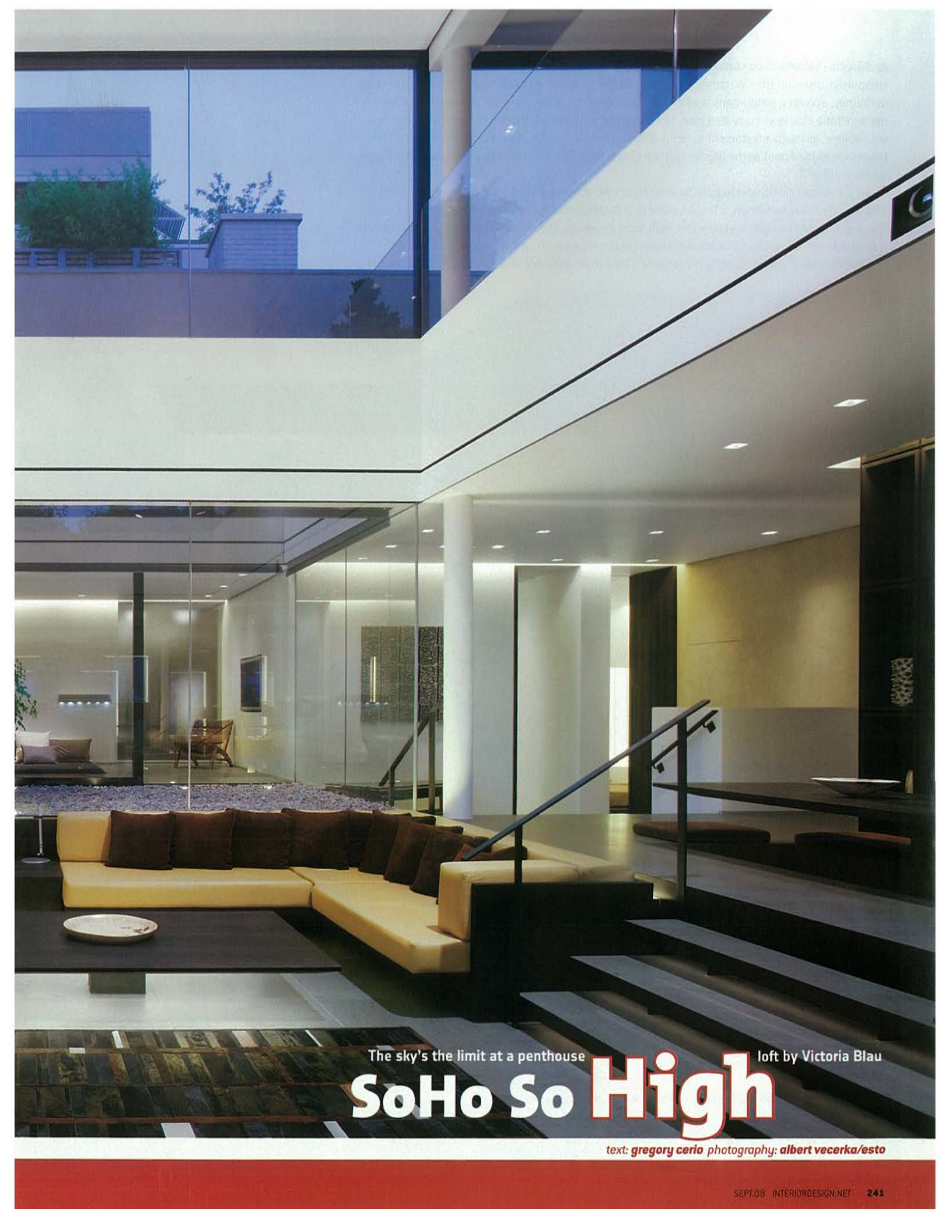
INTERIOR DESIGN[®]

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The sky's the limit at a penthouse

loft by Victoria Blau

SoHo So High

text: *gregory cerio* photography: *albert vecerka/esto*

Architects—talented and committed ones, at any rate—always seem to have a touch of obsessive-compulsive disorder. They're consumed by rational planning and methodology and passionate about uniformity, accuracy, proportions, and plumb lines. With this notion in mind, you might jokingly wonder if Victoria Blau is as crazy as a loon. Her design for a duplex penthouse loft in SoHo is rigorous yet sublime, as much a testament to her meticulousness and dedication as to her creativity. "The process is as important as the finished product," she says. "Each detail in this place was exactly custom-crafted."

Her U.K.-based client, who frequently visits New York, gave very brief marching orders to Victoria Blau Architect and Architeam, a firm involved in preliminary design for the 5,700-square-foot space. "He said it should be open and peaceful, with room for guests and small dinner parties," Blau reports. A complete gut job resulted in a three-bedroom plan centering on an atrium living area.

While the owner did not specifically request a Japanese ambience, it suggested itself to Blau ➤





Previous spread: In the living area of a SoHo penthouse, Victoria Blau Architect used larch that was hand-rubbed, then ebonized, for a custom cocktail table's top and a built-in banquette with leather-covered cushions. The plasterboard wall above the gas fireplace serves as a screen for a projection television.

Left: The living area's custom rug was pieced together from dyed cowhide.

Right, from top: Custom brushed-steel sconces swing out from the wall above the master bedroom's bed. A weeping birch grows in the light well, which is enclosed by ¾-inch-thick commercial-grade glass.



Top: The living area has a 29-foot ceiling. **Bottom:** Volcanic basalt from Italy clads the master bathroom.

Opposite top: In the master bedroom, a chair by Fatima de la Espada faces a settee by Antonio Citterio. **Opposite bottom:** Larch meets stainless steel in the kitchen.



because of his impressive collection of Asian ceramics. The display case she designed for them further illustrates her gift for bravura simplicity. Starting in the dining area, the case rises to the ceiling, then appears to reemerge in the mezzanine study. From there, the steel side panels continue up to pierce the roof and reemerge on the terrace. "It's one of those architect things," she says with a shrug and a smile. The outdoor section of this triple-height element is blackened steel; the part below is larch, the project's only wood. She had it all hand-rubbed to bring out the raised grain, then ebonized.

The larch dining table stands in front of the display case, in a well—as at a Japanese teahouse, guests sit on cushions set directly on the floor. (Blau cannot help but point out the perfectly aligned joints between the square slabs of gray volcanic stone.) Down three steps, in the sunken living area, a pair of larch-topped cocktail tables sit between L-shape banquettes upholstered in cappuccino leather. Each enormous rectangular tabletop is supported by a single small steel cube. At first glance, the tops appear almost wafer-thin, their balance precarious. It becomes clear upon closer inspection, however, that they're quite hefty. Their undersides angle down toward the steel bases, which are bolted to the floor.

Separating the living area from the master suite is an open-air light well paved with pebbles. Though it could have been plucked directly from a Zen garden in Japan, this feature actually came to be because of code issues ▶









that are very New York. The former warehouse building was at its maximum floor-area ratio, meaning that no new square footage could be added anywhere. "Creating a light well technically eliminated living space. That gave us room for the mezzanine," Blau explains. "Essentially, it was a swap." The building's management, worried that the light well would be a source of leaks, insisted on commercial-grade glazing. In the end, she sourced 3/4-inch-thick high-performance glass not only for the light well but also for walls elsewhere in the apartment.

The design details that make Blau proudest are those that would be least apparent to the untrained eye. One such detail is the 1-inch gap between ceilings and walls, walls and floors. These reveals serve as vents for the HVAC system, eliminating the need for panels or grates. Blau also has a singular affinity for built-in lighting. The apartment has no floor lamps and a bare minimum of table lamps. Instead, she used cove lights and dozens of recessed spots as well as installing LED strips on the bottom of the staircases' floating treads. "Some surfaces do require direct illumination," she concedes. "In general, though, indirect lights create a calmer atmosphere. There's something wonderful about the way they wash walls and wooden surfaces, especially at night."

Blau prefers the warmer glow cast by standard incandescent lightbulbs, but she predominantly chose compact fluorescents out of practicality: to save on energy and to spare her client the chore of continually replacing burned-out bulbs in hard-to-reach places. Still, the colder, bluer light cast by fluorescents demonized her. She fought back

The dining table stands in a 17-inch-deep well, surrounded by custom leather-covered cushions. Behind, a display case contains Japanese and British contemporary ceramics by the likes of Usui Kazunari, Miyajima Masayuki, and Ursula Morley Price.



by installing miniature colored gels, the kind used by photographers and filmmakers. “To find the gels that would create the right glow, we went through hundreds of them,” she says. “They’re packaged like paint chips.” Crazy? Crazy like a fox. 🦊

PROJECT TEAM

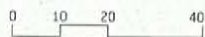
CORRIE ROSEN (PROJECT MANAGER); **AMANDA LOY**; VICTORIA BLAU ARCHITECT. **PHILIP CAVE ASSOCIATES**; **PLANT SPECIALISTS**: LANDSCAPING CONSULTANTS. **LANE ENGINEERING CONSULTING**; **SEVERUD ASSOCIATES**: STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS. **THOMAS POLISE CONSULTING ENGINEERS**; **MEP**: **IRON WORKS BY YSL**; **METALWORK**. **VCA**: WOODWORK. **MARMARO MASTERS**: STONEWORK. **BARON**: UPHOLSTERING. **FOUNDATIONS**: GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

PRODUCT SOURCES

FROM FRONT **HALSTED WELLES ASSOCIATES**: CUSTOM FIREPLACE (LIVING AREA). **POLTRONA FRAU**: OTTOMANS. **HOLLY HUNT**: BANQUETTE UPHOLSTERY. **KYLE BUNTING**: CUSTOM RUG. **EDELMAN LEATHER**: PILLOW UPHOLSTERY (LIVING AREA), CUSHION UPHOLSTERY (DINING AREA). **SCHÜCO INTERNATIONAL**: SLIDING DOORS (BEDROOM). **LATTOFLEX**: BED. **CALVIN KLEIN HOME**: BED LINENS. **LEAX**: CUSTOM SCONCES. **LEFROY BROOKS THROUGH PEARL IMPORTS**: SINK FITTINGS, SHOWER FITTINGS (BATHROOM). **DORNBRACHT THROUGH SIMON'S HARDWARE & BATH**: SHOWER (BATHROOM), SINK FITTINGS (KITCHEN). **DE LA ESPADA**: CHAIR (BEDROOM). **B&B ITALIA**: SETTEE. **WAINLANDS**: CUSTOM HOOD (KITCHEN). **HERA**: RECESSED HOOD LIGHTS. **ARPER THROUGH SUITE NEW YORK**: STOOLS. **GANDIA BLASCO**: PERGOLA, FURNITURE (TERRACE). **MASTER KITCHEN SUPPLIES**: CABINETRY. **THROUGH GEM APPLIANCES**: GRILL. **FRITZ HANSEN THROUGH SUITE NEW YORK**: CHAIR (STUDY). **INGO MAURER**: PENDANT FIXTURES. **HOPE'S WINDOWS**: CUSTOM DOOR (STAIRWELL). **THROUGHOUT** **LITELAB CORP.**: RECESSED CEILING FIXTURES. **IO LIGHTING**: LED FIXTURES. **BARTCO LIGHTING**: COVE LIGHTING. **STONE SOURCE**: FLOORING. **BENJAMIN MOORE & CO.**: PAINT.



Left: The roof terrace's pergola by José Gandía shades seating by Ramón Esteve Estudio de Arquitectura and an outdoor kitchen with a stainless grill. **Right, from top:** Opening onto both terraces, the study features an Arne Jacobsen chair and Ingo Maurer pendant fixtures. LED strips under-light this staircase's blackened-steel treads.



- 1 ENTRY
- 2 KITCHEN
- 3 LIVING AREA
- 4 DINING AREA
- 5 LIGHT WELL
- 6 MASTER BEDROOM

