

House & Home

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HOUSE PROUD

Making Family History in Historic Harlem

By PETER HELLMAN



On Christmas morning of 2000, Susan and Derek Q. Johnson's children found no gifts under the tree in their West End Avenue apartment. Instead, the Johnsons bundled Dillon, 5, and Kira, 1, into the family S.U.V. and whisked them 45 blocks uptown to Hamilton Terrace in Harlem, one of the city's most gracious and secluded streets.

They pulled up in front of No. 51, a three-story, brick and limestone town house built in 1909. Despite the house's years as an S.R.O., its bedrock dignity had not been shaken. The Johnsons had bought it in early 1999, planning to finish construction by November 2000. But by that Christmas, roughly a year and a half after they started, a Dumpster was still parked at the curb and plywood covered the windows. Mr. Johnson unlocked a heavy chain and led his family into the parlor where, amid piles of plaster sacks and crates of tiles, Dillon and Kira found gifts beneath a gaily decorated tree. "I

On a secluded block, a showpiece of the old and the new.

wanted desperately to raise our family in that house," Mr. Johnson said.

As successful professionals, the Johnsons could have raised their children practically anywhere in New York, but they chose Harlem, where Mr. Johnson, 41, a lawyer who, as president of the Apollo Theater, is leading the landmark theater's \$40 million transformation into a performing arts center on 125th Street.

"At the Apollo and at home, he's known for his focus on detail and a rigorous approach to restoration," said Darren Walker, chief operating officer of the Abyssinian Development Corporation, a community development group.

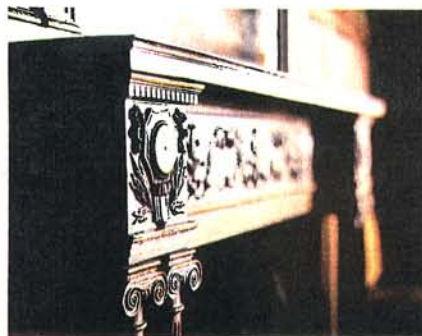
By the time the Johnsons began moving in last September — following a renovation that consumed 30 months and \$1.6 million — their town house had surpassed mere historic preservation to become a showpiece for a Harlem ascendant. "It's a mix of old and new for a family that appreciates history but lives in a contemporary way," said Sheila Bridges, the Harlem-based decorator who enlivened original detailing with brilliant fabrics and wall colors.

Mrs. Johnson, 39, likes to say that her husband has three children, the third being the 93-year-old town house. Mr. Johnson, known to his friends as intense and focused, estimated that he visited the site more than 1,000 times, overseeing even the path of air-conditioning ducts.

"What Derek sets his sights on, he always gets done," said Ruth Messinger, who named Mr. Johnson deputy Manhattan borough president and chief counsel in her tenure as borough president from 1990 to 1997. But Mr. Johnson sometimes doubted that he would get the job done at No.



Photographs by Jeffrey Scates/The New York Times



RENAISSANCE Derek Johnson, president of the Apollo Theater, left West End Avenue for a 1909 town house on Hamilton Terrace in Harlem, far left. Renovated over two years, it shows the detail he hopes to bring to the theater. Mr. Johnson, above, with Kira, his daughter, set vintage paneling against bold window fabric and kilim-covered club chairs. Left, a restored mantel.

Continued on Page 6

ess, cook, maid, laundress and chauffeur.

For all its distinction, Hamilton Terrace is easy to miss. It's just three blocks long, at the heart of the landmarked Hamilton Heights Historic District near Hamilton Grange, home of Alexander Hamilton. At 144th Street, Hamilton Terrace takes a brief turn to Convent Avenue. The Victorian house on the south corner plays a feature role in "The Royal Tenenbaums."

Even when Harlem was most rundown, Hamilton Terrace remained a prosperous enclave. Its black homeowners included Bill Lynch, a deputy mayor under David Dinkins. By the mid-1990's, white families, charmed by its intimacy and reasonable prices, began buying houses there. When the Johnsons first saw No. 51, it was a single-room occupancy on the decline with an absentee landlord who had left the house in the care of her son, a musician. Makeshift partitions had been added over the years: the former dining room, with wainscoting capped by elaborately carved friezes was now dominated by a toilet. A drug dealer's graffiti was scrawled in a hallway.

Potential buyers came to look, among them the Rev. Calvin Butts, the minister of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. "That house was the source of much interest in the community for years," said Mr. Butts, who presided at the Johnsons' wedding. "But it wasn't really available."

The sticking point for prospective buyers was the owner's son, who refused to move out until his mother evicted him in 1998.

The Johnsons won against 10 bidders, in part because the broker, Lana Turner, a noted Harlem preservationist, had persuaded the seller to hold out for a buyer who would restore the house to family living.

In Mr. Johnson, Ms. Turner sensed "the ability to organize and plan in a way that was not just a dream." And his strategic aim was in tune with hers.

Mr. Johnson said, "This was less a real estate transaction and more about rooting ourselves in a neighborhood where we felt welcome and integral." The Johnsons bought the house for \$468,000, then the highest price paid for a Harlem town house. "It was the biggest town house I'd ever seen," Mrs. Johnson said. "It was an amazing place, but this being 'pre' the big-time Harlem Renaissance, the price seemed crazy. I added to not having the vision Derek did for the house." By now their purchase price seems quaint, as a wave of buyer interest rolling northward has lapped at Harlem's rich but neglected trove of fine houses. A smaller house nearby sold for \$850,000 just a

DEDICATION

The Rev. Calvin Butts blessed the town house on June 21, two and a half months before the Johnsons moved in and two years after the renovation began.

From left, Mr. Butts and Kira, Derek, Dillon and Susan Johnson.



Photographs by Jeffrey Sczesla/The New York Times; stylist, Donna Paul; inset (far right), Susan Johnson

UPTOWN UPDATE Top, the master bedroom's bluish-green walls echo faded tints in the Tibetan carpet. Above middle, in the dining room, the original woodwork was complemented by French furnishings. Above, the third-floor sitting room.

year after the Johnsons bought No. 51. and a house on West 142nd Street is being offered at \$1.79 million.

But that hardly seemed possible in a cold April day in 1999, when Mr. Butts stood in an overcoat in the chill of what would be the Johnsons' second-floor bedroom and offered a prayer for the successful renovation.

The Johnsons got a \$480,000 construction loan and hired the architect Reginald L. Thomas, a traditionalist who advised them "to surgically upgrade the house, keeping as

much of the original detail as possible." "I'm not a believer in destroying the house in order to renovate it," he said.

Two successive general contractors were hired and fired after failing to measure up to Mr. Johnson's exacting standards. One person who works with him describes him as "extremely intense and extremely obsessed about aesthetics — he always got his Armanni." A third contractor, Anthony Sapp, who had extensive experience renovating town houses, advocated radical surgery. "It's a basic engineering truth," Mr. Sapp said, "that most of New York built around 1900 is basically shot. For a house like this, the most difficult thing for people to get their arms around is that they've got a beautiful piece of history which has to be gutted before getting to the fun stuff."

Mr. Sapp prevailed. The plaster walls and the original moldings that Mr. Thomas wanted to save were knocked out to update the plumbing, wiring and ductwork. The wood paneling, door framing and the handsome stair railing were preserved. The Johnsons visited the site so often that Dillon came to call it "the dirty old house." Even as the Johnsons' budget dwindled, the work expanded in early 2000 to include a six-foot extension of the first floor, allowing for an east-facing breakfast nook at the end of the kitchen. The Johnsons decided to push ahead. "Susan's view was, let's put the comfort of our children first, and do it all now," Mr. Johnson said. "What level of construction do you really want small chil-



DREAM CASTLE A turrettlike column of original windows at the house's back, above, was refaced, and its elements were replaced to include French doors to the terraces and garden, left.

dren to bear? So we made our decision to grit our teeth and bear it. Most well-balanced people would not have done it."

The first sign of completion came last summer when Ms. Bridges, who was also working on Bill Clinton's new Harlem office, hung the first of the striped fabric shades in the second floor bedrooms.

"It's an old house," Ms. Bridges said, "but we wanted to make it suit a young family." That meant updating the fabrics on antique furniture, like the striped upholstery on the Napoleon III chairs in the dining room, and a range of untraditional wall colors. The most startling color is in Mr. Johnson's study, where Ms. Bridges set off the chocolate mahogany paneling with a deep, Caribbean blue. Mr. Johnson first thought the color was too dark, but allowed himself to be won over. "My priorities were more about functionality and space than design," he said. "But like everyone else, I have my own set of sensibilities."

Last June, more than two years after his initial blessing, Mr. Butts reblessed the house as the Johnsons prepared to move in. The Johnsons say their children warmed to life in the house before they did, though it's hard not to love space that most New Yorkers can only dream about. The master bedroom suite is almost 60 feet long, including its terrace. The master closet is 200 square feet — the size of many New York bedrooms — with its own windows.

The drawback of most midblock row houses is their lack of natural light. No. 51

was designed to compensate by admitting extra light to the interior dining room through a curved rear facade wrapped in steel-framed windows. Leaks from the original windows had damaged the south side of the house. The Johnsons installed a three-story latticework of windows and French doors at a cost of \$86,000. The dining room opens to a terrace where an ancient rose of Sharon blooms in summer.

To the Johnsons, the original house belonged to another era. But in 1988, Michael Adams, a Harlem preservationist, found Rose Heller, George Backer's youngest daughter, who was then 91 and living on Park Avenue. Her bedroom, she told Mr. Adams, had been on the second floor, looking onto Hamilton Terrace. Her best friend lived around the corner.

Mr. Adams had been puzzled by the Backer family's brief tenure at No. 51. Despite the care that had gone into designing the house, the Backers had moved out after seven years. "My father was appealing when an apartment building was built next door to us," Mrs. Heller said. "Those people who moved in didn't even have servants."

Ninety years after the Backer's departure, No. 51 is once again home to a prosperous young family. On the second floor, a girl named Kira occupies the same bedroom that once belonged to a girl named Rose. The serene view from her big windows is unchanged, and perhaps Kira will also find a friend around the corner.

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Continued From Page 1, This Section

51. "Despite my outward determination," he said, "I had to push back questions from within about our ability to complete this — financially, mentally, emotionally and in terms of my marriage."

Before taking on the Apollo project, Mr. Johnson spent seven years as a senior vice president of AOL Time Warner, where he was a protégé of Richard D. Parsons, who is to become the company's chief executive. Mr. Parsons, as chairman of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone, brought Mr. Johnson to the Apollo project.

After the Johnsons married in 1993, they moved into a West End Avenue apartment, but never felt entirely comfortable there. Mrs. Johnson, an assistant professor at the Columbia University School of Dental and Oral Surgery (where she is known professionally as Dr. Susan Crawford LeMelle), said her neighbors occasionally mistook her for a maid. "We felt no sense of community in that building," Mr. Johnson said. "That was O.K. in Year 1, but not in Year 6."

With their second child on the way in 1998, the Johnsons set out to find a new home, looking from Bedford, N.Y., to Bedford Street in Greenwich Village. "Intermittently," Mr. Johnson said, "I'd float the idea of Hamilton Terrace."

Raised in the Bronx as the son of a waiter at Oscar's, an affectionately remembered Third Avenue fish restaurant, Mr. Johnson had boyhood memories of Hamilton Terrace, where his family visited friends. In 1986, as a bachelor lawyer, he made a \$15,000 deposit on a town house there, only to lose it when the seller declared bankruptcy.

Early in their search, the Johnsons inspected No. 51, the only Federal house in a dignified double file of town houses built around 1900. It was designed to abundant proportions for George Washington Backer, a prosperous builder. With its depth of 93 feet (Manhattan town houses are typically 75 feet deep), the Backer home had a startling 8,000 square feet of living space. Its 21 rooms had basement quarters for a govern-



SUPPORTING CAST The Johnsons, front row outside their home. Back row, Lana Turner, the broker; Sheila Bridges, the decorator; Anthony Sapp, the contractor. Inset, Reginald Thomas, architect.



SERENITY In the skylighted guest bathroom, left, the underside of a clawfoot tub was painted a subtle green to match the walls. The white and green create a clean, simple calm for the old house, said Ms. Bridges, the designer.

