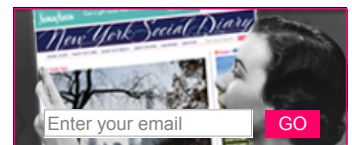


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Douglas Wright

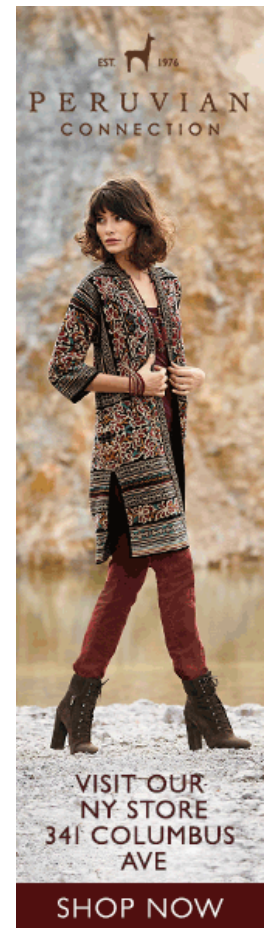


By Sian Ballen & Lesley Hauge
Photographs by Jeff Hirsch

"Sometimes I sit here and wonder, what was he thinking?" says **Douglas Wright** of the well-known architect. C.C. Wendelhack who designed his lovely, quirky 1920s home in Maplewood, NJ. "I think at some point he just went, 'Eh, let's try it and see what happens.'" Somehow we don't think that's exactly **Douglas Wright**'s own approach to his high-end architecture practice and yet ... His appreciation of the oddities (which he calls the "weird symmetries") of his own family home speaks of a sensibility that still values charm in an architectural era full of sleek, "luxury" apartments in which no one actually appears to live. "At the end of the day it's awfully nice to sit here with you in a comfortable setting and have some iced tea." Well, it was.

The architect of your own house (Clifford Charles Wendelhack – most active during the 1920s) also did quite a bit of the same kind of architecture that you do—that seems somehow telling although I'm not quite sure why ...

So, Wendelhack was a club architect—he did country clubs. He did Winged Foot Golf Club and I did the pool house there. I just thought wow, how much fun would it be to live in one of his houses? But when you actually live in the house by the man, you really sit here and see so much more.



So what do you see?

Well, there are all these, like, weird symmetries here. It's a very inventive house because it's basically a sort of center hall Dutch Pennsylvania farmhouse but he's done this bizarre thing of adding a porch on to the front and then there are all sorts of untraditional [elements].



Doug's 1920s house in Maplewood, New Jersey is situated on what was once the old 19th century carriage road to the Cornelius Roosevelt Jr. estate.



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While not on a large plot of land, the mature trees and lush plantings surrounding Doug's home give sanctuary from the traffic and din of his Manhattan office location.





The front entrance to the 1926 stone-and-wood home.



Charming windows under the eaves still have their original shutters.

It's very charming. We hate suburbia but this is gorgeous.

Well, I think that's why we're still here ... frankly. Every three years my wife says, "Why don't we go back to the city?" Before we lived here, we lived in Brooklyn Heights and the Cobble Hill. But we have three kids who are all very active and ... even with two floors of a townhouse, it just didn't feel like enough space.

We watched your interview on Bloomberg TV and I'm going to steal a question from that: What's it like building and renovating houses for the 1%?

Did they actually ask me that? So I will definitely answer the question—I don't know if you've done TV—but you always go through this prep beforehand so the producer can decide if they even want to have you on the program. So all of the questions were not anything like this ... and then I'm sitting there thinking, this isn't what they were going to ask me. But ... building and designing for the 1% is no different than working for anyone except that they basically can do almost anything. Everybody has the same wishes and desires but the natural constraints on [the 1%] are far smaller.



The main staircase with broad oak treads and a chestnut handrail, dominates the front entrance hall. An American mirror with an églomisé painting depicting Brown University where Doug's grandfather served as a dean, hangs next to the entrance to the dining room.



A recessed cabinet is tucked into a thick curved archway leading to the dining room.



Philippe Starck's "Ghost" chairs surround a pedestal dining table. The brightly colored wallpaper is from Pierre Frey. On the far wall a landscape photograph by Lynn Geesaman hangs above a cabinet designed by Doug and inspired by William Morris. Doug gave the cabinet to his wife, Meredith, as a wedding gift.



Looking into the main entrance hall from the dining room. The walls are covered in a bleached bark paper and were inspired by a room that was decorated by friend and colleague Ellie Cullman. The cherry block-front desk is a family heirloom and the basket is from Venezuela where Doug's wife, Meredith was born.

**In a way can constraints make for creative solutions?**

They can be very creative but when a billionaire tells you that they want an Olympic pool with a spa at the end and an infinity edge with a waterfall towards the ocean ... that's out of the reach of most people or when somebody tells you that they want a lead-lined bedroom with triple-paned windows so that they can go in there and work and not hear a single sound.

Um ... a lead-lined bedroom ... that sounds weird.

Well, it's a great place to work, I guess. What's fascinating about this is that it's kind of like when you're reading a great story and the novelist has an unexpected turn in the story. And here, because someone has an idea like this and because there is a budget, I can do it.



Doug and Meredith, a law professor, chose to retain the former owner's kitchen cabinets when they moved into the home last year.





I don't know how much work you do in the city but what do you think of these huge luxury apartment buildings going up all over New York, what seems to me to be the "Dubai-ification" of the skyline. Have there been technological advances that allow for these extremely tall residential buildings?

The zoning is really the main thing that has changed and allowed for these buildings—and Manhattan is the ideal place to build tall buildings because of the bedrock. When you look at the skyline, that's why you see the tall area around Wall Street and then you see that low, low section and then they start up again at 34th and 42nd Streets because the bedrock schist underneath dips down in Midtown.

When I was reading about these tall buildings, I came across a job I'd never heard of: "shadow consultant". Have you worked with a shadow consultant?

I don't know what a shadow consultant does.

They measure and predict the shadows that will be cast by these buildings.

Oh! I thought you meant a behind-the-scenes publicist or something! We do shadow studies all the time. That's one of the great things about Google. We're able to locate our house and then run the sunlight patterns and see how it's going to look in spring, summer and fall.



Peeking into the living room from the front entrance hall. A hand-blown glass lamp from Simon Pearce stands atop an 18th century American, tilt-top, cherry table.



When Doug and his wife moved into their home last year they chose to keep their family-friendly furnishings, even in a more typically formal living room. The kilim was purchased in a Hamptons design store, the leather ottoman is from Room and Board. Fabrics layered atop the living room sofa were purchased on a trip to Morocco.



A painting by Italian artist Gino Scarpa hangs above the living room fireplace mantel.



A rare gilt Regency bulls-eye mirror hangs between the front living room windows. The mirror originally hung in Doug's grandparents home and before he inherited it, he had long admired its beauty.





A plate of cookies from Doug's favorite Maplewood bakery.



A painting by Daniel Senise hangs above a Dutch storage trunk that was left by the previous owner.



A watercolor of one of Doug's projects by Russian-born artist Irina Shumitskaya in a frame from the House of Heydenryk, hangs opposite a recessed bookcase.

Why are interiors these days so empty? There's no sense that anyone lives there at all.

I think you've hit on a very profound question. I will venture an answer. I think it is—and I've thought about it a lot—I think it's because it allows people to project anything on to it. If it has very little content, it's difficult to criticize for actually standing for anything, do you know what I'm saying? It's very, very safe.

Do some people think of it as tranquil? This "hotel look" is perhaps somehow oddly comforting.

Ironically I think [with] all the travel that people are doing, when they get home, it actually feels familiar.

You seem unusually interested in interiors—somehow over the years we have the sense that some architects feel interior design is a little beneath them.

At the end of the day it's awfully nice to sit here with you in a comfortable setting and have some ice tea.



The L-shaped sofa in the sun porch is from Room and Board.



The architect of Doug's 1926 home, Clifford Wendelhack, devised a clever ventilation system using louvered window shutters placed above the windows in order to cool the rooms in the summer months.



The family's upright piano is tucked into a corner of the sun porch.



Azaleas in full bloom outside the windows of the sun porch.

You'd be surprised how many places we've been that belong to interior designers and there is no real area in which we could sit and have a conversation. We have to move the furniture around so that we can sit and talk together.

Really? Well, I chalk up [an emphasis on comfort] to Albert Hadley and Sister Parish because there were so many times when we would get a plan and Mr. Hadley would say, "I can't fit a sofa in here" or "There's no place for conversation."

How did you get to work for Albert Hadley?

So I graduated in the recession of the '80s and no architects were hiring. At the time I thought, this is awful, I'm going to work for an interior designer. But it was actually great because all of my architecture friends were doing things like fire stairs or aligning tiles in service baths. And here I was, working in the field with craftsmen, wood carvers and furniture makers. I designed a lattice room based on this John Russell Pope house ... extraordinary stuff. I'm still doing work for some of the clients.



A lantern from Charles Edwards hangs above the main staircase.



In the upstairs study: a butler's tray table and a Turkish rug.



Family photos, framed degrees from graduate school as well as Doug's drafting table fill the upstairs study.



On top of a low bookcase is a basket filled with flags representing the different sections of Siena, Italy, where Meredith's parents own a home.



The cedar shingled roofline.

I read that in one project you used what you called “gentle materials”. What are gentle materials?

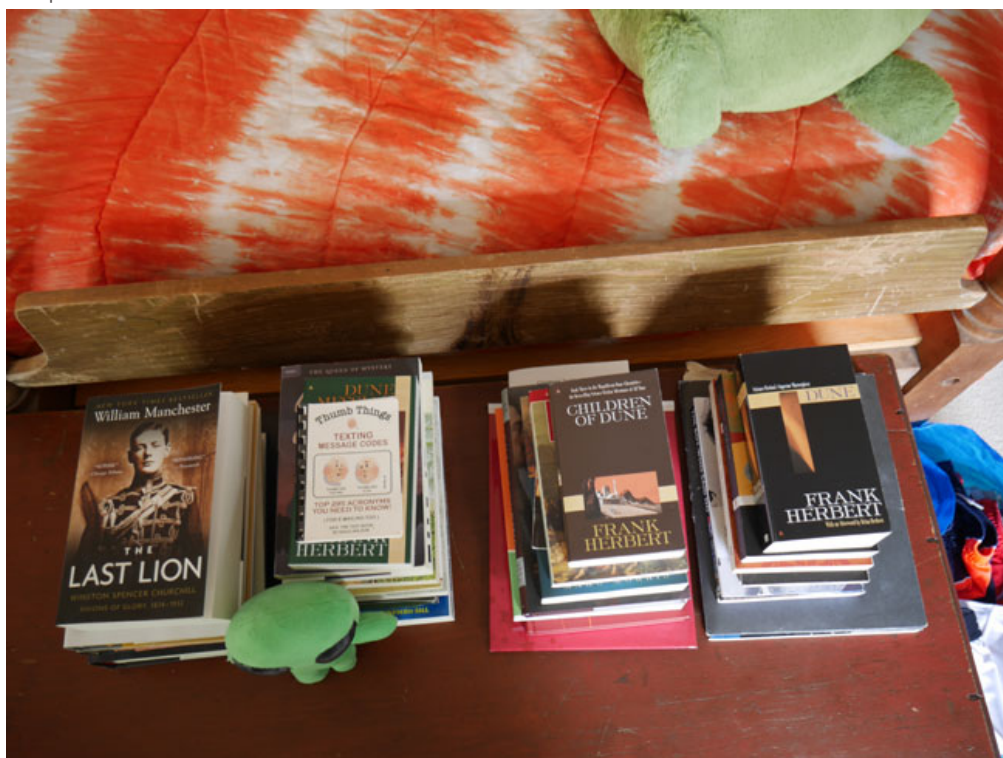
Gentle materials are natural products that age [well]. So, like on the house to which you are referring, we used cedar. The horizontal sunshades are cedar—they’ll start out that warm reddish color and they’ll gradually go more silvery. Some of the metals are going to oxidize over time. It’s kind of like Richard Serra’s sculptures. There’s a warmth to them. You would think that steel is a very frightening material—there’s a power to those sculptures—but I find them very warm and inviting. That’s more of what I mean by gentle materials.

So you mentioned earlier about “challenging” questions from building authorities and historic review boards. What sort of questions are those?

Oh ... you know: “Why are you going to paint the shutters blue?”



In Doug's teenage son's room an early American flag hangs above a four -poster bed bought at a barn sale in New Hampshire.



Impressive bedtime reading.



Drawings of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew by political cartoonist Jeff MacNelly hang on the far wall.





A collection of British toy soldiers are arranged inside an old printing press drawer.



A desk from West Elm is placed next to a tall mahogany chest of drawers that belonged to Doug's grandmother.



Favorite objects including a model of a sailboat, an hourglass and a football bobble-head are arranged atop of the chest of drawers.



Doug's twelve-year-old son's room is a 'study in blue'. The paint is "St. Giles Blue" from Farrow & Ball.



Drawings of Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey by cartoonist Jeff MacNelly hang above an American spindle four-poster bed.







Paris ... painted above the bed of Doug's ten-year-old daughter.



The ever-important hair accessories are arranged in front of a photo of a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



A wing chair next to the fireplace in the master bedroom makes it the perfect place to read on cold winter days.



A view across the master bedroom.



A gilt over-mantel mirror belonged to Doug's grandmother.



This gilt leaf shelf was discovered at the nearby store, Shed.



The master bath retains its original fixtures.

So you end up in absurd conversations?

Look, the thing I always do say is that the people on boards have a genuine desire to keep their communities beautiful, they really do. And these boards would not exist had architects not desecrated these beautiful locations. So whenever I get into these maddening conversations that's what I tell myself. It all happened in the '60s and '70s—it started with the destruction of Penn Station. It's astonishing to think that people thought what is there now was preferable.

What kinds of books do you read?

Oh my God, I read so much. I'm reading a new translation of *The Iliad* by Peter Green—I'm so excited. I've read, like, the first four pages. I don't know ... I read a lot of stuff about the universe and cosmology. My favorite moment in all of those books is towards the end, almost all of them have a chapter where they say "as much as I understand the universe, I don't understand consciousness." What I love about it, is that all of them arrive at that point ... it's just like, "Well, I dunno."



Looking down the main staircase.



In the back staircase a forty-eight star flag hangs opposite a map of South America. Doug hand-painted the Kid Robot doll.



The family corgis, Tiberius and Contessa, otherwise known as Tibbs and Tess.







Why does cosmology interest you?

I think it's because the answers are so difficult ...

Maybe they *like* ugly white brick buildings in another universe.

I'm not going to be buying a ticket to that planet!

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