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## TREASURED ISLANDS

JOURNEY TO JAPAN'S  
GREAT ART ESCAPE



**AHEAD OF THE CURVE**  
In de Cárdenas's dining room, a Paul Rudolph table and Mario Bellini Cab chairs meet a 1930s Swedish secretary. The mixed-media work on the wall is by Isabelle Cornaro.

DESIGNER DWELLING

## CLASH PAD

Rafael de Cárdenas's Brooklyn apartment—where vintage Baccarat mingles with Mapplethorpe, plus a few things in between—reflects his roving eye.

BY SARAH MEDFORD PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON

**I**N THE EARLY 1970S, the Brutalist architect Paul Rudolph designed a dining table for a house in Westport, Connecticut, that sums up that complicated decade. Its top, a pristine oval of white plastic laminate, looms like a jumbo jet over three Plexiglas legs in the shape of oil drums. When the piece came up for auction about 10 years ago, the interior designer Rafael de Cárdenas knew it would be his. “You have to understand the history of it to love it,” says de Cárdenas, who was born in 1974 and came across Rudolph's work as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design. “I was obsessed with it.”

After paying nearly \$10,000 for the table, de Cárdenas put it in storage, waiting until he had just the right home for it. About two years ago, he finally did. Motivated by a vague longing to live in a more bucolic zip code and to entertain more often, the Manhattan-born-and-bred designer moved from his longtime Chinatown loft into a railroad apartment on the parlor floor of an 1890s brownstone in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn. In came the table, which now occupies the grandest of six sunny, high-ceilinged rooms.

“I've never lived in a place this old,” says the 43-year-old de Cárdenas, dressed in a collared sweater and Birkenstocks and glancing from the table's antiseptic surface down at wood floors scarred by generations of tenants. “I'm never going to have a dance party here. But I do like being able to have 10 people over for dinner.” His guests can choose among Mario Bellini's 1977 leather Cab chairs, a 1920s Swedish armchair with a dedication to a previous owner scrawled on its underside or two circa-1968 fiberglass seats designed by Michel Boyer for the cafeteria of the Rothschild Bank in Paris.

“Raf was looking at those chairs for a long time,” says Suzanne Demisch, who sold him the pair and whose Greenwich Village gallery (Demisch Danant, specializing in French modernism) de Cárdenas designed not long ago. “He likes our program,” she says. “Our speed, in a way, and our storytelling. What we get behind is not on everyone's radar—he likes that. He likes to be in the know.”

The same restless intelligence informs Rafael de Cárdenas/Architecture at Large (RDC/AAL for short), the firm de Cárdenas founded in 2006. Since then he's overseen upward of 100 projects, from art installations, pop-up shops and an East Village apartment for the actress Parker Posey to boutiques and environments for Cartier, Baccarat, Nike and, most recently, the 25,000-square-foot Manhattan headquarters for Glossier, a beauty brand favored by dewy millennials.

“A lot of our professional lives intersect with what's cool and fashionable,” says de Cárdenas of his partner, Cale Harrison, an agent for photographers and stylists in the fashion world who divides his time between Paris and Brooklyn. “It's nice that our private lives don't at all. Cale and I watch Pee-wee Herman. And *Moonlighting*. It's the best TV show.”

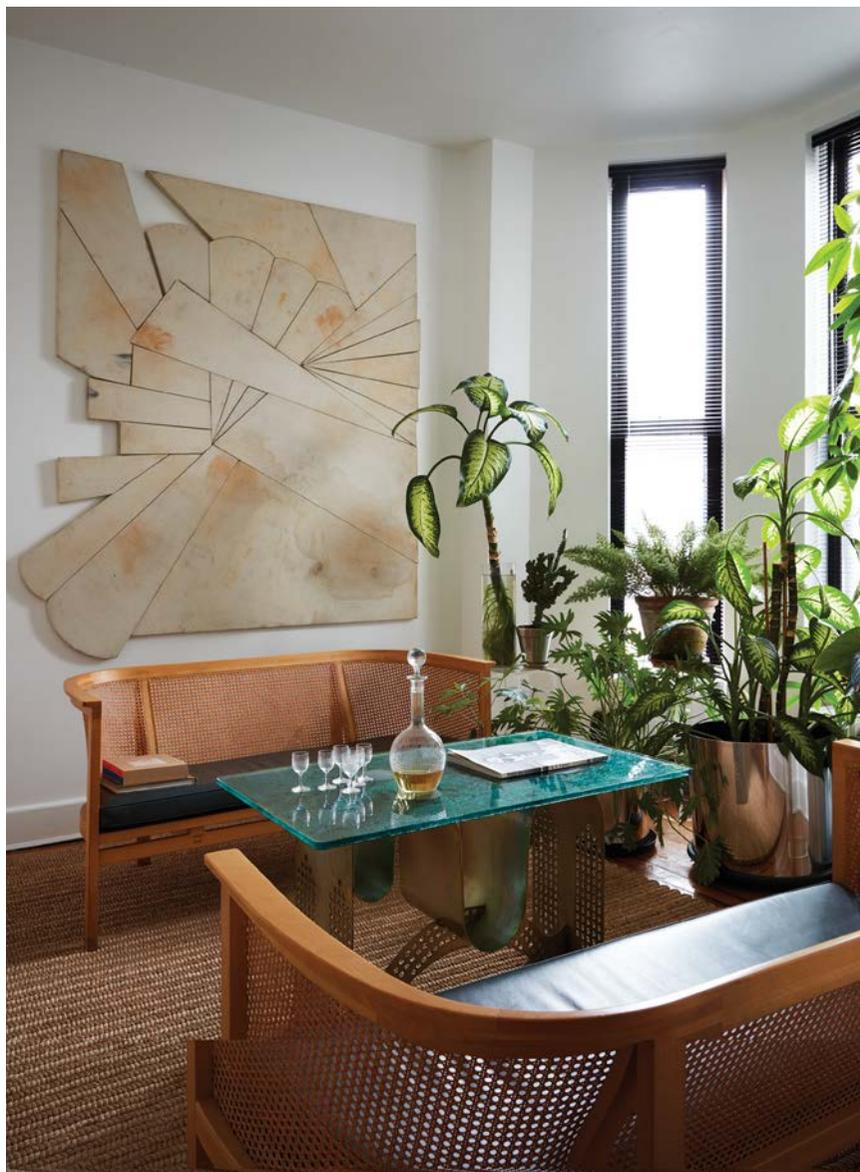
De Cárdenas approaches interior design as a highly associative game, and the influences he cites most often are late-20th-century film, TV, art, music and fashion. Given the contemporary brand work he does, getting in touch with the Victorian aura of his new home, as a prelude to furnishing it, felt like a >

**AT YOUR LEISURE**

Artwork by Jonathan Binet (on wall), Matt Paweski (on plinth) and Joe Zorrilla (chair) in the TV room, where fur bolsters snake across a Liaigre sofa.

**NEW ATTITUDE**

From left: In the bedroom, a Robert Mapplethorpe photo hangs above a Michele de Lucchi chair; de Cárdenas next to Ron Nagle's *PM Dom* (2013), at left; cane sofas and a Wyatt Kahn painting in the living room.



treacherously foreign exercise. "I was so unsure at the beginning," he says. "That's never happened before."

He decided to do what his clients do: He hired someone. Through an intern at his office, he'd struck up a friendship with a Brooklyn-based interior designer, Adam Charlap Hyman, a fellow RISD grad 15 years his junior. The two come at design from opposite ends of the timeline—Charlap Hyman likes to revel in its historical byways—but they share an audacious, fantasy-fueled outlook and a pet hate for modern decorating conventions (throw pillows, twin nightstands), not to mention an irreverent sense of humor. To start off, they reviewed the furniture de Cárdenas had in storage and combed through references Charlap Hyman proposed. "We'd slide through 200 to 300 images per sitting," the young designer recalls. "From there we would talk about what we were trying to do. We developed a vibe, a narrative."

Pinning these six rooms down to a single storyline, however, is hopeless. In the living room, the smallest of the spaces, two cane benches face off across a glass

table that displays a 1920s Baccarat decanter filled with tequila and six matching glasses. An abaca carpet lies underfoot, and houseplants in chrome tubs crowd the bay window. It's a setting David Hockney might have staged for one of his double portraits. In the adjacent media room—the brightest space, with windows on two sides—faux-fur bolsters snake across a louche Christian Liaigre sofa opposite a wall-mounted TV, its wires heaped on the floor, postgrad fashion, amid books and remotes. De Cárdenas resisted the idea of a console. "It was too much furniture in the room," he says. "I'm waiting for new technology."

The one constant to these layered spaces is the contemporary art that de Cárdenas has been collecting since his college days. Pieces by Ron Nagle, Wyatt Kahn, Isabelle Cornaro and others have a constructivist richness that pops against the timeworn white walls, a contrast that is fully intentional. According to Charlap Hyman, the dingy, overpainted Paris apartments of French New Wave cinema became a major touchpoint for the décor. "It's sort of careless—almost

a juvenile approach to decorating a grand apartment," he says of the reference. "There was something romantic about it that we both responded to."

Since the place is a rental, the decision not to spiff up the walls (which de Cárdenas calls "an American inclination") also made practical sense. The one modification the new tenants insisted upon was a kitchen overhaul. On de Cárdenas's first visit to the brownstone, he'd noticed a door to the outside obscured behind the refrigerator; when he asked about it, the landlord said he'd never seen it open. The remark lodged in the designer's mind like the proverbial red flag before a bull. He wasn't satisfied until he'd rearranged the room to access the door, which opens onto a landing and a staircase down to the street.

"This is the entrance we use, though it doesn't have an address," says de Cárdenas, stepping out into the cold spring air. He has been flirting with the idea of buying a grill and barbecuing here. "As far as I'm concerned, I have a terrace!" he says, before closing the door with a slam and heading off to the subway. ●