



Ina Schell Solomon Asser

Within a restricted space, Robert Marc Opticians brings a salon-like situation to Madison Avenue.

If the real estate axiom "location, location, location" holds true, then the site selected for Robert Marc Opticians' third Manhattan shop at 782 Madison Avenue (67th Street) should have been close to perfection. From a design and operations stance, however, the extant situation was hardly a harbinger of retail success. Long a generic neighborhood coffee shop, the space presented dimensions (44-ft. length, 9 to 10½-ft. width) deemed awkward both for browsing customers and storage/display accommodations for the high-style eyeglass collection. Further, access to the site's basement level was achieved only by means of a rather precarious ship's ladder.

Given these conditions the client deemed it prudent to bring in architect Solomon Asser and designer Ina

Schell (who previously had collaborated on the Robert Marc residence) to evaluate the space's viability in terms of his precise program and vision. Asser, who was responsible for gutting and rebuilding the interior space, including transformation of the basement into a lab, and Schell, who took charge of the furnishings, granted approval.

For the design-savvy client, whose credits include consultancy on the Calvin Klein eyewear line, this shop was to have a strong residential flavor with styling indicative of British Colonial themes. For Schell, whose background includes retail experience, this prerequisite jibed with her approach to this project genre. "I think that if you like a retail environment," she says, "you want to buy something from that place and own it. It makes sense to create an environment that people can relate to." Additional client input stipulated in-



Above: Storefront alterations, inspired by French boutiques, entailed replacing aluminum framework with oak painted a rich red/ochre tone. Display stands are of patinated steel with recessed halogen lighting.

Left: The main storage/display unit incorporates low-voltage lighting and mirrored panels. Recessed fixtures house Capsylite lamps said to offer greater control and wattage than other reflective sources.

Opposite: Sunglasses are displayed on painted wood platforms capped by a Victorian pelmet.

Custom cabinetry, flooring, mirrors, storefront: A-1 Design Furniture. **Rugs:** Karastan. **Chairs and table at side wall, table adjacent to cabinet, pelmet:** Godfrey Simpson. **Chairs adjacent to cabinet:** Winsor Antiques. **Chairs at front, chair adjacent to sunglass display:** Greene Street Antiques. **Chandeliers:** Chandeliers Etc. **Antique sconce:** Louis Mattia. **Gold-leaf frame:** Jinpra. **Hardware:** Kraft.

Photography: Peter Paige

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Above: Custom unit provides crucial extra inches of storage space.

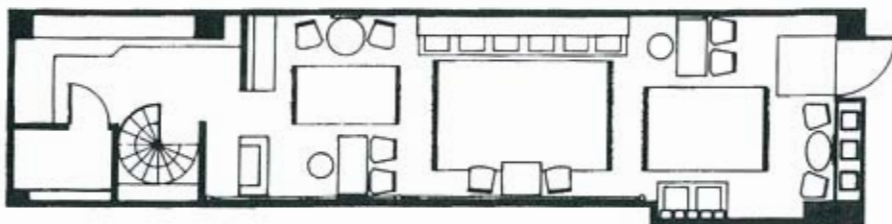
Below: Wainscoting is detailed to recall a porch fence. The mirror frame pulls away from the wall for better viewing angles.

Front: An inviting vignette at the shop's rear includes an assemblage of antique-frame mirrors to offset the awkward appearance of a single try-on mirror.

Dispensing table and chairs at rear: Godfrey Simpson. Chair at game table: Winsor Antiques. Cushion: Tom Malatesta. Fabrics: Osborne & Little; Old World Weavers. Mirror frames: American Country Antiques.



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clusion of five dispensing stations plus directives concerning storage and display fixtures so that about 25 percent of his expansive collection would be on view to customers.

Working within a newly built envelope consisting of varied-width pine plank flooring, walls detailed with moldings, chair rails and wainscoting, plus a circular stairway linking the two levels, the collaborating trio determined that custom cabinetry would take the place of flat files used for product storage in the previous two installations. Adjudged a cost-effective and spatially efficient alternative, the solution entailed design of three oak units, each with a different framework and finish of hand-rubbed paints and stains. Latticed woodwork backed by mirror and a divinely quirky Victorian pelmet cap two of the units while the largest piece along the north elevation has a classical framework incorporating three mirrored panels to aid customers in their decision-making process. The display elements are 24

in. deep, with 36-in. counter heights and overall heights varying from 7 to 7½ ft. Cabinets and dispensing stations are arrayed along lengthwise elevations in an "alternating" scheme that provides maximum floor space along the central aisle.

What is particularly charming about this project is its individualistic character established by antiques located throughout the Northeast. English chairs, vintage games tables given new use as dispensing units, a Victorian table and decorative mirrors to supplement the wall panes create an atmosphere that is anything but clinical. In fact, this salon-like interior is one beckoning the Madison Avenue shopper to relax and linger, and ultimately bring home a part of that pleasurable experience.

The project, encompassing 506 sq. ft. on the ground floor and 350 sq. ft. below, was completed within seven months. Costs are cited as \$125,000 for construction and \$75,000 for cabinetry and furnishings.

EDIE COHEN



Solomon Asser (Robert Marc Opticians, New York) is president of Sonycon Building Corporation, the design/construction firm he established in 1990 to handle residential and commercial commissions. Asser earned a diploma in architecture from the Ecole Speciale d'Architecture in Paris and two masters degrees in architecture and urban planning from Columbia University. Sonycon Building Corp., 26 East 84th Street, New York, NY 10028, (212) 879-6570.

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