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Uptown or Downtown? In the Early '80s, It Made All the Difference

New Yorkers declared their allegiance to a neighborhood via their decorating choices — and proved that an apartment should be the ultimate expression of its inhabitant's beliefs.

T's re-creation of a typically stylish early 1980s apartment in New York City, replete with design totems of the era — a mix of sleek contemporary pieces, exotic accents and chinoiserie and Art Deco antiques. Photograph by Dean Kaufman. Set Design by Piers Hanmer

By Nancy Hass - April 17, 2018

Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl," released in 1983, was, on the surface, about the working-class Long Island rocker wooing the rich model Christie Brinkley. But the song was more deeply about a

famed Manhattan boundary, one insurmountable at the time: "Uptown" was shorthand for the well-lit East Side corridor where nouvelle society, powered by the Wall Street boom, resided in splendor. "Downtown" was the shadowy province beneath 14th Street — a countercultural warren of tenement walk-ups and industrial loft spaces.

Such a duality seems quaint now that artists are being priced out of Ridgewood, Queens, and billionaires range freely in aeries from Central Park South to Little West 12th Street, but in the early '80s, where you lived was an inarguable announcement of your politics, your values and your status. To say you lived uptown, even if you rented in a white brick 1960s building on upper Second Avenue, was to suggest where you longed to be: in a duplex at 740 Park Avenue like the one designed by Mark Hampton for the corporate raider Saul Steinberg and his third wife, Gayfryd, the couple who defined the era's excess. The burnt-umber brocade walls of their 34-room apartment, with its George II gilt-wood chairs and antique ormolu tables, were hung with Old Masters; on the marble mantel sat a harp that neither inhabitant knew how to play.

To declare yourself "downtown" meant that as you lay on your futon next to the bathtub in a sublet studio on St. Marks Place, you imagined yourself an artist in a cavernous former factory in the no man's land that people had recently christened TriBeCa, living inside a loft with whitewashed walls, built-in platforms covered with gray industrial carpet, curved glass-brick partitions and steel tables by the designer Joe D'Urso. Not everything was monochrome in the land of lofts, of course: For a jolt of color and madness, there were paintings by Neo-Expressionists, including David Salle, Eric Fischl and Julian Schnabel. The design world was also enraptured by Memphis, the Milan-based collective started by Ettore Sottsass in 1981. Few New Yorkers actually accessorized their homes with those Tinkertoy shapes in Crayola-color lacquer, but Memphis had an outsize influence; omnipresent in home design magazines, it was a playful reminder not to take Minimalism too seriously.

And while the uptown aesthetic of these years may now seem anachronistic — cluttered with Louis XV canopy beds and gold-leaf mirrors — it was, in fact, its own revolution. Decorators like Hampton — and like Angelo Donghia, who outfitted apartments for Diana Ross and Ralph Lauren before dying of an AIDS-related illness in 1985 — transformed grand Fifth Avenue domiciles once bedecked with uncomfortable, inherited cane-backed settees into cushy sanctuaries adorned with the pattern-mad chintz of English country manors. Hampton developed formal window treatments — elaborately layered swags and jabots — for the homes of Estée Lauder and others, while Donghia brought in enormous palms and poufs upholstered in men's flannel suiting fabrics. This style, an over-the-top celebration of WASP culture that was, ironically, on its way out, was in perfect harmony with mainstream fashion's embrace of ruffly Laura Ashley dresses and the popped collars of preppydom.

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But downtown, the era's design (a version of which is reimagined here) remained defiantly rough-edged and high-tech — the school known as High Tech, in fact, incorporated track lighting, gym lockers and other industrial touches. Pieces like the 1981 Rover chair by the London designer Ron Arad, built from scaffolding welded to a castoff leather car seat, were all the rage; Jean Paul Gaultier, then just starting out, bought six. As much sculpture as functional object, this chair embodied the craft ethos that now dominates high design and presaged contemporary limited-edition furniture. On the other, mass-produced end of the spectrum, the Parisian Philippe Starck became the first industrial designer to make himself an industry, creating an international brand that brought flowing, organic objects — a poetic juicer, a sinuous toothbrush — to New York's increasingly rich inhabitants throughout the next decade.

If there is a rivalry today, it's between the fully gentrified borough of Manhattan and the barely untamed Brooklyn. You can argue that downtown won the aesthetic victory of the 1980s, its gospel of less-is-more transforming neighborhoods once dangerous and affordable into safe zones for international moguls. Which is not to say that all of us haven't lost something profound since the early 1980s: the pride in knowing — with every kitchen implement or window treatment you bought — precisely which team you were playing for.

Featured in the photograph: an '80s lemon-hued lacquered goatskin dining table (courtesy of eerdmansfineart.com), Marcel Breuer Cesca dining chairs (courtesy of knoll.com), a midcentury wool-and-Brazilian-rosewood sofa from Milo Baughman (courtesy of samuelivan.com), a Gae Aulenti for Knoll coffee table, Andy Warhol's 1983 screen print "Ingrid Bergman: The Nun," a Robert Sonneman for Kovacs floor lamp (courtesy of FS20.com), a spattering of embellished Turkish and North African throw pillows (courtesy of antiquetextilesgalleries.com) and a pair of 19th-century carpet pillows (courtesy of rareelements.com). Photographer's assistant: Blaine Davis. Set design assistant: Morgan Zvanut