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Kia ra

A STARBUCKS MEMBER 

YOURS TO TAKE HOME



Kiwi architect David Howell has built himself a solid reputation and a little slice of paradise in New York City's bustling borough.

I'LL TAKE MANHATTAN



BIO

ARCHITECT David Howell Architects, New York
BIRTHPLACE Hastings, New Zealand. He studied architecture at the University of Auckland and moved to New York to establish his architecture practice there 20 years ago.

CLIENTS Howell's warm, modern designs have garnered him a mixture of commercial work for high-end retail clients (such as media agencies and the handbag and accessories company Coach) and residential work for technology millionaires, including a loft for Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes and a renovation of a Brooklyn mansion for a Google engineer.

LOCAL CONNECTION Howell visits New Zealand most summers with his wife and two daughters. He recently completed a building in Upper Queen Street in Auckland, and has another one under way in Motueka.

After 20 years in New York, designing for the rich and famous, New Zealand-born architect David Howell has moved into the family apartment of his dreams.

New Yorkers are borderline obsessive about finding peaceful spots in the metropolis. In rented apartments, the room facing the street is usually the worst; putting bedrooms at the front of a Manhattan house is akin to moving your mattress into a nightclub. So a visitor to Howell's new home, on the second floor of a seven-storey Gramercy condo, will already know there's something a little skew-whiff about him before he reveals his accent: the apartment's three bedrooms face the street.

The counter-intuitive orientation is a bold Kiwi touch that prizes outdoor living as much as indoor. East 22nd Street is a relatively serene side street, and large, double-glazed windows add a library-like calm to the bedrooms. Meanwhile, like most Antipodean families, Howell, his wife, interior designer Steffani Aarons, their 10-year-old twin daughters, Bianca and Sintra, and Isis the Abyssinian cat, do most of their living at the rear of the home.

Located a stone's throw from the opulent Gramercy Park Hotel and a quick cycle from the offices of David Howell Design on Park Avenue, this is the first ground-up commercial project Howell has undertaken in his 20 years in New York. He started work on the building (five condos above street level, and commercial space, parking and utilities basement below) with two partners in 2007. One year in, the recession hit. But while New York is littered with the shells of stalled apartment developments, Howell's building was completed on time, and every condo has sold.

The understated exterior, clad in mocha-coloured brick, blends in with its neighbours. It is distinguished by those large, school-room-sized windows, but "it wasn't trying to

be the new, best, fancy thing", says Howell, who has no interest in the "condos of curtain glass" that line Manhattan's cavernous avenues. "I just think, 'Yuck.'"

Inside the apartment, the kitchen has turned out to be a handy advertisement for his services: Howell has found it's the place where he has the best chance of explaining his design philosophy to new clients. Especially along the eastern seaboard, US interiors tend towards the opulent and finicky. It can be an overbearingly old-fashioned aesthetic: tongue-



Opposite: Shady and relaxing, the courtyard is alive with welcoming greenery. Top: Spacious open-plan living merges lounge and dining. Above: View from the street.



Left: The lounge is set up with family living in mind.

and-groove cabinetry, plush furniture, stately dining sets and gigantic bedroom furniture.

To leap past this, Howell has brought several clients here, including the "Google guys" – young technology experts who tend to bring their mothers to the first meeting. "They're 22 years old, they've just sold their company for \$20 million, they've just bought a \$4 million loft. These are smart kids, but

visually and design-wise they've got no experience," Howell explains. "So I bring them here and show that it can be warm and interesting, not boring."

The subtle sales technique works. David Howell Design has recently completed a loft for Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes, and the renovation of a stunning Prospect Park West mansion for a Google engineer. Howell's work in New York predominantly involves renovations and stylish re-fits on high-end residential homes and townhouses. His commercial projects include retail clients and media agencies looking for airy, warm designs that encourage creativity and focus. Outside New York, Howell has flexed his design muscle with hotel projects in Dubai, a ski house in Utah and a stunning Mexican hacienda.

Howell's journey to New York from Hastings' Karamu

High School was a stop-start one. He arrived at the University of Auckland's School of Architecture in the late 1970s, but his second-year studies were interrupted by a medical drama: cancer. "That was a pretty devastating year," he says, with cheerful understatement. A successful six-month bout of chemo later, he was back at school, finally graduating seven years after he first arrived.

Following five enjoyable years working with architect Richard Priest, Howell took his first big trip overseas. It was intended as an inspirational breather before he settled back in New Zealand to "really get into my career". Within days of arriving in Manhattan, he was struck by an idea: "I'm moving to New York."

Then began the hard slog of door-knocking, navigating the hermetic East Coast old boys' network, securing a green card, and starting his own company. ("I literally pulled out my drawing board from under my bed, put it on my table and said, 'Open for business.'")

Howell still works occasionally in New Zealand, with projects on Auckland's Upper Queen Street and in Motueka, and if his daughters have their way, the family will be living in the South Pacific within the decade. "The girls want to go to university there, and I don't blame them because every time they go to New Zealand it's summer and they're on playtime. So maybe in eight years I'll go back. But I think it would be hard for me to go back and practise because I'm not sure I'd know all the rules."

Howell simply has to look at his own backyard – a small piece of New Zealand nestled in Manhattan – to realise his grasp of the rule book is just fine.

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HOME.

HOME New Zealand is the country's leading home design magazine. Every issue showcases amazing homes by New Zealand's best architects.