

BOHO IN BROOKLYN

It took years for a fashion designer to find a coveted 19th-century brownstone and turn it into a vast family home, complete with cutting garden

REPORT Emma J Page
PHOTOGRAPHS Floto+Warner



Home!



The living room, with hanging sculpture by Kathleen Ryan. Opposite: Ulla Johnson in the garden, with table and chairs by Roda on the terrace



From left: Rogan Gregory mirror in the master bedroom; Asher's bedroom with mural by Ashley Zangle; bathroom



Zach Miner and Johnson with (from left) Asher, Soren and Agnes in the living room

As the daughter of two archaeologists, it's no surprise that fashion designer and native New Yorker Ulla Johnson knows how to handle precious artefacts, a skill that proved useful when it came to reading the bones of her 19th-century Brooklyn brownstone. Located in the borough's historic Fort Greene neighbourhood, the four-storey building had been on Johnson and husband Zach Miner's wish list for a long time, but it took years to clinch the deal.

"It was a bit of a courting process that involved writing love letters to the owners about the property," says Johnson, mother to Soren, 14, Asher, 10, and Agnes, 7. "There are several buyers within a small radius chasing the same homes, so you have to prove your mettle."

It's not hard to see the appeal of this classic brick-fronted townhouse, with its Insta-worthy stoop and period features, including ornate mouldings and original fireplaces. But what really sold it to Johnson was the back yard.

"For years, I longed to create a cutting garden, but that's a big ask in Brooklyn," she says. "As soon as I saw the rear of this house, I knew it had potential."

Another draw was the neighbourhood itself, with its relaxed village vibe, farmers' market and proximity to verdant spaces, including Prospect Park. It's a far cry from Johnson's own upbringing on Manhattan's Upper East Side, with its big-city feel. "This is very different from most people's idea of NYC," concurs Johnson. "Here the kids can ride their bikes and play in the yard. It doesn't have that gritty, urban feel."

Although Johnson was unfazed by the idea of a renovation, she was looking for a place with a solid structure. "I am very emotion-based, so I knew it had to feel right when we walked in," she explains. The house originally



The kitchen-dining space, leading on to the terrace

comprised a separate garden apartment and three-storey family home, so the couple's aim was to turn it into a single dwelling.

Careful to preserve the original details, they were unafraid to add a modern touch. The "parlour" floor's kitchen-diner was knocked into one space and a rear window punched out to create a glazed solarium leading to a sunny terrace. The master bedroom and bathroom were flipped, and the children's top floor gained an additional bedroom and a bathroom. "We added our imprint through gestures such as the oval skylight and the soaped Douglas fir floorboards," says Johnson. "We knew that they

would scuff a little over time, but we wanted to embrace the informal and the imperfect."

The fashion designer worked with interiors specialist Alexis Brown, who helped create her first clothes store on Bleecker Street in the early Noughties. "We share the same vision for the handmade and artisanal," she says. The challenge was how to transfer those principles successfully. "Layering, texture and contrast were key," reflects Johnson, whose eponymous clothing label is renowned for its intricate, whimsical designs, married with artisanal fabrics and ease of fit. "My garments celebrate texture, colour, touch and feel and I think



The den in the basement, with lamp by Bernard Buffat

those elements can be read in our home, too: linear shapes combine with the curvaceous, and humble fabrics have been elevated and luxurious textiles treated with informality."

Johnson points to the handwoven blinds ("The fabric would work equally well for ready-to-wear"), wax plaster-finished mouldings and deeply veined marbles, seen in the kitchen and bathroom, as examples. "I think we visited every marble yard in the Tri-state area to get it right," she smiles. "I fell in love with the way the granite comes out of the earth already possessing such a singular structure."

With Johnson's love of travel and her husband's contemporary art background, it's little surprise that the house showcases an array of unique pieces, from the Sheila Hicks weave in the living room to the pod-shaped Kathleen Ryan sculpture suspended from the ceiling, incorporating clusters of jade and rose quartz. "We hung it near the window because we thought about the feeling we would project on to passers-by," Johnson reflects. "For that reason, we also took care to add window boxes and to plant a magnolia in the front yard."

No doubt these embellishments are appreciated during a spring in lockdown. The family, used to hosting friends around the dining table every Sunday, are hunkering down. "We tend to congregate in our communal spaces," says Johnson, "We light a fire most nights and often read together before supper."

Johnson says quarantine has increased the sound of passing sirens, but it has also magnified her appreciation of the changing seasons. "That cutting garden has come into its own. Now, we find ourselves at home all day and we cut daffodils and tulips together. We'll have lunch on the terrace in our coats even if it's chilly." Life has slowed temporarily, and the family's most pressing concern is when the wisteria trailing the back wall will finally come into bud.

"We always wanted this to be a home for all seasons and now it is," reflects Johnson. "We know that we are the stewards of something precious yet approachable, and we're planning on staying put for years to come." ■

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