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ing page: Interior decorator Eric
er in the living room of his Upper
Side duplex; the bronze floor lamp
m Christopher Norman, and the
ings sofa is upholstered in
ngton wool by Andrew Martin.
page: A George II chair, circa 1750,
holstered in David Hicks's La
ntina linen, and the club chairs are
red in Eskdale Velvet, both from
ofa. The rug is by Asha Carpets,
he wool curtains are by Holland &
y. The paintings displayed against
er window are by Randall Exon,
and Sandra Blow. See Resources.





The stair hall displays Cohler's collection of vintage and contemporary photographs, including iconic works by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Bert Stern. The bronze sculpture is by Anita Huffington, and the Picture Stand chair is from Profiles; the Queen Bee carpet by David Hicks is from Beauvais Carpets. Facing page, from top: The collection of artworks suspended by cables includes 18th- and 19th-century portraits and a 2003 diptych by David Salle. The lamp on the 1960s rattan bar is by Christopher Spitzmuller, and the chair, circa 1810, is by Thomas Hope. See Resources.

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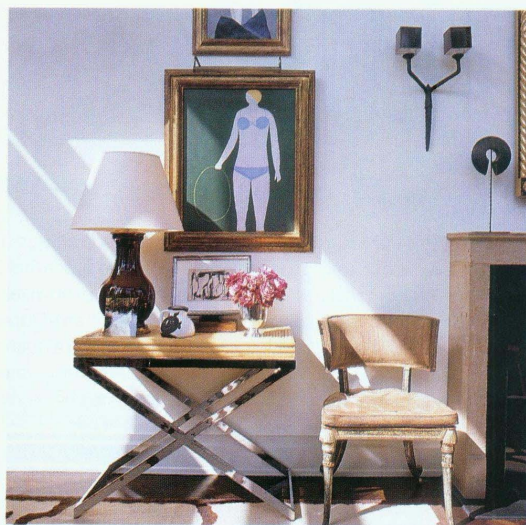
tupid question: What, exactly, is comfort? You hear the word so much—applied to fashion, furniture, food, even film—that you would think you'd know it the second you sink into it. But while it's easy to put your finger on—it feels so soft, so...comforting—the concept is awfully hard to hold onto.

If there's some aspiring novelist out there who wants to update Flaubert and pen a novel about a fruitless quest for comfort in modern society, there's no need to fret over what trade your tragic hero should practice; he should be a decorator. Who else, after all, has the almost superhuman ability to make an interior supremely comfortable, yet at the same time suffers the slings and arrows of perfectionism so acutely as to be personally immune to the concept?

"I'm really only comfortable in hotels," says Eric Cohler, a Manhattan decorator who has made his name with tastefully eclectic interiors that have a sense of history without seeming stodgy or forced. Yet anywhere outside of the bland neutrality of a hotel room, Cohler faces the constant urge to readjust, rearrange, rethink, and recalibrate. He is such an avid collector of paintings, black-and-white photography, and countless other objets d'art, that he has to rent storage units to contain it all. As he admits, "There's always a temptation to collect."

With that kind of compulsion, it's probably a good thing that, after studying art history, Cohler quit law school to follow his boyhood love of design ("I was always rearranging the furniture," he recalls). Though he clearly has the attributes of a good lawyer—he's hardworking, neatly dressed, and carefully spoken—his impeccable taste would only have held him back in the kind of law firm where bad cherry veneers, brass lighting, and powder-blue broadloom are considered the height of chic.

Instead, courses in architecture and historic preservation at Columbia have given him a sensitivity to buildings and an understanding of what can be done with them. Seeing possibilities in a space that exists, not just the space that might someday emerge once the demo crew is





done, is a talent that too few decorators possess. And frankly, not many decorators would have even seen an apartment in the space that Cohler took on for his personal domain, the former offices of an investment firm in a not particularly residential section of Manhattan's Upper East Side. The second-floor duplex once housed more than a dozen busy employees, with their multiple phone lines, coffeemakers, watercoolers, copy machines, etc. One can perhaps imagine some renegade artist taking it over, but hardly a fancy uptown decorator.

Now, after a six-month renovation, one would never know the place had ever been anything other than a lovely New York apartment, so graceful is the flow of rooms on both floors. And given the translucent shades that most days are pulled down behind a novel latticework of paintings hung over the windows in the living room, one barely realizes that the traffic on First Avenue is an arm's length away.

While Cohler's self-confessed impulse to fiddle and refine means the apartment will never quite be finished, there's no mistaking that it is, as they say, done. In the soaring, 20-foot-high living room, a custom-made coral-pattern carpet lies underfoot. Gustavian oval-backed dining chairs ring a Regency pine dining table. The study and the stair hall are



In the dining room, 18th-century Gustavian chairs upholstered in Edelman Leather's Royal suede and an English Regency table; the rug is by Beauvais Carpets, and the Bridge Table chandelier is from Hinson & Co. The painting, *Tartarean II*, 1991, is by Jacob Kainen. Facing page: The antique zebra-upholstered bench in the study is from Denton & Gardner, and the 1940s French limestone-and-iron cocktail table is from C.J. Peters. The kitchen cabinets are by Page1Design, the dishwasher is by Fisher & Paykel, and the tile backsplash is by Walker Zanger. See Resources.



The carpet in the master bedroom is by Beauvais, the late-19th-century chinoiserie chest is from John Rosselli, and the folding ladder is Anglo-Indian; a Qing dynasty vase is displayed above a Toshiba flat-panel television. Facing page, from top: The closet doors are hand-painted with a traditional Tree of Life pattern. Paintings from the 1920s through the 1950s surround a suede headboard designed by Cohler; the bedding is by Matouk, and the Tizio lamps are by Artemide; the walls are painted in Farrow & Ball's Drab. See Resources.





lined with photographs by Diane Arbus, George Platt Lynes, Richard Avedon, Bert Stern, and Harry Callahan; a vivid David Hicks carpet runs up the stairs. The array of paintings ranges from works by George Romney to David Salle, 19th-century portraits to outsider art. The sedate palette of blacks, grays, creams, and browns is enlivened with punctuation marks of color: a red-lacquered cocktail table, a turquoise lamp, a pair of Josef Frank-pattern pillows, a Futurist painting.

The extreme eclecticism of Cohler's gentlemanly pad suggests not only a different place but a different time—when collecting was something people did for passion rather than for profit or status. That passion shows not only in the quantity of the possessions Cohler has acquired over 20 years, but also in their quality and curiosity. For a man who says he might have been a museum curator if he hadn't turned to design, the apartment is an opportunity to be active rather than lie back and enjoy. Constantly shuffling, putting something away and bringing something else out, rehanging this work, changing that one, Cohler has made his sanctum a paradise of control rather than comfort. "When I stop rearranging everything," he says, "I'll move."

So if you really want to relax, hire a decorator. Don't become one. ■