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# Starting All Over



Once **Karen** and **Richard LeFrak** settled into their new house—just six short Manhattan blocks away from their old apartment—they realized they'd made a move of life-changing proportions. *By Julie V. Iovine*



"I just knew I was home," Karen says of the moment she first entered the foyer of her new town house (opposite). She curls up with Mikimoto and Gem, her retired champion standard poodles, in front of Vicky Colombet's painting *Wind & Snow*.

HAIR BY NATÉ BOVA FOR WARREN-TRICOMI. MAKEUP BY NIKKI WANG. FLOWERS BY VSF

Photographs by *Oberto Gili*



FIRST THERE COMES the clattering rat-a-tat of perfectly clipped nails on the limestone floor of the foyer. This is followed by two hurtling puffs of white careening to an instant halt at the side of their mistress as she swings open the door. Being greeted at home by Karen LeFrak and two of her show poodles is a more animated event than one expects to encounter at a stately Upper East Side town house. But it is exactly that spirit of ebullience and discipline that characterizes Karen and Richard LeFrak's current life just off Fifth Avenue—a new chapter, as Karen is quick to offer, resulting from the couple's first change of Manhattan address in thirty-six years of marriage.

The LeFraks' personal history has an old-fashioned, very New York ring: he was seventeen and headed for Amherst College and she was fifteen when they met at a winter dance. "Our parents were friends, and his father said Richard had to talk to me," says Karen. "All I remember is that he was tall, blond and smart"—and that he liked her sleeveless white mohair dress with pastel ribbons at the neck. They dated for seven years before getting married and soon moved into the same building as his parents. What else do you do when you marry into a family-owned real-estate dynasty? Then, as now, the LeFrak Organization was one of the largest private real-estate development and management companies in the country.

Flash forward thirty-four years to the couple, now with two grown children, Harry and Jamie, who both work in the family business. Karen is active in a wide range of philanthropies, from the Women's Committee of the Central Park Conservancy to the New York Philharmonic. She has become well-known for breeding standard poodles and taking home awards from the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show; she also escorts her dogs to hospitals for therapy visits with patients. Richard now heads the real-estate company that was founded by his grandfather, Harry LeFrak, in 1901. He also pursues avid interests in contemporary art and architectural history while

**In the living room, interior designers Mary Foley and Michael Cox created a calm center for conversation. Karen's favorite orchids bloom atop a custom coffee table; surrounding sofas were made by DeAngelis in the style of Jean-Michel Frank and covered in Holly Hunt's cotton velvet in Doe. The Venetian-style chandelier is from John Salibello Antiques.**







serving on several boards, including those of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the American Museum of Natural History. On a smaller and more personal scale, the couple has endowed a fund to preserve the statue of Balto, the heroic sled dog, which stands astride a rocky ledge in Central Park.

In spite of their many social obligations, the LeFraks have always been homebodies at heart. "Richard's is a very close-knit family, and I loved the feeling of safety," says Karen of those years spent living one flight below her in-laws, in a postwar apartment on Fifth Avenue with a terrace overlooking Central Park. The Parish-Hadley decor was classic

Manhattan taste of a certain stripe: a sophisticated country style that Karen refers to simply as "daisies and baskets with some English antiques." In fact, Karen liked it so much that she stalled for more than a year when her husband suggested they think about moving. "I really did not want to move, and I came up with these lame excuses, like 'What do we do if we run out of milk late at night?'" she recalls. But Richard truly felt the need for a change after his father's death, in 2003. "So I went around with all these real-estate people, pretending to look," Karen says.

**The formal dining room (left) has its playful side, too, thanks to a wall of Picassos, both ceramics and works on paper. Custom horsehair-covered chairs surround a dining table from New York City's Wyeth. In the master bedroom (above), ebonized furnishings enliven a palette of white and cream.**





The search was desultory at best, she now confesses, until she entered one particular town house. "The moment I saw the foyer, I knew," she explains, sitting on the living-room sofa with Mikimoto, one of the dogs, curled around her back, his muzzle tucked neatly under her thigh. "It was so serene and spacious and bright—I just knew I was home." The landmark neo-Georgian town house, built around 1875, had been completely renovated by Foley & Cox Interiors of New York for the previous owners, a young family that had barely moved in before putting it up for sale in the aftermath of a divorce. As far as the LeFraks were concerned, the five-story dwelling didn't need a thing. And, best of all, it was a mere six blocks from their old home and offered a view of Central Park, if only a sliver, from one upstairs terrace.

They decided they wanted the house—and the talent behind the renovation, as well. Mary Foley and Michael Cox are both graduates of that inimitable school of livable glamour known as Polo Ralph Lauren, where they met while designing private residences in addition to corporate interiors for the Ralph Lauren Home division. "We have a philosophy of appropriateness," says Cox. "We believe in architectural integrity but also in updating classical vocabularies to suit real living today."

"We're not design Nazis," adds Foley. "We don't have *our* way of doing things." In their renovation for the family that had preceded the LeFraks, they'd treated the town house not slavishly but with respect. They'd known how to tweak it in subtle ways, by supersizing the dentil moldings on the second floor, for instance, and switching out the carved-wood balusters of the

first flight of stairs in favor of nickel-plated cast steel, touches that would give the house a modern twist. The result was cosmopolitan and inviting. The LeFraks admired it so much—especially the subdued color scheme of white and cream—that they hired Foley and Cox to do > 171

**Two of Karen's poodles lounge in front of competition photos on the fifth floor. The poodle-centric black-and-white decor includes a cowhide rug, a sofa slipcovered in Manuel Canovas's Cotton Club in Neige and curtains of awning-striped cotton canvas from Ralph Lauren Home.**



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some more tweaking of a decorative sort.

The designers approached the job in keeping with their belief that decor at its most successful is simply a background to life. Since no structural changes were necessary, they focused on giving the interiors a formal feeling suited to a more mature couple. The dining room got the biggest overhaul. For the previous owners, it had been a family room with a big television set and furniture for lounging. The LeFraks needed an event room for sit-down dinners. Or as Foley puts it: "Out went the Warhol; in came the Picasso."

Foley and Cox added a Venini chandelier and a dining table for twelve custom-made of crushed bamboo with an ebony finish. They gave a wall-to-wall bookcase cabinet doors to accommodate dinner services the LeFraks have collected over the years. And in the corner they installed a table for two that looks out onto the garden and provides a spot where the couple can eat when alone. "Add a lamp and some salt and pepper shakers and it's just like a romantic restaurant," Karen jokes. Upstairs, two bedrooms became a guest room and an office for Richard, while on the very top floor, a playroom was transformed into Karen's private sanctuary, where she keeps her dog-show trophies, a writing desk and her baby grand piano (she started playing at age three and now also composes). She calls it the Poodle Room.

From the start, the LeFraks saw their move less as a relocation than as a life-renewal project. "It was a spiritual reassessment, too," Karen says, "and the chance not only to edit our stuff but to edit our lives, our goals and our priorities." In other words, the decor had to reflect that with their children grown, the LeFraks were going to be spending more time pursuing their own interests together as well as apart. The second-floor library, with its gray flannel walls, softly upholstered sofas and sixty-inch plasma-screen TV, has become the after-dinner lair for Richard, a fan of sports and the

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History Channel. On the third floor, Karen has made an office for her philanthropy work and correspondence between the master bedroom and bath, which is itself a luxurious getaway, complete with a terry-covered chaise longue. "It's my very favorite place for making phone calls," Karen says of the marble-clad room.

From top to bottom, the house is unified by its modern palette, a river of white on white on gray with dramatic dark-brown floors and quiet eddies of camel and beige here and there. The idea to go almost entirely neutral was Karen's own, and it was a big break from the bright country colors and dark English antiques of the LeFraks' old address. The new setting complements the couple's collection of 20th-century art, which includes large works by Richard Artschwager, Fernando Botero and Milton Avery, among others.

The only real challenge in the project for Foley and Cox was accommodating the dogs. But even that turned out to be a breeze. "Who knew that poodles were so decorator-friendly?" asks Foley. "They don't shed!" Basically, the only canine concession was the absence of antique carpets. In their place went rugs of woven wool and woven jute and, in the library, woven leather—all contributing an urbane note to this update on traditional luxury.

The LeFraks' move has been as transformational as they'd hoped. Richard recently relocated his office from Queens to Manhattan and now enjoys walking to work, a stroll that also allows him to drop in on his mother each morning for a visit. Karen has gotten more serious about composing music and has begun writing children's books featuring an irrepressible character named Jake, a boisterous poodle with highbrow tastes. Her debut, *Jake the Philharmonic Dog*, was published last August. And she admits that one of the most unexpected thrills of a new life in a new home, even at this point in her marriage, has been the pleasure of new stationery engraved with an address that is finally theirs alone. ❧