

HOME WORK

GIVING SPREE

Well-heeled New Yorkers are designing homes to accommodate fund-raisers and charity benefits

BY MARK ELLWOOD

IT seemed like a standard assignment for interior designer Purvi Padia: a 5,600-square-foot luxury loft in Tribeca, owned by a family with three small children. But the clients — both keen philanthropists — lobbed her an additional request: They wanted the common areas to do double duty, to function both as a cozy family hideaway and a workable venue for hosting benefits.

The ask didn't faze Padia. She's been fielding similar requests lately from wealthy New Yorkers across the city, who want to go beyond conventional entertaining to focus on opening up their homes for formal, charitable events.

"There is now a subset of my clients who ask me to design spaces with the intention of entertaining people they might not know that well," she explains. Handily, that includes Padia herself, a fervent UNICEF supporter who has thrown bashes for the charity at her own home — where she has workshopped the techniques that she now applies to her clients' spaces.

Her overall challenge is simple: creating a warm, comfortable and welcoming space that's also transformable into a blank canvas. Take family photos, for instance. Rather than hanging them on the wall, dangling from immovable nails, it's better to perch them on a beautiful console, she says, which can be removed when needed.

As for family heirlooms and knickknacks that are too extensive to regularly move? Display them on bookshelves with custom glass doors, as she did for another client who wanted to make her living room benefit-ready; an oversized locking mechanism worked as both a visual statement and a security measure.

Leaving a large, open space at the entrance to an apartment is also vital, Padia says, especially when the elevator opens directly into a home.

"A grand foyer feels extra spacious, and can also be used for rented tables or extra standing room when you're hosting," the designer explains. (Not to mention other bonus uses, as the aforementioned Tribeca family confessed to her later: "We did this to be conducive to entertaining, but it's such a brilliant idea — the children love this space to do cartwheels in!")

Bathroom placement is crucial: Padia always ensures that at least a half bath can be accessed by strangers without trampling through private spaces, like kids' bedrooms. Check voltages and power supplies throughout the home, she advises, so that sockets can handle amps for a band or an emcee's microphone.

"I built my own apartment with real firepower in case I want a band," she notes. "I don't want that ever to be an issue." Indeed, she threw a Mother's Day gala with live entertainment that was able to sing through lunch.

Another trick? Large sliding glass doors that can partition off spaces in an airy, but definitive, way. Padia often uses French barn doors with translucent windowpanes running along a barn rail, especially at the entrance to the kitchen, which can then be featured or hidden away as the event demands.

Author and design expert Sophie Donelson believes this trend is native to New York. "Giving over any space in Manhattan to rooms that typically function well just for cocktail parties is a hard thing to wrap your head around, even for the most affluent," she tells Alexa, adding that it's instinctive to opt for modular rooms, designed to accommodate multiple uses. "But it takes a clever designer to come up with options that feel like the space is at its best doing either, or both."

The democratization of gala-throwing has boosted the need for such spaces in the homes of the city's most fabulous. Prestige charity fund-raisers are no longer limited to a ballroom, a ballgown and the Plaza Hotel.

"Doesn't it all come back to Instagram?" laughs Donelson (follow her @sophiedow). "A fund-raiser is an opportunity to open your home and make it seem like you're doing it for the benefit of humanity, but you're really dying for women to see the wallpaper you just spent an arm and a leg on. And I'm totally on board with that."



Clients of interior designer Purvi Padia (top) increasingly request flexible home spaces that can host formal charity events. Padia herself holds fund-raising soirees at her own West Village home (above).

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