

# NEW YORK CASUAL



Markham Roberts attains superhero status after gutting and decorating a child-friendly Park Avenue apartment



Opposite: Markham Roberts designed a Lucite console for the hallway of Clayton and Amanda Benchley's apartment to show off their coral and shell collection. This page: Amanda and Markham play with Teddy, the Benchleys' son, on an orange velvet sofa that pops against the dark walls. The seascape is by Karen Connell.

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AMANDA BENCHLEY ALWAYS KNEW she had terrific friends. But she never knew that she also had at least one Super-friend, a seemingly mild-mannered type who had the ability to transform himself into a hero on command.

Markham Roberts was a longtime buddy of Benchley and her husband, Clayton. They knew he was a decorator, but they had never seen him in action, professionally speaking.

"When my husband and I saw him on the job, talking to the workmen, it was like—Markham's a whole other person!" says Benchley. "We knew he was fantastic on the non-professional side, but our respect for him just shot up enormously."

It seemed to Benchley that there was no recalcitrant contractor or co-op regulation Roberts could not leap in a single bound. It was a good thing, too. At the time, the Benchleys were renovating their Park Avenue apartment in New York and Amanda, a documentary filmmaker, was pregnant with her son, Teddy.

"I was pregnant and hysterical, and he never indulged me," says Benchley. "He was just very calm, cool, and collected."

Their collaboration almost never happened—both designer and client were wary of working with a friend. Needless to say, it worked out well. "It was a nice experience and it didn't kill our relationship," says Roberts.

For starters, Roberts gutted the whole apartment. Raising and widening the door openings made it feel "more open and grander," he says. He ripped out the floors and installed dark-stained oak, which gave him a dramatic backdrop for the offhandedly modern look he wanted.

"They're super casual, so it's not too decorated," Roberts says. "It's very kid-friendly. They just weren't into a place that they had to worry about, that they couldn't enjoy or live in." As a fellow dog owner, he also knew it needed to be sturdy and not the least bit precious.

Part of the impetus for doing a good job was that Roberts and his partner, James Sansum, spend a lot of time at the Benchleys'. "As opposed to some of these apartments, they really use the living room," says Roberts. "It's where we all watch movies, eat dinner, order in food."

He installed a U-shaped, copper-colored cotton velvet banquette for sophisticated lounging across from a blue suede chaise—this is a living room where you can be horizontal and unashamed. "I wanted all the fabric to be really sort of luscious and luxurious," says Benchley.

Instead of trying to hide the television, Roberts simply mounted a flat-screen on the wall.

"I think it's a piece of art," he says. "I love it." A piece of more conventional art, a color photograph by the Benchleys' friend Tapp Francke, hangs nearby.

On the apartment's original mantel is part of the Benchleys' coral and shell collection. Their fascination with the sea makes sense when you consider that Clay's father is *Jaws* author Peter Benchley. "Clay grew up traveling all over the world with his parents and diving, and they're big into marine life preservation—it's in their blood," says Roberts, who also collects coral.

The designer wanted to make a statement with that collection for the entrance gallery. He began with glorious brown lacquered walls, against which everything else, including an orange velvet sofa, pops. He built a clear Lucite console with a shiny white lacquered top, and put some choice coral specimens inside.

Topped by shells and with a starburst mirror above it, it's an outdoor still life that happens to be indoors. The ocean theme is furthered by a seascape photograph by Karen Connell, which hangs across from the console. (Even the Benchleys' Tiffany wedding silver has a shell motif.)

Since the apartment had no formal library, Roberts wanted to create a bookish dining room as a hybrid. He installed substantial bookshelves around a Karl Springer table from the 1970s, giving the whole room a brainy appeal. As in the living room, a Noguchi ceiling lamp seemed the right finishing touch.

Amanda lobbied to use Philippe Starck's Louis Ghost chairs around the Springer table for some very good reasons: "They're cheap, they're really comfortable, and they seem to be able to go with everything," she says. And they make it easier to see the flokati rug Roberts installed under the table.

Roberts's powers of transformation also applied to pieces of furniture the Benchleys had owned for years. "We had to reuse a lot of the pieces I already had because we did not have a huge budget," says Benchley. "He saw potential in things I would never have seen."

Prime among those was a pair of Louis XVI-style chairs, a long-ago flea market find for \$100 in London, which Roberts painted white and upholstered in a brown and white geometric pattern for the entrance gallery.

But it was the personal change she saw in her friend that lingers in Benchley's mind. "He is so commanding; he has such a presence," she says. "I'd never work with anyone else again."

Roberts combined the dining room with a library, building bookcases around a Karl Springer table from the 1970s. Philippe Starck's Louis Ghost chairs stand on a flokati rug. The walls are covered in Minerva, a fabric by Lulu DK. Left: The Benchleys' Tiffany wedding silver has a shell motif.







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Roberts mounted a flat-screen TV in the living room instead of trying to hide it. In front of the copper-colored cotton-velvet banquette is a white lacquered coffee table from the 1970s. The blue suede chaise has a faux-mink throw. As in the dining room, Roberts chose large but simple Noguchi ceiling lamps to light the casual room. The mantel is topped with a 19th-century French mirror and part of the coral collection. For more details, see Resources.





Above: In the nursery, Roberts used a charming safari print from Cowtan & Tout on the curtains and sofa, and covered a standard nursery glider chair with a snazzy orange cotton. Top right: The bathroom—filled with toys—was covered in a red-and-white fabric from John Rosselli. Right: The soothing master bedroom has yellow grasscloth on the walls and yellow-and-white silk striped curtains. Roberts designed a quilted muslin headboard and put a faux-fur blanket on the bed. Opposite: Another view of the living room shows a painting by Julia Condon. The 19th-century French walnut chest holds a Chinese turquoise lamp dating to the 1920s, and two similar foo dogs.

