



the hotel opened to the public in October 1907, quickly becoming one of New York City's toniest addresses—and, indeed, one of the most iconic hotels in the world. Alfred Vanderbilt, the railroad heir and celebrated sportsman, was the first guest to sign the register; he was followed, in due time, by Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, the Beatles on their first American tour, Ronald Reagan, and Michael Jackson. The ballroom has witnessed the comings-out of countless debutantes, as well as the inimitable black-and-white ball hosted by Truman Capote, and, of course, the entire hotel was the playground of a precocious six-year-old named Eloise.

Gambrel's clients adored the building's storied past, but they were not intimidated by it. "Coming from Europe, we are used to living with history," says the wife. To her, an illustrious pedigree does not in and of itself confer greatness. "It isn't something you can wear on your own shoulders," she says, adding that she appreciates America's more in-the-moment approach to merit.

In Gambrel, she found a designer well matched to this sensibility. His designs have a reputation for evoking earlier eras while remaining squarely attuned to the practicalities of the present. For this project, says Gambrel, "we were inspired by the idea that this luxe environment had aged in a regal way, so we approached it like a stage set, where you create a relic, but with a twist." The result is a suitably sumptuous envelope in which modern-day life can unfold in a historic landmark. The wood wall panels and moldings were designed and fabricated piece by piece, hand-painted with multiple layers of glaze, worn and sanded on the edges to give them an aged appearance, and then waxed. And the library was constructed entirely of native oak in Oxford, England, then shipped over in pieces. "Although the apartment is brand new, it has an old spirit," says Gambrel, "as if it has been there a long time, beautifully maintained, and has mellowed over the years."

For the wife, her apartment speaks of a time when craftsmen used materials and techniques that "aged with grace," she says—unlike now, when "they do things fast and cheap."

The intentional mellowing also serves a quotidian purpose: It allows the apartment to feel simultaneously grand and approachable. Because it has a sense of being comfortable and broken-in, one walks in the door and immediately feels at home. "It feels real, like you can use it," says Gambrel. "I'm not a big fan of luxury that seems so overly rich that you can't live in it."

He's also not a fan of predictable gestures—which is why the hammered-leather wall panels in the bedroom, inspired by a Spanish chair, are done in