

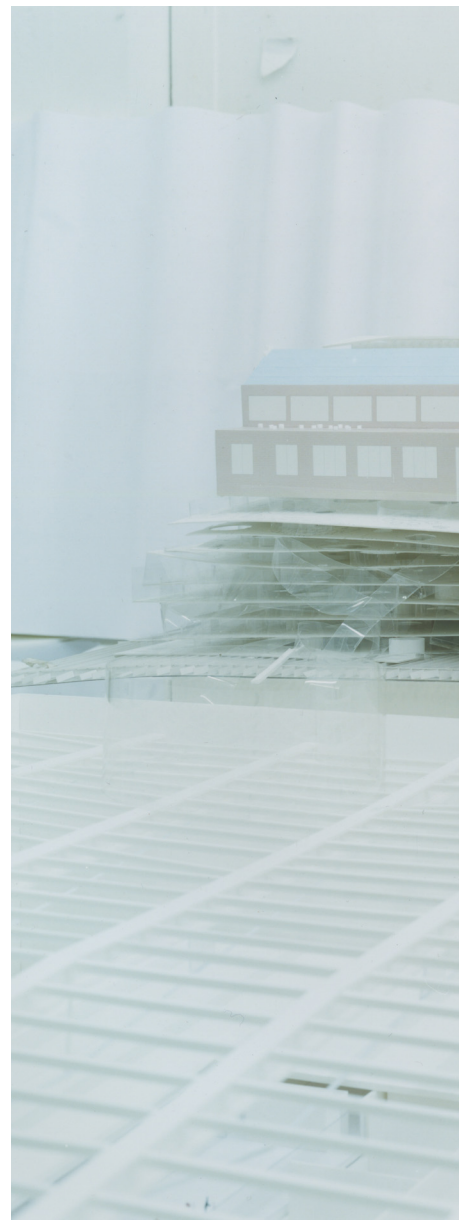
PIN-UP

Featuring Osaka '70,
SANAA, Ole Scheeren,
Ettore Sottsass, Boris
Rebetz, House XI, and
Claude Dalle.

Magazine for Architectural
Entertainment
Issue 2, Spring/Summer 2007
US\$10.00/EUR9.90



9 771933 975000 >



PIN-UP BOY #2—

Angel Hernandez

How the Harlem plaster master saved the renovation of a dilapidated Brooklyn brownstone.

Photography by Xevi Muntane



1. Angel's well-tried hands move fluidly from carpentry to tiling to plastering—always with smart solutions to unforeseen problems.

2. Former graffiti artist Angel has hammered out a lucrative niche for himself as a skillful plasterer.

3. A view of one of the brownstone's bathrooms before Angel and Luis laid their hands on it. For Angel's contact information, go to page 104.



In 2005, I decided after five years that communal living had lost its charm. It was clearly essential to move on—but I had one requirement: I promised myself I would stop paying rent before I turned 30. One of my roommates and I teamed up as real estate business partners and together we defined our goal: “free” living, with tenants paying our way. To make this happen, we needed to find an affordable four-story four-unit building. My business partner would get one unit, my boyfriend and I would share another, and the remaining two apartments would be rented out. To find what we wanted in our price range we needed a building in a marginal neighborhood that had to be fully renovated. After months of searching we found a four-story brownstone in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Of course, the excitement of being able to design our own place blocked out the messy reality of a massive do-it-yourself operation.

The first step in the renovation was demolition. Once the place was gutted we started to build our team. We began gathering bids: plumbing and electric first, then plastering (the ceilings all needed to be taken out), followed by carpentry (every door in the house need to be reframed and rehung). We tried to pick companies that were just starting out, because we figured they would be cheaper and younger, and we would be able to relate to them better. Personality turned out to be really important. Contracting in Brooklyn transformed our house into a mini-United Nations: The project became a crash course in

cultural diplomacy. We worked with local hipsters, Jamaicans, Staten Island Italians, Williamsburg Hasidic Jews, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Trinidadians, and African-Americans who lived in the neighborhood. The multicultural crews we chose won us some approval in our predominately black area. The ladies on the stoop next to ours were overheard telling friends how “those white boys next door are okay—they are always hiring brothers.”

Still, finding the right groove with contractors was a painful process of trial and error. We needed teams that understood design and had the right level of finish, but also could be fast and affordable. We found out quickly that contractors that have aesthetics are slow and expensive. The perfect fit ended up coming to us accidentally. While looking on Craigslist for guys that specialized in Ikea kitchen installation, we stumbled onto the saviors of the project: Angel Hernandez and Luis Ortiz. Their ad was amazingly humble compared with their skill level and experience. Angel and Luis had exactly the speed, price, attitude, and level of consideration we needed to finish the project. They could move fluidly from carpentry to tiling to plastering and always had smart solutions to unforeseen problems.

But their true genius was in plastering. It was really their talents that transformed our building from a dilapidated former crack den into the beautiful new apartments we imagined so many months before. What the two of them could plaster in a few days took another crew of four two

weeks to accomplish. They took great pride in the details, even sculpting matching moldings in places we had never considered. At the end of each day, Angel would excitedly take me on a tour of his accomplishments.

After working on the house for a long time, I also learned that the stereotype of construction sites and sex stories is true. For some reason, construction makes all men—gay and straight—want to proclaim their vigor to the whole world. The fact that I happen to be gay didn't stop any of our workers. The combination of pride, social jockeying, and even boredom has made bragging about sexual conquests a part of the culture of contracting. Throughout the course of the project I learned about the plumber's nights at strip clubs, about the carpenter's adventures with lesbians, and that the electrician's wife is O.K. in bed—but his current girlfriend is better.

Maybe this heightened sexual awareness is another reason I hired Angel. Because Angel is sexy. He is a big Dominican daddy with long eyelashes and a boyish Latin charisma. He charms everyone. While working he would passionately sing along to rock ballads on the radio. At the beginning, I developed a small crush on him. I noticed right away that Angel's ears are pierced with tiny hoops, so I kept fantasizing that his sexual interest might turn my way. After a little while though, it was clear from Angel's own stories of sexual conquests that he loved women and my crush faded into a solid friendship.

Similarly, this renovation was a kind of rite of passage: a physical, mental, and financial

test. After what felt like forever (but was really just 10 intense months), the house was finished. I made it to the other side with my relationships with both my boyfriend and my business partner intact. I have my own new apartment, the nicest bathroom I have had since leaving my parents house years and years ago, and no more annoying roommates. And best of all, my monthly mortgage payment is less than what I've ever paid in rent in this city.

—Michael J. Bullock