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THE LONG VIEW

In Philadelphia, James Timberlake, the international member of our Home of the Year jury, has lived in a spectacular building designed by IM Pei for over 20 years.

TEXT JEREMY HANSEN PHOTOGRAPHY ©PETER AARON/ESTO





Philadelphia is a city to which tourists flock for a close-up lesson in American history: among other things, it is home to the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence was signed. There are also treasures for modern architecture buffs, among them Chinese-American architect IM Pei's Society Hill Towers, a group of three handsome apartment buildings that were part of a late-1960s urban renewal project along the Delaware River. James Timberlake, the international member of our 2011 Home of the Year jury and a director of KieranTimberlake architects, has lived in the towers since 1989. He started out as a singleton in a 32-square-metre studio; 20 years later, he and his wife, interior designer Marguerite 'Meg' Rodgers and their children, Harrison (13) and Veronica (9), moved into a completely refurbished 306-square-metre spread - three apartments combined into a single residence - on the 31st floor of Society Hill Tower B. I visited a couple of months ago, and found the apartment and its views so alluring that I almost volunteered to house-sit when the family went on vacation. I had to return to New Zealand and write about the place instead.

Even a cursory look at KieranTimberlake's buildings gives a clue as to why James likes living here: his firm's

James and his wife, interior designer Meg Rodgers, combined three of the building's apartments into one family-sized residence, linking the spaces with a corridor that lines up with the city grid. The kids' bedrooms are behind shoji-style doors. The glass lamps are by Alison Berger for Holly Hunt. The tower below is identical to James and Meg's building, and is also part of the IM Pei-designed Society Hill complex.



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The main living area (above and left) features a dining table by George Nakashima, a craftsman Meg has long admired. Meg kept the furniture – a mix of mid-century pieces, Chinese antiques and items Meg designed herself – low and the window treatments minimal to emphasise the views of the city. The corridor to James and Meg's room (right) holds family portraits.



creations possess a similar degree of poise and understatement, a classical approach to modernity. The apartments were originally designed to be cheap units, a way of revivifying an area that had previously become a locus of urban decay. Many apartment towers with similar aspirations were erected in cities around the world in this period, and many of them are now slums. The Society Hill Towers are not, a fact that Pei's elegant design (and the

architect's ongoing fame) deserves at least some of the credit for. The generous, park-like grounds and swimming pool at the base of the towers help too. "They're timeless and classic buildings, serenely proportioned," James says. "The contemporary nature of the 'egg crate' windows [that are also structural forms] sets up an armature for lots of life happening behind it".

James and Meg's connections to the

towers run deep. James remembers visiting Philadelphia with his parents from Michigan when he was 12 and noticing the huge pile of dirt beside what was then the construction site for the buildings. Thirty years ago Meg, who was a woodworker and furniture maker before she became an interior designer (her firm now employs 28 staff), was commissioned to create timber panels that still grace the lobby today.

The couple purchased their first apartment a few weeks after Harrison was born, and gradually acquired two more before hatching the plan to combine them. James acted as client for much of the process, but he and Meg developed the key idea of the renovation together: a long east-facing corridor that visually connects both wings of the apartment and links it with the river and the city grid; 2nd Street almost feels as if it passes directly under the apartment (it once bisected the Society Hill site). "You stand there and you look both ways and you are in the city," James says. The kids' rooms and a den have sliding glass shoji-style doors opening onto the corridor, with a casual family room at the northern end that leads to James and Meg's bedroom suite, and the kitchen and dining areas and a more grown-up living room at the southern end.

Meg says the building's clean lines inspired her to keep the design spare and open to the views. To achieve this, she chose simple roller blinds for the windows, dark cork floors and low

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furniture that she oriented in groups towards the vistas. Not that the apartment could be described as minimal, for some of the items of furniture constitute views in themselves, including pieces by Hans Wegner, George Nakashima and Wharton Esherick, all craftsmen Meg has admired since her woodworking days, as well as chairs by architect Robert Venturi, James' former employer. There are also Asian antiques and cabinetry Meg designed

The children's rooms (including Harrison's, shown at top left) have glass sliding doors that open onto the apartment's hall, with views of the Delaware River. A chair by Robert Venturi sits in the corner. Meg hired a muralist to decorate the powder room walls (top right). The den (above) features Meg's collection of animal paintings.





INSIDE

herself (she also designed the living room sofas, end tables and bathroom vanities, among other things). She called in a muralist friend to decorate the guest bathroom with images like those found in Chinese scroll paintings, and installed a hanging system on the walls for the couple's art collection, which includes drawings by architect Louis Kahn (Kahn's son Nathaniel, who made the documentary film *My Architect: A Son's Journey*, is a friend of the couple and lives

in the building), artist Chuck Close, block prints by Wharton Esherick, prints by Harry Bertola and, in the den, Meg's collection of animal paintings.

It's a humane mix that warms the refinement of Pei's buildings, but doesn't try to upstage the outlook. "Between rainstorms and snow flurries it's just gorgeous," James says. "I love the light in the building." Despite living in the building for so long, he says, "there are still things we discover." •

The apartment's main bedroom (top left) looks north across the city, past one of IM Pei's other towers. A smart hanging system in the hall (top right) holds part of the couple's art collection, including architectural drawings by Louis Kahn, whose son Nathaniel is a neighbour. The family room (above) features fold-down desks and colourful carpet.