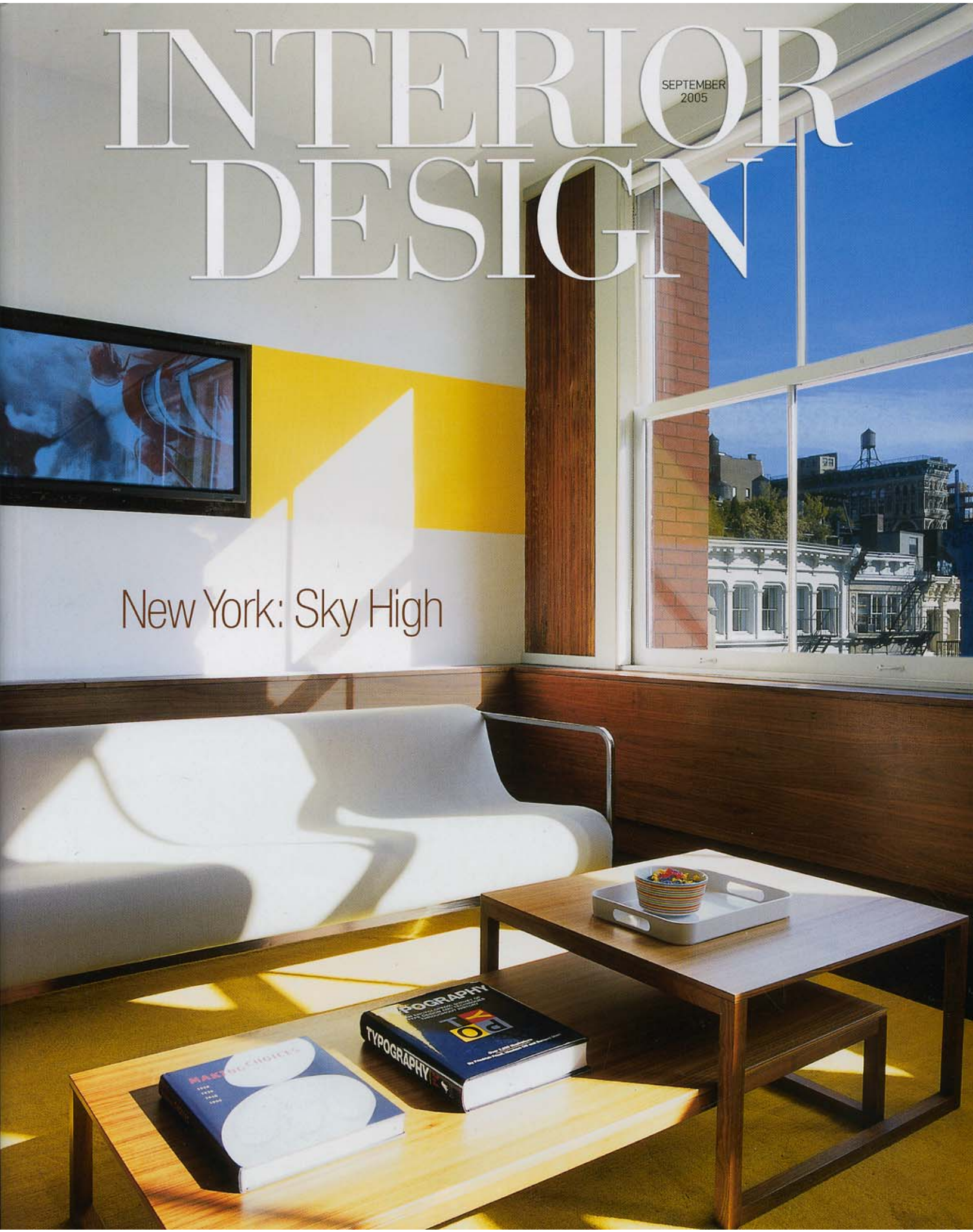
INTERIOR DESIGN

SEPTEMBER
2005



New York: Sky High

high concept

ATTAINING SERENITY AMID THE skyscrapers of Manhattan seems like a lofty goal. But it's one indisputably reached by **Vicente Wolf Associates** at Alto. The path to tranquillity begins right outside, in a pocket park off a side street in Midtown. "Even before you enter, you're required to step out of the hustle and bustle," says principal Vicente Wolf.

The northern Italian restaurant is the second owned and operated by Wolf and restaurateurs Scott Conant, Christopher Cannon, and Jane Epstein—their L'Impero opened nearby in 2003. Like L'Impero, Alto →

From top: A banquette upholstered in faux leather and wool bouclé runs around a corner of the 85-seat main dining room at Alto; velvet covers the chairs. Entry to the restaurant is via a Midtown pocket park anchored by a section of the Berlin Wall.

Clockwise from top left: Vicente Wolf used clear glass for the balcony balustrade, tempered glass for the floor. The balcony offers access to two private dining rooms, which seat 20 each. A wool curtain separates dining tables from the bar area. Fiber optics backlight the main dining room's steel-framed wine racks.

relies on neutral colors and clean lines. Unlike that first venture, the follow-up looks and feels masculine, Wolf explains, "not in an obvious way but in the elements."

Alto takes its name from the Alto Adige region and the Italian word for *high* or *tall*—appropriately, given one specific part of the L-shape main dining room. With it 22-foot ceiling, Wolf says, the area was "very *alto*." Height aside, though, decor left over from a departed Japanese restaurant was oppressive, dark, and anything but serene.

Wolf virtually gutted the 3,400-square-foot interior, leaving nothing but concrete slab floors in the main dining room and mezzanine. Then he faced the question of how to make the space more cohesive. This involved not only unifying the double-height part of the main dining room with the lower part, under the mezzanine, but also making the upstairs read as a whole. "When it's all lit up, it's supposed to look like a glowing cube," Wolf says, pointing to the tempered glass floor of the mezzanine balcony and the clear glass of the balustrade as well as the frosted glass wall and doors of the two private dining rooms beyond.

In all the dining rooms, Wolf's neutral palette is punctuated by the strong burgundy of the velvet on the Jacobean-style chairs. Color plays a part in unifying the two sides of the main dining room, too: The iridescent silk wall covering, underneath the mezzanine, shares a pinkish undertone with the banquettes' bouclé and faux-leather upholstery. Those luxuriously soft materials are counterbalanced by the hard-edged mahogany and steel of the open staircase and the exposed concrete of a wall in the reception area—Wolf is widely known for juxtaposing the smooth with the rough, the finished with the industrial.

The restaurant's collection of wine bottles also plays a part in the design. In the *alto* area of the main dining room, the "walls" are actually a glass-fronted rack, backlit by fiber optics. It's just the kind of restrained razzle-dazzle we're sure to see more of at one of Wolf's upcoming commercial projects: a lingerie boutique at the Wynn Las Vegas. —*Kimberly Goad*

CUSTOM FLOORING (MAIN DINING): **GET REAL SURFACES.** CUSTOM BANQUETTE: **ROLLHAUS SEATING PRODUCTS.** BANQUETTE UPHOLSTERY: **DESIGNTEX.** BANQUETTE FABRIC (MAIN DINING), CUSTOM PENDANT FIXTURES (MAIN, PRIVATE DINING): **VW HOME.** GLASSWORK, METALWORK (BALCONY): **ARCHITECTURAL GLASS CRAFT.** DOOR PULLS: **ROCKWOOD MANUFACTURING COMPANY.** CUSTOM MIRROR (PRIVATE DINING): **APF MUNN MASTER FRAMEMAKERS.** CUSTOM DRAPERY (MAIN DINING): **MONTE COLEMAN; CORAGGIO TEXTILES** (FABRIC). SEATING: **RESTORATION HARDWARE; ARCHITEX INTERNATIONAL** (FABRIC). PAINT: **BENJAMIN MOORE & CO.** GENERAL CONTRACTOR: **MG & COMPANY.**