CONTEMPORARY WORLD INTERIORS
In their conversion of the basement and ground floor of a five-story loft building in Lower Manhattan serving as their office and family home (2003), Sandro Marpillero and Linda Pollak of Marpillero Pollak Architects were more literal in their interpretation of “less is more.” By moving a section of the rear wall of the structure forward, they reduced the building's footprint and gained a 15-foot-deep (5-meter-deep) urban garden. Capitalizing on the space they gained, the architects created a 25-foot-high (7.5-meter-high) atrium with a rear wall of glass that looks out onto the garden and channels generous amounts of natural light into the center of the long narrow loft. Adjacent to the atrium, a two-story volume contains the bedrooms, which overlook both the garden and the interior space below. The reconfiguration is so successful that, according to Pollak, “When people descend into the living room/atrium, they immediately forget that they're in a basement. I think this comes from the counterintuitive move of making such a high window look out onto such a restricted space. Usually big windows are oriented towards big views.” The living zones are separated from the work zones along a meandering vertical axis established by an innovative bookshelf/staircase that rises up through the building; the street-front rooms are devoted to business, and the garden-facing rooms to the home, in a taut compression
of city and country. Cantilevered balconies within the residential atrium, as well as a mezzanine in the 15-foot-high (4.5-meter-high) office space, create an artful complex of spatial layers, a layering echoed in the remnants of the building's industrial past that have been incorporated in the interior. Salvaged timbers serve as railings, steps, and countertops; wrought-iron window shutters, still covered in blistered red paint, are reused as pantry doors. Columns and piers, excavated in the walls, are partially revealed, noticeable only when lights are turned on. (Marpillero grew up in Italy, where the frescoes of churches are often like votives, illuminated by coin-operated lights). Throughout the loft, the process of "making" is palpably evident from the details of the cabinetry to the deployment of the structural beams and platforms. Its character is archaeological, revealing the rich stratigraphy of the urban loft.

The Loft as Art Object
Just as the artist's loft is freighted with the history of labor, the purely residential loft is inflected with the memory of the art that brought it into being. At its most exploratory, the loft becomes a surrogate art object, engaged in the poetics of perception through self-conscious and unexpected manipulations of space and light, for their own sculptural value. With an acute sense of the surreal, architect Attilio Stocchi animated a defunct factory building in Bergamo, Italy (2002), to create a thoroughly bizarre home. The result is a loft that floats within a slender forest of canted steel poles. Floors, tables, and beds are tethered to the columns as if frozen in motion. A glass plane in the floor of the main living space reveals an undulating "fish" made of twenty-one large iron rings—envisioned by the architect as a captured animal at the heart of the house. Radiant in the darkness, the subterranean "aquarium" amplifies the strangeness of the tilted columns.
This is the same challenge taken on by the sixteen architecture firms engaged by the Robin Hood Foundation’s Library Initiative for elementary school students in New York. Putting design on a par with building staff and collections, the foundation has engaged these firms, working on a pro bono basis, to design interiors for libraries in at-risk public schools in spaces that range from 1,300 to 2,000 square feet (121 to 180 square meters). Further underscoring the importance of words, the foundation persuaded graphic designers at Pentagram to do the signage for every project.

At PS 42 (2002) in the Far Rockaway neighborhood of Queens, Weiss/Manfredi Architects celebrated the library as an active, kinetic place by introducing red seating into the space that rocks and wheels, and a rippling “worm wall” of curving wood bookshelves. A story-telling area is defined by a translucent white curtain inscribed with words chosen by the students and rendered by Pentagram in handsome, playfully scaled gray characters—a subtle but sure signal that this is a project that takes young enthusiasms seriously.

At PS 1 (2004) in the borough of Brooklyn, local architects Marpillero Pollak Architects saw an opportunity to make a figurative element out of the reading tables, and created a customized system of lamps and desks to make a playful,
interlocking zigzag that snakes through the space. Each table is incised with a capital letter so that children can easily find or claim a place. Other opportunities presented themselves underfoot and overhead. Instead of carpeting, sound-absorbent cork covers the floor; and overhead, Jasper Morrison globe lights play a game of peek-a-boo behind the ceiling's Swiss-cheese perforations.

The remarkable aspect of the Robin Hood libraries is that they are respectful and playful at the same time. They