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**GREAT HOMES & DESTINATIONS**

## Back on the Block

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On Location

By **PENELOPE GREEN**

It was 1969, and Francis Mason, the dance writer, former cultural attaché and assistant director of the Morgan Library, was walking down Charlton Street, marveling at the Federal-style townhouses that lined the street's north side. As his daughter, Leslie Mason, recalled recently, he rang the bell of one of the most lavish, handed his card to the young woman who answered the door and said, "If it's for rent, I'll take it." The young woman asked, "Don't you want to see it?"

It was a characteristic moment for Mr. Mason and his wife, Patricia, who became a locally famous townhouse broker and horticulturalist. They were lovers of houses, and the Charlton Street apartment (they lived on the parlor and ground floors) would be the first in a series of moves through the West Village, a course that marked the fortunes of the area.

Thirteen years ago, the younger Ms. Mason, now 53, moved back to Charlton Street, to a house just a few doors down from the one she grew up in, with her partner, Thad Meyerriecks, 58, a co-owner of a shipping company (their daughter, Lucy Mason, is now 9). But it wasn't until last year that they were able to renovate the place, following the sale of Ms. Mason's family's last house, on Morton Street, to Sofia Coppola for \$9.85 million, as *Curbed* reported at the time. (Ms. Mason, a broker at Douglas Elliman, was too politic to divulge the buyer.)

Back in 1970, the Masons realized that the owner of their house on Charlton Street was never going to sell it to them. After two members of the radical group the

Weathermen accidentally blew up an 1840s townhouse on West 11th Street, the Masons and another couple, the architect Hugh Hardy and his wife, Tiziana, bought the lot for \$75,000. Mr. Hardy (who also, coincidentally, oversaw the renovation of Polly Guth's New Hampshire house on Page 1 of this section) designed a house for the two families — that diagonal window, Ms. Mason said, was her father's idea — but no bank would give them a mortgage. So they sold the plot with the plans, and the Masons stayed on at Charlton Street, hoping to wait out the owner.

In 1978, Mrs. Mason got the listing for the house they would eventually own on Morton Street, built in the 1850s and set on a curve of the street, with an enormous garden. It was just a few years after New York City had flirted with bankruptcy, and a townhouse in the Village was not an easy sell. So the Masons bought it for \$240,000, half of which came from a 15-year mortgage extended to them by the seller.

"The idea that you would enter into a long-term relationship with a previous owner is unheard-of now," said Ms. Mason, who can still remember how proud her mother was when she paid off the debt.

Ms. Mason, who worked as an actress into her mid-30s, had no plans to follow her mother's career path. Mrs. Mason was a formidable presence, educated at Wellesley and the London School of Economics, and a preservationist who once donated the commission on the sale of a house on East 19th Street belonging to Lincoln Kirstein, a founder of the New York City Ballet, to a fund in his name.

But it's not easy to eke out a living as an actress. "One day I went to my mother to borrow money, and she refused. I said, 'O.K., I'm going to sell real estate,'" Ms. Mason said.

"I had always thought what she did was reprehensible, probably because it took so much attention away from me when I was a child," she continued. "But I soon realized that selling houses is more than just finance. It's people at a pivotal moment in their lives. And when my mother got sick, it gave us something to talk about."

Mrs. Mason died in 1997. And Ms. Mason found herself with many of her mother's former clients. "It was a way to remember her," she said. "And also to see another side, one that was softer and kinder."

In the mid-1990s, Mrs. Mason had tried to buy her daughter and Mr. Meyerriecks a house on Bedford Street. But it was marriage-conditional, Ms. Mason said: "Of course, had we liked the house, we might have relented."

She recalled a saying of her mother's: "Houses are like men: They are all

compromises. They become perfect by your choice.”

The couple bought this house, which was divided into three apartments, in 2001 for \$2.536 million. “It was incredibly comforting to be back home, as it were, at that time,” Ms. Mason said.

Her father moved into the ground-floor apartment six months before his death in 2009, and Ms. Mason decorated it with furniture from the Morton Street house.

He was fading, or as Mr. Mason himself put it, “I’m only good in short takes.” But he could still find his way to the West Side Highway, where he liked to take a brisk walk, shirtless, while singing “Shall We Gather at the River?”

After Morton Street sold, Ms. Mason and Mr. Meyerriecks hired David Hottenroth, an architect, and Elizabeth Bauer, a decorator, to renovate Charlton Street, opening up the back of the house with a two-story extension and a wall of casement windows, and connecting the three apartments into a luminous single-family residence. It cost about \$1 million.

“I was happy with the house,” Mr. Meyerriecks said. “But Leslie did make it a better place to live. It took so long, and at times it was difficult to realize, but I think it’s a good house. And a family lives here, with some cats and a dog.”

He added: “It’s very satisfying and comforting to raise our daughter in the same environment Leslie grew up in.”

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