

'It was drug-ridden – but a wonderful place'

At home with the FT | In 1978, Peter Schlesinger bought a floor of an old factory in New York's Flatiron district. Much has changed, but its creative legacy remains. By Andrew Jack

When the ceramicist and author Peter Schlesinger moved to New York nearly half a century ago, he was told not to live south of 14th Street. His partner Eric Boman needed an apartment large enough to house a studio for his fashion photography, but Eileen Ford, head of a leading agency, told them it was too dangerous to send her models into Lower Manhattan.

SoHo was too expensive, but many of the industrial premises further north, in the Ladies' Mile near the Flatiron district, were empty and not yet rezoned for residential use. There the couple chose an entire unpartitioned floor in a former girdle factory, with other impoverished artists for neighbours. "Even on lower Park Avenue, you had to be careful going into the clubs at night," Schlesinger, now 76, recalls. "It was drug-ridden – but a wonderful place."

He says the "artsy people" have since moved out, and fashion shoots have shifted from photographers' own studios to more grandiose venues. Through his large windows, he says he can see the nearby penthouses of Rupert Murdoch and Jeff Bezos. Many other wealthy inhabitants live in the conversions of old buildings and the modern towers that have risen up around his home.

Today, the apartment is more conventionally partitioned, with two large studios at one end and an airy, high-ceilinged living area at the other. In the middle stands one of the factory's original iron pillars, which Schlesinger considered "too thin" and enveloped in plaster in the form of a white classical ribbed column. "It was my first sculpture," he says.

Schlesinger, a native Californian, came to public attention in the late 1960s when, as the lover of the British artist David Hockney, he was immortalised (clothed) in *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* and (naked) in *Peter Getting Out of Nick's Pool*. The 1973 film *A Bigger Splash*, directed by Jack Hazan, is a semi-fictional film about their break-up.

The couple met in Los Angeles and then moved to the UK, where Schlesinger studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and went on to forge a career as a photographer, artist and ceramicist. Two of his early paintings hang in the apartment: a friend bathed in light in his North Kensington flat; and two vases on a table, a hint at his passion for pottery, now his primary focus. Today he is represented by Tristan Hoare in London

(Main image) Ceramicist and author, Peter Schlesinger; (above right) pottery on display; (clockwise from right) the dining area with an Edward Wormley table, chairs by J.L. Moller and two sculptures by Schlesinger; a view of the partitioned space; pottery tools; Schlesinger in his office; (below) one of Schlesinger's ceramics

Photographed for the FT by Weston Wells



and David Lewis Gallery in New York, and his work is held in collections including Farnsworth Art Museum, and the Manchester Gallery of Art.

His first book of photographs, *A Checkered Past*, published in 2003, recounts with colourful candour the social whirl of the 1960s and 1970s London. He still loves the stories, describing the dinner where he first met Boman following the premiere of Visconti's *Death in Venice*; they were at Mr Chow in Knightsbridge, with Fred Hughes, Andy Warhol's business manager, Manolo Blahnik, the Spanish shoe designer, and Paloma Picasso. "Those were very formative years, and they remain very close friends. I speak to Manolo every week to gossip."

Schlesinger and Boman soon became a couple, and after a few years decided to leave London. "Rents were cheap but finding a place was difficult; buying was very expensive and it was hard to make a living. In 1978 everyone was moving to New York, which was bustling."

Their partying continued in their adopted city. Schlesinger tells of attending the opening of the Lime-light Club with Warhol. "He was very friendly, not as he is sometimes portrayed. But I was shy. He liked Eric, who loved talking and telling stories." He holds up a faded telex he came across recently and has had framed: an invitation to Studio 54 from Warhol, with Blondie in attendance.

Boman, with whom Schlesinger lived until his death in 2022, began working



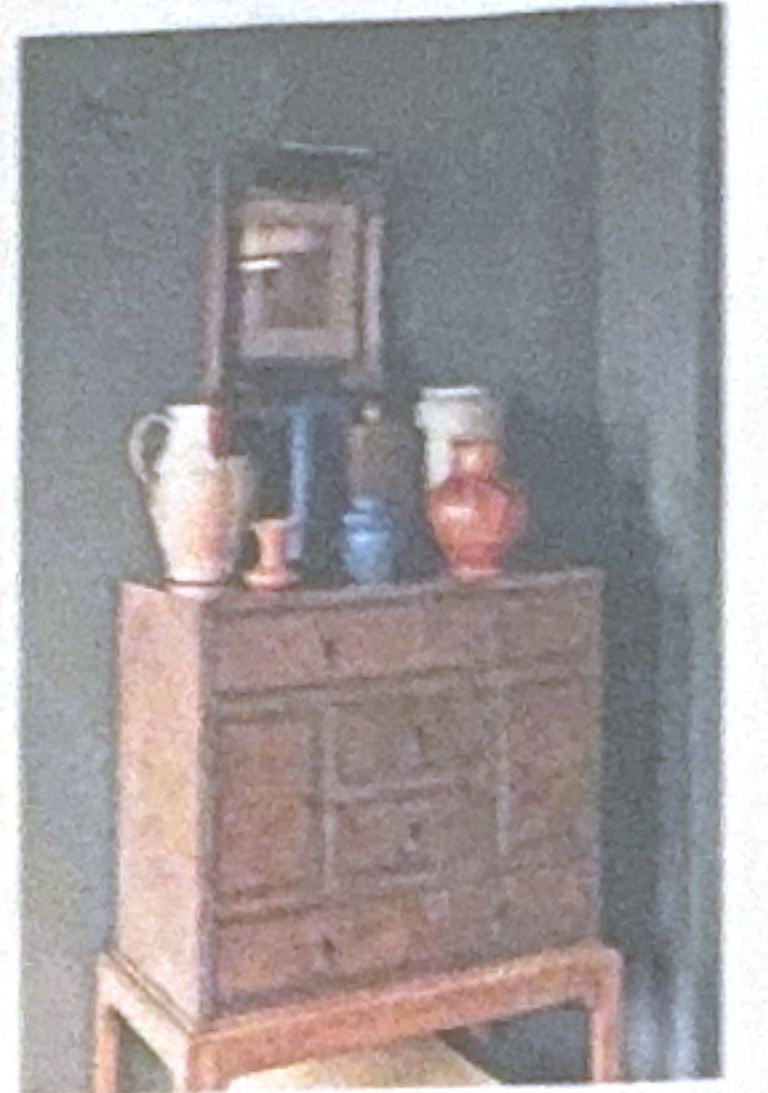
for Vogue, Vanity Fair and House & Garden. One of his photos of Brooke Shields hangs in the hallway, and Boman's former studio is piled with albums, boxes and photographs. "It's a mess," says Schlesinger, who is hiring an archivist to sort through it. In the corridor between their two studios, he opens a cupboard to reveal shelves of photo albums from 1968 until 1992 – some reproduced in a second book published in 2015, *A Photographic Memory 1968-1989*. "It was very different then. You can't take anonymous pictures any more. Everyone is posing for Instagram."

The bond between them is reflected in the decor. Boman's Murano glass pieces

and Schlesinger's Poole pottery collection are on display. He recalls the fun they had rummaging in flea markets, developing a taste for mid-century furniture. The house now has several pieces by designer Edward Wormley.

Schlesinger has moved his own desk into his late partner's studio to create an office. On a shelf, he has placed a vase that Boman had wanted him to make, decorated with the daisies he loved.

He continues to work in his own studio next door. Here, two partially-completed pots are wrapped up. Slabs of fresh clay from Sheffield, Massachusetts, are ready to be bound with "slip" from a jar nearby. He is proud of making his own glaze from ash, and of a technique to mould handles directly into the form rather than attach them separately. His pots mix ancient tropes with modern wit – playing with colour and pattern.



He first took lessons from potter friends in 1987, and now makes two or three works at a time, some up to a metre high. For a while, it was more than a creative pursuit: "It was therapy – or an escape when Eric was ill."

For a number of years, he struggled to find a dealer and used a small kiln in the studio "until I set the sprinklers off and soaked the apartments below." A grant from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation in the 1990s enabled him to buy a larger kiln and create more ambitious pieces. The kiln lives at his second home on Long Island, a 19th-century house at Bellport. He travels there to fire his ceramics and stays for four months every summer. "I wanted a real home. We both wanted a garden."

He sits down on a sofa in the living room, its green, grey and yellow colours matching – "perhaps too closely" – those of his vast painting behind, of the Bellport garden, showing its plants, a small pond and a yellow fish that

A painting by Hockney hangs on a wall, the name 'Peter' written beneath Schlesinger's face

swam in it "before the egrets got them". While this living area is spotless and almost museum-like (partly as he is preparing for guests), his bedroom feels more personal. A painting by Hockney from his pulp paper period hangs on a wall, the name "Peter" written beneath Schlesinger's face; opposite are two sketches of him, also by the British artist.

There are photos of his mother, and also of Cecil Beaton. There are images of novelists and playwrights Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood, whom he and Hockney got to know well, and a painting of a youthful Jack Larson, the actor and librettist.

He says he does not have a favourite possession, although when pressed he cites a series of Japanese antiques collected by his aunt after the second world war, including two lamps and Imari chinaware. "Growing up, I would explore her closets full of antique objects," he says. "That is where my love of collecting came from."

He also picks up a solid metal "High energy bar" artwork, a gift from the artist Walter De Maria shortly after he moved to London: a symbolic reminder that, while he continues to be a highly productive artist in the present, the past is always held close.

Peter Schlesinger is showing at Tristan Hoare Gallery at PAD London, Berkeley Square, until October 13. padesignart.com

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Curtain twitching – but make it chic

Interiors | Once a symbol of petty parochialism, lace curtains fell from favour. Their comeback aims to celebrate the craft once again, writes Kate Finnigan

How do you feel about lace curtains? A charming finishing touch that brings back fond memories of granny's cottage? Or an age-old prop of the curtain-twitcher that should never haunt windows again?

The textile designer Tori Murphy, who has launched a collection of British-made, vintage-inspired lace curtains, is hoping customers are persuadable to the former. Made in Nottingham, the home of the original lace-making industry, the designs are drawn from the archive of one of the city's oldest manufacturers, which began making lace in the 1760s. "The laces in this new collection are made exactly the same way, on the same machines, with the same materials that would have been used 50, 100 and 150 years ago," she says. "Extraordinary manufacturing capabilities still exist in this country, and we're dedicated to preserving them."

Murphy, who grew up between England and Ireland and is now based in Nottingham, is well aware that she has some prejudice to contend with. "Nets" have suffered a bad press over the years. While the original Nottingham lace was seen as a luxury, a status symbol made

using state-of-the-art British textile manufacturing, its desirability diminished as lace curtains grew in popularity and technology developed, with manufacturers turning to cheaper materials, including acrylic and nylon. Over-familiar and poor quality, lace curtains became associated with small-minded parochialism.

The term curtain-twitcher came into parlance in 1940, when lacy windows were widely visible across the British Isles. The Oxford English Dictionary attributes its first usage to Flann O'Brien, writing under the moniker Miles na gCopaleen, in a column for the Irish Times. But it was another Irish writer (under another pseudonym), Brinsley MacNamara, in 1918, who created the indelible image of nosy neighbours peering through curtains to cast judgment upon their townspeople, in his thinly-disguised village tell-all, *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*.

Still in publication more than a century later, the cover of the 2018 edition of the book features a window with a lace half-curtain and a human silhouette, just visible – proof that those negative curtain-twitching associations still stand today, but also that its subject matter

continues to make rivetingly good drama. Following what the neighbours are up to and judging them for it is, after all, the driving narrative of every soap opera ever made. Only last year, the



trailer for *Wicked Little Letters*, starring Olivia Coleman and Jessie Buckley as neighbours-at-war, saw lace curtains used as a visual shorthand for the tale of prying and tittle-tattle that lies ahead.



(Left) Belvoir Lace from the Tori Murphy collection (above) Café panels, made by the London Curtain Girls

But if there is a time for sheer curtains to shake off that frumpy image, it is surely now. After years dedicated to minimalism, we're in softer and more decorative interior times and these cur-

'Lace always has a story – what it's made of, where it's made, who made it'

tains have found themselves in favour again. Café curtains, usually made from sheer or demi-sheer linen, covering the lower half of windows, have been leading the way. Mary Walsh and Laragh Bohn, founders of bespoke curtain and blind-making service The London Curtain Girls, report a notable uptick in the style over the last couple of years, particularly for central London areas, such as Notting Hill, where houses directly front busy streets.

"They're an easy solution for privacy," says Walsh. "Other options are shutters or full blinds, which block out a lot of light." Lace, they believe, is the next step, particularly for the romantically

inclined. "They're definitely making a comeback and I think that's because it's all about memory and nostalgia," says Bohn. "Using the kind of fabric you remember being used in your family. Lace always has a story – what it's made of, where it's made, who made it."

A dramatic case in point is Murphy's BB lace; the style was deemed the best for protecting households from flying glass and shrapnel during the Blitz, able to catch fragments in its intricately designed weave. Such heroic levels of practicality are surely a good reason to let go of lace's negative associations.

But let's not pretend the attributes that made lace curtains a popular option in the first place are not still attractive today. What is our preoccupation with social media if not 21st century curtain-twitching? A lace curtain allows you a certain amount of control over your privacy, while still being able to invade your neighbour's. "You can tweak them so that people can see or not see what you want them to," says Murphy. "You're screened from the outside but you can still follow everything that's happening beyond." Sound familiar? Sound tempting? Maybe time, then, to give lace curtains another look.