

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD



MUSEUM MANIA

A critical look behind the scenes

plus RESIDENTIAL SECTION:
LOFTY LIVING



Custom doors slide and fold back to open the loft to a refurbished terrace (above and opposite). The living/dining area comprises one third of the apartment's footprint (below and plan, opposite). New floors are sapele.



With views in four directions, a **Fifth Avenue Loft** keeps the perimeter free for circulation around a central core

By William Weathersby, Jr.



FLOOR PLAN

1. Entry
2. Kitchen
3. Living/dining
4. Sitting room
5. Terrace
6. Bedroom
7. Master bedroom
8. Master bathroom
9. Study

A 4,000-square-foot penthouse apartment on lower Fifth Avenue with views in four directions, including a terrace overlooking the Empire State Building, certainly qualifies as prime Manhattan real estate. But achieving an open, loftlike space while accommodating a fully loaded program of three bedrooms, three baths, and two studies took considerable vision on the part of the clients, a young professional couple, and Murphy Burnham & Buttrick architects. Occupying the 15th floor of a 1920s industrial building that rises above most neighboring structures in the district near Madison Square Park, the space was previously a cluttered, compartmentalized music-recording studio devoid of architectural details.

"The interiors of the recording studio worked in opposition to the views," recalls architect Mary Burnham, "with a warren of rooms covered by sound-barrier insulation more than a foot thick in places. It was a very inward-looking environment, because of the intimate nature of the business." As they peered out the partially obstructed windows on the first day they toured the space, however, the owners knew they had discovered a diamond in the rough as a cooperative apartment.

Once interior partitions and dropped ceilings were demolished, the resulting space was nearly column-free, with large windows on all sides letting in daylight. A new dark-stained sapele floor was added, and plaster walls were patched but left with the patina of age to establish a neutral envelope. New HVAC was contained in streamlined soffits, yielding ceiling heights of 9 to 10 feet featuring recessed and track lighting.

In response to the views—from Midtown skyscrapers to rooftop gardens and water tanks—the architects decided to place all new interior walls away from the perimeter of the footprint to allow for open sight lines and ease of circulation. Approximately 1,100 square feet of space was left unobstructed as a combined living and dining area set between the open kitchen and the terrace at the north end.

Most storage and utility functions, including kitchen and bathroom plumbing and electrical, are concentrated in a central cube. Occupying about a third of the loft's footprint, "the cube functions as a highly defined and detailed box," Burnham says. "We could have eaten up more space with the program, but we wanted to fit the service elements together like pieces of a tight puzzle."

Clad with white-painted wood panels, the cube is exploded and stretched in plan and elevation to further define space. Elements such as library shelves, art display niches, a stone whirlpool tub, and custom storage units pinwheel out from the structure's center point. A bar, kitchen

Project: Fifth Avenue Loft, New York City

Architect: Murphy Burnham & Buttrick—Mary Burnham, AIA, partner in charge; Bogue, Trondowski, project architect; Rachel Lehn, Amy

Nicholson, project team

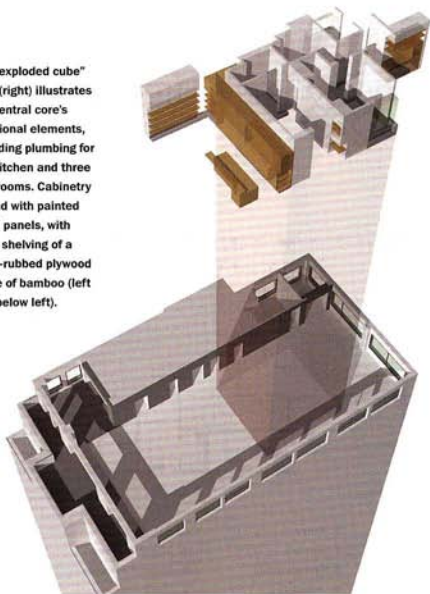
Engineer: Hoge Engineering (structural); D'Antonio Consulting Engineers (mechanical)

General contractor: Sweeney + Conroy





The "exploded cube" view (right) illustrates the central core's functional elements, including plumbing for the kitchen and three bathrooms. Cabinetry is clad with painted wood panels, with open shelving of a hand-rubbed plybwoo made of bamboo (left and below left).



pantry, and an audiovisual center are among the many custom-fitted elements tucked behind the panels. Niches and corners of the white core are pulled away to reveal shelving and a pull-down desk constructed of hand-rubbed plybwoo, a plybwoo made of bamboo. Closets and drawers slide open to display detailing with the same wood. "The material palette of the cube was limited to the painted panels or plybwoo to enhance its sculptural quality," Burnham notes. (A planned enhancement calls for replacing the painted panels with milky translucent Plexiglas.) "Conceptually, we wanted to deconstruct the cube to reveal parts of its interior functions."

Glass-sheathed perforations and clerestories punched into the perimeter of the cube allow light into interior enclosures such as bathrooms, while adding a degree of transparency. In one guest bathroom, the upper part of a shower is framed by glass, exposing a sliver of its blue cladding to a hallway. A corner of the soaking tub in the master bathroom is also enclosed by glass to offer views across the adjoining master bedroom and the windows beyond. (Shades allow privacy.) A vertical gap between sections of the entry shelving creates a similar juxtaposition between interior and exterior, framing a glimpse of the living room.

Avid travelers, the clients wanted to showcase their collections of objects and books, so the longest legs of the central core are reserved for display. On the east side of the cube facing the entry, a wall of shelves and niches houses artifacts collected in countries such as Tibet and Morocco. A carved Moroccan door at the endpoint of the passageway pivots to reveal a private study, while a nearby illuminated niche frames a fish fossil thousands of years old. In the bathrooms, handmade Japanese ceramic bowls the clients acquired on a trip serve as sinks atop custom mahogany pedestals.

The clients encouraged Burnham to explore unexpected mate-



The master bathroom tub is framed by glass to access views from the bedroom windows (above left). The tub and sink (above right) are made of Pietro Cardoso stone. A guest bathroom features back-painted glass panels (below left).

materials "to create a canvas of texture and color meant to capitalize on the play of shadow and light," the architect says. In the three bathrooms, for example, colorful walls are abstract collages of back-painted glass panels: blue, green, and yellow, respectively. The kitchen backsplash is enlivened with a similar treatment in fiery red.

The double sink in the master bath is constructed of slabs of overlapping Pietro Cardoso stone, the same variegated material used for the tub. Bathroom floors are Sadler tile, a ground masonry material similar to precast stone, while kitchen floors and countertops are fabricated of smoky schist.

The floor plane of the outdoor terrace was brought into the apartment's main volume to blur the edge between interior and exterior. A floating step of wood ascends to a platform of stone along the northern and eastern edges of the living room that meld into the exterior pavers. A rock garden, narrow reflecting pool, and graduated railing with new wood supports enhance this front-row perch for peering at landmark skyscrapers all around town. ■

Sources

Windows: ABCO; Windlovations

Custom doors: Chandler Lewis;

Windlovations

Custom plasterwork: Hutton Berry

Hardware: FSB; G+V; Soss

Glass tiles: Zecca Glass

Plumbing fixtures: Duravit; Vola

Appliances: Miele; Wolf

Lighting: Color Kinetics; Lightolier;

LSI

For more information on this project, go to Projects at

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