



nationalpost.com

NATIONAL POST
SATURDAY,
AUGUST 27, 2016

Find your home
at nationalpost.com/homes

CONDOS

These 'contemporary chic' units have a little something for everyone.
Page PH2

PRIMED

Size definitely matters when it comes to this new Burlington development.
Page PH2

HOLMES

Don't even think about skipping the home inspection before your next big purchase.
Page PH3



PLAYGROUND on the HUDSON

RENOVATING NEW YORK PENTHOUSE
MEANT STARTING FROM SCRATCH

MARTHA UNIACKE BREEN

This stunning Upper West Side Manhattan penthouse, with its colourful and engaging art collection, and bright, expansive layout, and million-dollar views overlooking the Hudson River to the west and New York's fabled midtown skyline to the south, is the stuff of dreams. But according to the Toronto architectural team that created it, in collaboration with the owners the tale of its creation is quite a New York story in its own right.

The apartment itself was a real find for the owners, an expat Toronto lawyer and jewelry artist, and her husband, a New York real estate executive and former theatre set designer. Set atop an uptown apartment building overlooking Hudson River Park, it had a private elevator and a generous wraparound terrace on three sides. Like many buildings of its vintage and location, it also featured an inner courtyard, brightening the inner face

of the apartment as well. However, to say the least, it also had a few problems.

"It hadn't been touched since the late '60s, and despite those incredible views, there was no relationship to the outside at all," recalls Toronto-based architect Julian Jacobs. It was incredibly dark and gloomy; it had a row of stucco arches in the hallway, tiny windows, dark wood and brown Mexican tile everywhere. "We pretty much had to start from scratch."

That's daunting enough with any renovation, let alone one that's 17 storeys up in a 105-year-old building. Wiring and plumbing was replaced from the street level up; inside the unit, even the floors were torn up to replace mechanicals. "Old New York buildings have false floors with rubble in them, so that you can work on the plumbing without disturbing the neighbours below," Jacobs explains, laughing at the memory. "But working with that rubble, it almost felt like an archeological dig."

See PENTHOUSE on PH4

“THERE’S THIS CLICHÉ THAT NEW YORKERS ARE IMPATIENT BY NATURE, BUT THESE CLIENTS WERE UNBELIEVABLY PATIENT THROUGHOUT. THEY KNEW IT WOULD BE WORTH IT IN THE END. — TORONTO-BASED ARCHITECT JULIAN JACOBS



The art is abundant but still gives the impression that each piece was affectionately acquired. These include instantly recognizable icons like Andy Warhol’s Mao prints.

BRING IN THE LIGHT

PENTHOUSE Continued from PH1

What’s more, the only feasible way to remove the debris was by hand, laboriously — workers were hired to carry bags down, one by one, by elevator.

The physical hurdles were only part of the obstacles facing them. The building was calendared, a uniquely New York classification that meant it was being considered for heritage status, and by the end of the renovation had been approved, meaning that any exterior changes were closely controlled by the city. For example, in order to replace crumbling brick on the outside of the apartment facing the terrace, the team had to seek out new brick that exactly replicated the original.

The building is also a co-op, which meant all improvements had to go through the building’s co-op board — who were tough judges. (In New York, co-op buildings differ from condominiums in that all of the building’s residents own the building communally and share its overall costs proportionately; in a condo, you own your unit outright, but pay a maintenance fee for shared facilities and reserve costs.)

But the silver lining to all this was that, freed from having to preserve any of the former interior, Jacobs and his team were able to completely reorder the layout to make the most of its considerable assets. Gloomy walls were replaced by a sequence of broad windows on all sides, making the view visible from almost every corner of the apartment; its courtyard side presented the opportunity to brighten the inner face of the apartment as well. In all that light, the design was purposely kept open and simple, forming a perfect backdrop to a truly impressive — and irresistible — collection of furnishings, modern art and ceramic figures and animals that enliven the entire space.

The space progresses in a relaxed fashion from the more public areas, including a kitchen



In order to replace crumbling brick on the outside of the apartment facing the terrace, the renovation team had to seek out new brick that exactly replicated the original.

and dining area at one end, past a central hallway with the elevator entrance, to the living area at the southwest corner, with its swath of wraparound windows. The flow then turns along the south side toward bedrooms (and the husband’s home office) on the skyline side, and the wife’s jewelry studio overlooking the courtyard on the other; a final turn north again leads to service areas and laundry.

In this relaxed setting, the

main event is the art, and one gets a real sense that, despite its sheer abundance, each piece was individually and affectionately acquired. Along with instantly recognizable icons like Andy Warhol’s Chairman Mao prints, there are works by Canadian artists Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow, American modernists Jim Dine, Larry Rivers and Red Grooms, and many others. But alongside “important” works like these, some of the most delightful pieces are a

sizable population of animals, people and other objects — ranging from small pieces arranged on shelves here and there, to child- and even grown-up-size figures: a life-size Superman in the hallway, a pair of seniors cuddling on a bench at the end of the bedroom hall.

The kitchen, by Smallbone Kitchens, is deceptively simple for its functionality; storage is concentrated in two towers flanking the stove and in cupboards hidden in both sides of

the island. The two fridges are recessed into the wall on the inner face of the kitchen; a separate, centrally located bar is built into a recess near the elevator. (“New Yorkers love their cocktails,” Jacobs laughs.)

As with the interior as a whole, the kitchen palette is light and simple, in soft white, pale oak floors and steel or black accents, with one notable exception: a centre panel of backpainted glass behind the stove, in bright vermilion. “We wanted a pop of colour there for balance,” says interior designer Gail Weininger, Jacobs’ design partner, “just to balance all the art in the space.”

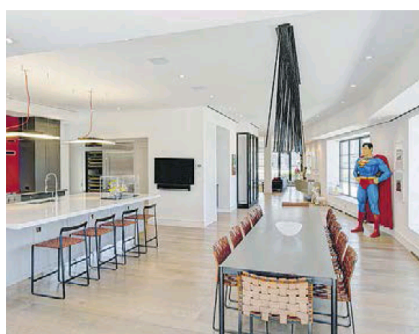
Over the dining table in the corner is a striking lighting fixture from the Italian maker Via Bizzuno called “Peled,” which consists of a nest of LED-tipped steel wands that can be individually aimed; in a space filled with art, it holds its own as sculpture.

The main living area is lit by a single bank of floor-to-ceiling windows that wrap around the corner, each featuring French doors to the terrace flanked by equal-size fixed windows, making the entire area feel almost part of the view as well as framing it. Overhead is another sculptural lighting fixture that resembles the spidery metal frame of a giant Ascot Race Dayesque hat, over a glass coffee table whose blown-glass supports vaguely resemble traditional turned legs.

With its windows and terrace that seem to blur the division between indoors and out, a view that takes in water and trees to the west, and skyscrapers far in the distance to the south, Weininger says it hardly feels like the middle of one of the world’s busiest cities. And the sheer friendliness of the artwork and furnishings banishes any notion of the loneliness of the big city.

“There’s this cliché that New Yorkers are impatient by nature, but these clients were unbelievably patient throughout,” Jacobs observes. “They knew it would be worth it in the end.”

National Post



Left, an Italian lighting fixture over the dining table consists of a nest of LED-tipped steel wands that can be individually aimed. Right, before renovation, the space had been dark.

