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Architect Helps Shape Future of a Building He Had to Leave

By MATT A.V. CHABAN

One of the happiest moments of the architect Steven Harris's career arrived as he was being evicted in 2011 from his TriBeCa loft, his home of 34 years.

It came when his new landlords asked him to stay.

Not stay on as a second-floor tenant; no, Matrix Development and Clarion Partners fully intended to turn the only residence Mr. Harris had ever known in New York into another luxury loft apartment. But the firm did want him to stay on in another way, as a designer on the new project.

"We were negotiating what it would cost to buy him out," said Scott Sabbagh, Matrix's managing principal. "And in the middle of it, we sort of asked if he would consider working with us. We totally thought he would tell us to beat it."

Especially since Mr. Harris had done just that nine months before.

Matrix had just bought a Village townhouse out of foreclosure and Mr. Sabbagh hoped Mr. Harris might redo the new property. The architect has gained renown the past two decades for designing townhouses, country estates and apartments in a lavishly minimal style. But Mr. Harris is also known for refusing speculative projects for developers.

"I was still shellshocked when we asked him about 7 Harrison," Mr. Sabbagh said.

But little did he know, Mr. Harris was already planning to demand a role in the 114-year-old building's future as a condition of his leaving.

"I told them: 'If you think you're getting rid of me, forget it. You'd be crazy to work with anyone else,'" Mr. Harris said. "Who knows the way the afternoon light hits in the middle of September better than someone who's been staring at it for 34 years?"

And that's all it took.

Well, that, a design fee and a hefty buyout, enough to ease a relocation a few blocks south, where he recreated his thousand-square-foot home almost exactly, but inside a 1,600-foot shell with no corner windows.

Much as the neighborhood has changed, Mr. Harris still found he could not leave it behind.

"The scale, the grandeur, the beauty of the neighborhood,



those things will never change, no matter who lives next door," Mr. Harris said.

He likes to joke that he wound up at 7 Harrison because it had his name all over it. But beyond the pun, TriBeCa offered a lot to love for a young architect who had just graduated from Princeton in 1977.

"There were literally tumbleweeds blowing in the street and sand dunes where Battery Park City is now," Mr. Harris recalled. "Art on the Beach was in full flower. Edward Albee was across the street and still is; Wendy O. Williams of the

Plasmatics parked her Cadillac Eldorado convertible in the garage.” It may very well have been the Cadillac she blew up and let fall into the Hudson River during a show.

Mr. Harris was not alone in this adventurous spirit. The building belonged to Mardig Kachian, an Armenian steel sculptor who had bought it a few years earlier and quickly filled it up with fellow artistic types — all of whom had to pitch in the \$3,000 fixture fee before the Buildings Department would let anyone move in, so barren were the accommodations in the former cheese warehouse. The place smelled like Camembert the first decade.

“There were no windows when we first moved in, just corrugated steel over the openings,” said Dana Buchman, the women’s fashion designer. “Sleeping on a mattress on the floor that first summer in New York City and the breeze blowing through — I couldn’t help but thinking this was what it was like to live in the city, the rush and the thrill.”

Among the first to move in, she was paying \$220 a month. Mr. Harris, the second-to-last tenant, was in for a mere \$185. “That was still a week’s pay at Charlie Gwathmey’s office,” he said, dismissing the notion his rent was cheap.

That would come later, as the rent barely broke \$300 over the next three decades. “I don’t think I could have launched my firm otherwise,” he said.

Everybody became friends bouncing between dinners and parties, or more often than not at the one laundromat, one parking garage and two bars in the area. “I met Ed Albee while waiting for my car,” Mr. Harris said of his longtime neighbor across Harrison Street.

Soon more celebrities followed, including TriBeCa’s most famous, Robert DeNiro, in a penthouse on Franklin Street at the end of the block. Aaron Eckhart moved into 7 Harrison in the mid-1990s, and Kevin Spacey calls a penthouse across the Staple Street alley home.

Mr. Kachian put the building on the market in fall 2010 with no price tag and only four tenants left, including Mr. Harris. Matrix and Clarion, both in the business two decades, had been on the sidelines for a few years after the recession. But when they saw 7 Harrison, the firms knew they had to have it, paying \$20 million in 2011.

“Even with the market still shaky, it was a no-brainer,” Doug Bowen, managing partner at Clarion, said.

It was equally a no-brainer for Mr. Harris, who quickly put his knowledge of 7 Harrison to work. His first order was to reorient the units, which had faced north-south, to be east-



west, to capture more light. This necessitated the complex and costly relocation of the elevators from the corner to the center of the building, which then necessitated the reconstruction of the floors. But this has its benefits, too.

“People love the look of the old wooden joists, but there’ll be no TriBeCa creak in here,” a Douglas Elliman broker, Leonard Steinberg, said. “You won’t be hearing the neighbors all night.”

Mr. Harris also did away with the typically lofty open floor plans, saying no one wants to look at dirty dishes during their dinner parties. The homes have the dimensions of Duane Street, but the proportions of Park Avenue, with separate living rooms, dining rooms and bedrooms, all off a central gallery. The inspiration is as much Rosario Candela as Donald Judd.

While Mr. Harris typically refuses developer jobs, he has typically gone all out here. Leather walls, retro light switches more befitting a rocket console and replica Bauhaus kitchen faucets — all are hallmarks of the designer’s carefree and understated opulence.

Where there was once a warren of 24 lofts for artists, designers and misfits, there are now 12 units for TriBeCa’s newer clientele. The 2,400-square-foot, three-bedroom units on the main floors start at \$4.5 million. Below is an \$8 million maisonette with an entrance off Staple Street, in addition to a \$20 million duplex penthouse, which features what Mr. Harris calls “a Neutra House resting on top, set within a walled garden.”

The World Trade Center, newly completed now as it was when Mr. Harris first moved in, is so close, it almost looks like an oversize lawn ornament.

