

All Is Not Loft: Open-Plan Layouts Lose Their Appeal

By Kim Velsey | 08/14/14 11:55am

Seven Harrison Street lies in the heart of loft country, on a cobblestoned Tribeca street a few blocks from the West Side Highway. A turn-of-the-century brick warehouse, it is precisely the kind of elegant industrial relic that spawned the cult of the loft—that obsession with open floorplans, exposed structural elements and industrial detailing that defined downtown cool through the 1990s and aughts, seeding the pages of countless shelter mags and inspiring interior demolitions from Manhattan to Seattle.

“In the early 2000s, anybody who didn’t want a Park Avenue co-op wanted a really sexy, cool downtown loft,” said Jarrod Guy Randolph, who heads up brokerage JGR Property Group.

So strong was the allure of the loft that even staid Upper East Siders could be found whacking down walls in their Gilded Age townhouses, installing hulking industrial ranges in full view of their delicate, plasterwork parlors. Every month, *Architectural Digest* featured another Hollywood star or hedge fund titan showing off his soaring ceiling, exposed metal ducts and vast open floorplans (who needed walls?!).

Classic layouts came to seem matronly by comparison, the sensible station wagon to the sleek speedster. To this day, it remains virtually impossible to turn on HGTV without seeing some design guru raving about how knocking down a wall or two will “open the place up.”

But when developers Matrix Development and Clarion Partners scooped up 7 Harrison in 2011,



with plans for a luxury conversion, instead of playing up the loft aesthetic, they dumped it.

Now near completion, the building’s interiors owe a greater debt to Park Avenue than Prince Street. A whisper-quiet elevator—no clanging-doored manual lifts here—whisks visitors to apartments with gracious entrance galleries recalling the Uptown layouts of Rosario Candela. Spacious bedrooms branch off to either side, the master equipped with a dressing corridor that opens onto a capacious bathroom. There are no unsheathed pipes, rough-hewn beams or Corinthian columns, no awkward gestures at “authenticity.” The only exposed bricks are on the building’s exterior, and the mechanicals are similarly concealed, under ceilings or behind walls—yes, walls—covered in

elegant white molding.

“I remember when I first discovered lofts, I was like, ‘Oh my god, this is so big, I love it.’ Then I discovered that when I had guests over it wasn’t so fabulous,” said Leonard Steinberg, the Urban Compass broker who launched his career selling lofts and is now the agent for 7 Harrison. “I’ve heard from buyers again and again that while they love the wow of the big, open space, they have a hard time living in it.”

In the last few years, open floorplans have met coolness from tastemakers and buyers alike. These days, you’d be pressed to find a Manhattan developer bringing traditional lofts to market. Even the “loftiest” new construction closes off a study or media room, brokers say, while the full complement of sprawling bedrooms, baths and dressing rooms is now *de rigeur* in luxury construction no matter your floorplan.

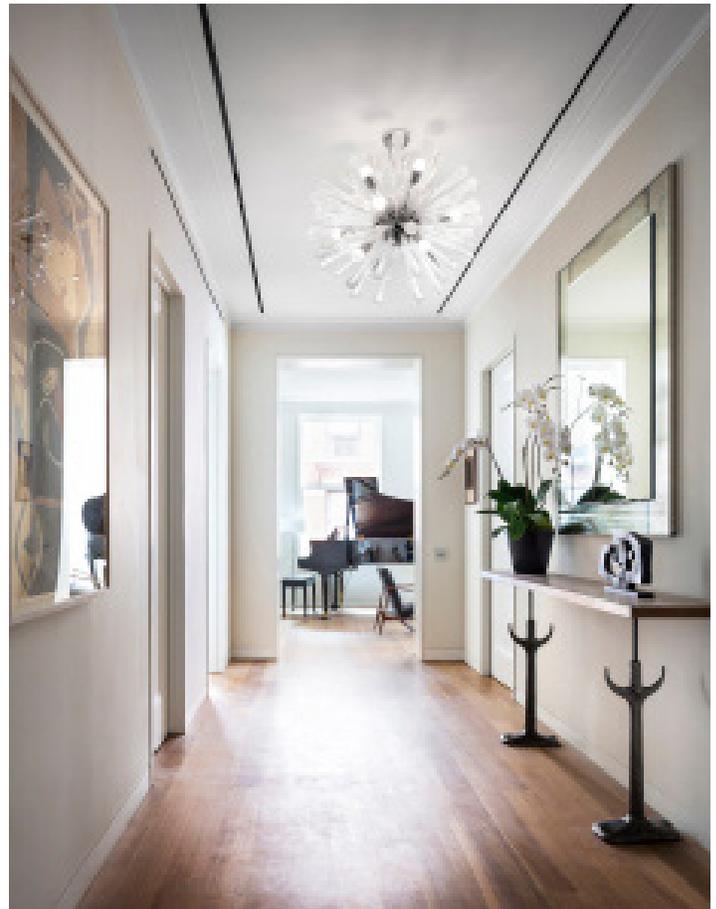
“At first, it was like, ‘The city is small, we want to make everything feel big.’ One way to do that is to remove all the walls,” said Brown Harris Stevens broker Paula del Nunzio. “But then you get the commotion of the kitchen, the noise, the smell, the distraction. It’s beautiful conceptually, but not in real life.”

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One disenchanted open-plan dweller moved from a true one-bedroom into a loft-like duplex—and made it through only a year before putting up a wall to sequester the bedroom. “I thought two levels would be enough that noise, light, etc. would not be an issue, even if one person was up working or watching TV, while the other wanted to sleep,” he recalled. “Boy, was I wrong. During the first year, there were times I honestly hid in the bathroom for peace and quiet.”

Hiding—what, where and how—is a subject that frequently crops up among those who live in open floorplans, with online message boards peppered with everything from tips on how to disguise clutter to sheepish confessions of crouching behind counters to eat cookies without being seen by the children.

The open kitchen, the most widely adopted fea-



ture of the loft, is also the most reviled.

“Everyone has this dream of what an open floorplan is going to look like, but they’re looking at an editorial. Throw life into the equation and it’s very, very different,” said one broker. “I go into apartments now where there are three pots in the kitchen and it looks like a mess. You put them away and it’s clean. People need places to hide things.”

“Most people don’t have kitchens that look like a showplace. And even if you do, the cooking smell gets into everything when you have an open floorplan,” said Mr. Randolph. “People are judged on

the cleanliness of their kitchens and bathrooms.”

He recounted a client’s delight upon being shown an apartment with a closed kitchen at Phillips House on 88th and Lexington. “When we walked in she said, ‘Finally, I don’t have to worry about leaving my dirty dishes in the sink!’ ”

Another woman told the Observer that she was horrified to find that food messes crept through the open-plan vacation house she rented, as people haphazardly drifted from the kitchen into other areas, trailing crumbs in their wake. When selecting a floorplan for her new apartment she eschewed anything open concept: “The only concession we made when renovating the kitchen was to widen its doorway.”

Not to mention that in the hands of an inept decorator, an open kitchen can be a design disaster. “If you have a green marble countertop you have to be able to bring that design into the rest of the room,” lectured one broker.

Even in competent hands, open floorplans are an interior design nightmare, opined Robert Leleux, creative director of interior design magazine *Domino*.

“I’ve always loathed open floorplans,” he said. “Why wouldn’t one prefer one’s home to have rooms? My heart aches when I see a lovely house from the ’30s or ’40s that’s been disemboweled, torn to pieces. And besides, furniture looks perfectly ridiculous floating in empty space. Is there anything worse than a dining table floating in a void?”

And though the foodie craze that helped popularize open kitchens shows no signs of abating, more and more buyers prefer to have the dirty dishes and cooking splatters out of view when it comes time to eat.

In fact, though the trend has yet to take hold in New York City, last year *The Wall Street Journal* reported that a number of wealthy homeowners have started adding smaller “dirty” kitchens where the actual cooking and cleaning take place to keep the showpiece kitchen looking as clean as the set of a cooking show.

“The higher price point stuff is being done with beautiful, spacious kitchens, but they are not open to the living space,” said Brown Harris Stevens broker Lisa Lippman. “Now you see the open kitchens

more in two- or three-bedrooms, where they’re trying to fit a big kitchen into a smaller space.”

Which was a huge part of the loft layout’s appeal in the first place: open floorplans allowed developers to accommodate larger kitchens, which buyers wanted and the Americans with Disabilities Act required—new-construction apartment kitchens and bathrooms must be accessible to those in wheelchairs. After that, it didn’t take developers long to discover that they could offset rising land and construction costs by squeezing open kitchen/living rooms into smaller footprints than they could separate rooms.

As loft-like increasingly went from indicating a preponderance of space to a dearth of it, the layout lost much of its luster. Like a cruel joke, in many new developments, the term came to mean the very opposite of what it implied.

“You ended up with a lot of developers building ‘loft-style apartments,’ but they were one-bedrooms,” explained Mr. Randolph. “The demographic that’s buying in these new development Manhattan buildings today isn’t willing to accept these half-way-there apartments that are trying to mimic a design trend. They want a real luxury product.”

For the many New Yorkers who have lived in studio apartments or shares and are therefore excessively familiar with the concept of one-room living, the idea of replicating the experience when one finally has the money to upgrade is not particularly appealing. Especially as the novelty and charm of “loft-like” has worn thinner over the years, with few “loft-like” apartments resembling anything even remotely close to high-ceilinged, 3,000-square-foot Soho splendor.

To wit, when Mychal Phillips was looking for a one-bedroom apartment, she specifically told her broker she wanted rooms.

“I didn’t want one of those places where you look in and in two seconds you know what the apartment is,” said Ms. Phillips, who landed in a pre-war Fort Greene building she adores. “The long hallway and eat-in kitchen make it feel like a real home.”

Not that developers are the only ones who try to achieve spatial miracles by knocking out walls.

“Several years ago, one of our new shareholders

jumped on the ‘open layout’ bandwagon, taking a sledgehammer to his lovingly preserved 1920s wall ... He blew out his foyer. He blew out his kitchen. And then it looked not like an open loft, but a dismal studio,” the board president of a pre-war Washington Heights co-op told the Observer. “He almost immediately regretted it and ended up paying \$50,000 to restore everything.”

And even large lofts can feel like a squalid studio when shared with children. As one broker put it: “In other cultures where everyone lives in the same room, they train the children to be quiet. But our children are not trained to be quiet.”

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It’s not just that tastes have changed—the city has, too. Families, who have increasingly come to dominate the high-end buyers’ market, rarely want to live in lofts; instead, their needs—larger apartments, multiple bedrooms, discrete spaces for different activities—dovetail with Uptown layouts.

As such, demand has raged for new developments that channel classic Uptown floorplans and offer larger apartments—the Robert A.M Stern-designed 15 Central Park West is arguably the most successful condo in the city’s history, and the briskness of sales at the Brodsky Organization’s 135 East 79th Street and the Witkoff Group’s 10 Madison Square West have surprised even seasoned brokers. Now both Vornado and the Zeckendorfs have engaged Stern to build new limestone-clad skyscrapers on Central Park South and Park Avenue.

And while developer Scott Resnick brought on architect Norman Foster to design his luxury condo tower at 551 West 21st Street, he looked to the long-dead Candela for inspiration on the interiors: “Candela-inspired layouts are really the best way to live in a large apartment,” he explained. “They have the separation between the public and private spaces.”

“Having this kind of product downtown is not really a surprise anymore,” Mr. Resnick went on. “The market has evolved so quickly and so strongly over the last couple of years. Quite frankly, when I first had the idea, it felt a bit strange, but in 2014, it doesn’t feel strange, it feels sensible.”

“Honestly, I think a lot of people always liked rooms and they still do,” said Frederick Peters, the president of Warburg Realty. “I’ve always been a rooms person.”

“The whole loft thing, this kind of bohemian artistic downtown idea,” Mr. Peters continued, “captured people’s imagination—sort of like Marie Antoinette dressing up like a shepherdess, you want to simulate the life of the artist even though you’re not one—but most people respond to rooms, in my observation.”

Even Cary Tamarkin, the architect and developer who built and renovated some of the most iconic downtown lofts in the 1990s, among them

140 Perry and 495 West Street, said that he's had to bend to the demands of an altered market.

"I would really like to build a concrete building where every beam is expressed and you can't really do that anymore," Mr. Tamarkin said. "I have ever so gently adjusted to the change. I'd have to be stupid not to. An architect might say, 'fuck that, I'll build what I want to,' but I'm also borrowing tens of millions of dollars, so I want the project to be successful."

Among the concessions he made were adding "certain things like pantries and powder rooms. It's still lofty, but it's a little less of me dictating how the environment is going to be inside."

Even those who are completely enamored with the loft lifestyle often leave it behind as they get older. Architect Randy Correll, a partner at A.M. Stern, said that a number of clients come to the firm when they're looking to transition from a one-big-room kind of lifestyle to something more classic.

He spoke of a client in the midst of renovating a Park Avenue apartment that he'd bought after selling his "very hip apartment downtown."

"He liked doing things there in the evening, but he liked to go back uptown to sleep," Mr. Correll explained. "People now realize that you don't need to be downtown, living in this bohemian loft, to enjoy going out downtown."

Sharon Zukin, a CUNY sociology professor who wrote *Loft Living*, one of the pivotal texts on the transformation of Soho, said that in the years since she published the book (a new edition is due out this fall), people's focus has shifted from living around artists to consuming around artists. Whereas once New Yorkers aspired to live in lofts as a kind of bohemian fantasy, now they just go to the Brooklyn flea.

"I think that a lot of attempts to be off-the-wall or cool have been transferred to bars, cafes, boutiques," said Professor Zukin. "When I wrote *Loft Living* people wanted to live in artistic neighborhoods. Now, people still want to be where the artists are, but they're more attracted to artistic consumption spaces."

And though the idea of the artists' loft still holds undeniable appeal, the fantasy that one could live out some kind of gritty bohemian existence in one

is so far removed from the current reality of Manhattan real estate that the charge has essentially gone out. Today's lofts, professor Zukin pointed out, have basically dropped all pretense of being edgy or tough.

"We've seen the luxuration of lofts. In design features, lofts today are the same as the patrician villas of the 1940s or '50s," she said. "The loft lifestyle of the 1980s was humble, it was restaurant stoves, industrial chic shelves, brick walls, or at least it claimed to be a modest kind of consumption. It fit into the city and distinguished itself by its knowing connoisseurship. It wasn't extravagant except in its use of space."

The thing is, today's apartment-lofts, kitted out as they are with all the delights of modern luxury, are as perfectly suited to present-day Manhattan as the rough-around-the-edges lofts were to the Manhattan of the 1980s. Lofts aren't the locus, or even embodiment of a particular type of dream anymore, they're just one more variety of very beautiful real estate for the very wealthy to covet. Mr. Steinberg noted that even as "true" lofts have become something of a rarity, there are buyers who really go crazy for them. In fact, he just sold one above the \$8 million ask after a bidding war.

"I have to tell you, when I show a traditional loft apartment with Corinthian columns, beautiful hardwood floors, high, pressed-tin ceilings, and big windows, people freak out," he said. "It's almost becoming a weird collector's item."