

# Apartment 4D by Maria Cook

The Mayfair Apartments is a landmark 1930s building located ten blocks south of Parliament Hill. Valued for its Art Deco-inflected ornament and traditional interiors, it is an unlikely place for a modern loft. The seven-storey mansion block was originally built as an apartment-hotel with small units for parliamentarians and others seeking a pied-à-terre in the capital. Within this U-shaped heritage building Paul Kariouk has designed a spare yet surprisingly accommodating 1,200 ft<sup>2</sup> apartment for himself and a 100-pound Bernese mountain dog. “I saw this as a lab to play with things that I wouldn’t have the opportunity to do for a conventional client,” he says.

A former co-op, the Mayfair is one of the city’s few buildings of this vintage to operate as a condominium. Many residents have combined two units into one, which was the case with Apartment 4D. Ottawa, which has demolished virtually all of its 19th- and early 20th-century industrial buildings, is a hard place to find lofts. Instead, Kariouk found himself ripping out plaster cornices and partitions to create a single space from six small, dark rooms. The goal was a live/work environment that could support a passion for cooking, accommodate visiting relatives, and make room for ongoing design projects.

The front door opens in the centre of a long and narrow space, which is anchored by a stunning 18’ x 3’ concrete table. Kitchen cabinets and appliances are underneath. This is the heart of the apartment and the focus of activities such as meal preparation, model-making, conversation and parties. It also defines public and private sections of the apartment. Beyond the table, in the brighter west end of the apartment, are the living area and secondary bathroom. To the east, an alcove contains a computer workspace; beside it, the master bathroom and sleeping area lie in the darkest corner of the unit.

Light plays a critical role in the apartment. A lightwell illuminates the view towards the dark wall of a neighbouring flat 40 feet away. At the west end of the fourth-floor unit, three windows have views out across a parking lot. A total of 18 small windows run along the 15-foot west-facing wall and 80-foot north-facing wall.

A number of intriguing details enhance light, subdivide space and provide atmosphere. Some move, and some don’t. For example, a set of glass sheets, warmed by the application of cream-coloured linen, roll along a barn door track to permit light in the day and screen the windows for privacy at night. Recessed lights within the window wells glow behind the glass at night. Mirrors lining the jambs reflect light and dissolve the mass of the building seen through the window. “A favourite principle is to take something which is conventional and inexpensive and transform it in a way so it’s unfamiliar and beautiful,” says Kariouk.

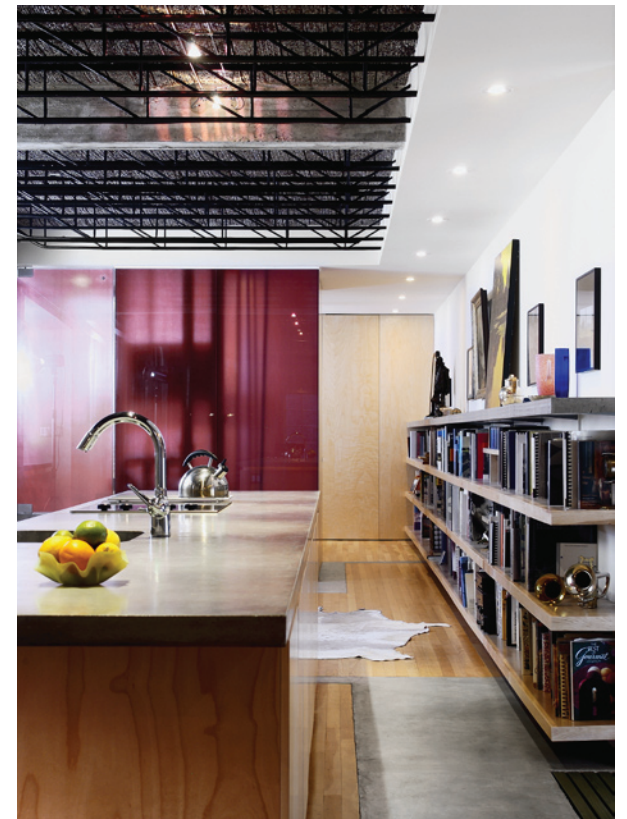
Clutter can kill a loft, but storage space was actually doubled during the renovation. Built-in closets line the back wall of the sleeping area, while a bookcase extends 40 feet along the southern wall from the bedroom to the kitchen. A series of tall cabinets on wheels, typically parked against a wall, store things like coats, shoes and a television. Fitted with interior lights that silhouette their contents, the cabinets can draw power from anywhere in the ceiling. Rolled out, they can seal off part of the living room to make a guest bedroom. Arranged



**Above: a view through the length of the apartment illustrating the rolling storage units along with the concrete and wood cabinetry and flooring details. Bottom left: an exterior view of the Mayfair apartment building. Bottom right: view toward the bedroom.**

freely for a party, they are mysterious sculptural lanterns. A playful exploration of public/private life is a motif that recurs. “Why not acknowledge the fact that we have things and try to do something beautiful out of something that is normally concealed?” says Kariouk. A refrigerator stands in the same kind of rolling cabinet. “You’re not committing to any particular layout, everything changes around,” he adds. This idea of flexible space is furthered by small meticulous interlocks with the bookcase to close off the sleeping area, and a section of birch panelling in the living area that folds out to form a bathroom door. A wheeled section of the concrete table migrates to a window to serve as a desk, or extends the kitchen counter when more space is needed. The strategy is rigorous but not dogmatic.

Other uncommon elements are apparent throughout the space. Stepping into the apartment, one encounters a sleek, ambiguous fixture on a polished red wall. It turns out to be a showerhead, designed by Arne Jacobsen, and is used to wash muddy paws and shoes upon entry. The current trend in boutique hotels of maintaining a visual connection between bathing and sleeping areas is evident here, as the bedroom area is separated from the master bathroom only by a pane of clear glass; wooden blinds can be lowered for privacy. A glass plumbing wall backed in red silk reveals faint shadows of bodies as well as







pipes. One of the delights of the apartment is the large cast-concrete tub lined with a curved wooden seat. To run a bath, a sculptured concrete sink overflows a cascade of water into the tub. A cutout in the bathroom wall opens above the tub to offer views into the apartment. The washing areas are identified by sections of floor in slatted green wood and rust-red plaster walls. The beautiful colour and leathery surface was achieved by mixing pigment into the plaster in small batches and applying it with a trowel. Four layers of marine varnish keep it waterproof.

One of the great virtues of the renovation is that it accepts a variety of found conditions. Gaps in the wood floor where the walls used to be were filled with concrete, tracing a map of the old life of the apartment. Original windows, which other residents have been quick

**Clockwise from top left: a detail of the concrete sink which allows water to flow into the adjacent bathtub; view from the bedroom down the entire 80-foot length of the apartment; view from the bathtub toward the kitchen; the raised blind completely exposes the elements of the washroom**

to replace, were preserved. The ceiling structure was left exposed when it divulged a strange, textured beauty which resulted when the original concrete slab of the floor was poured, pushing its mesh formwork into graceful folds between the steel joists. The ecumenical attitude extends to the furniture which includes a 19th-century dining table, Danish modern chairs, Russian icons and a contemporary sofa. What holds it together are simple geometries and rigorously edited

palette of materials and colours - rust red, olive green and natural wood. "Otherwise it's going to seem chaotic," says Kariouk. "I'm basically living in one room."

By doing much of the work himself, Kariouk kept expenses to \$90,000, but estimated it would cost \$160,000 to contract the work externally. He did, however, employ local craftspeople as well as architecture student Chris Davis. The apartment demonstrates Kariouk's interest in "breathing new life into an old apartment or house as opposed to trying to restore it to its original condition." in photographs, Apartment 4D appears to support a contention by Christopher Macdonald, jury chair for this year's Governor's General's medals, that young contemporary ideas of domesticity are formed by boutique hotels and trendy restaurants. In reality, Apartment 4D reveals careful consideration of how it is to be lived in, and a sustained study of both natural and artificial light. Even on a grey morning, the apartment is luminous. It combines a playfulness and practical purpose, which Kariouk describes as "beautiful efficiency."

*Maria Cook is a journalist at the Ottawa Citizen who writes about architecture and urbanism.*

**Client:** Paul duBellet Kariouk

**Architect Team:** Paul duBellet Kariouk, Chris Davis, Adam Frankowski

**Structural:** Buchan Parent Lawton Ltd.

**Interiors:** Paul duBellet Kariouk

**Contractor:** Ralph Lawrence

**Other Consultants:** Neoform Cabinetry

**Area:** 1,200 ft<sup>2</sup>

**Budget:** \$90,000

**Completion:** September 2003

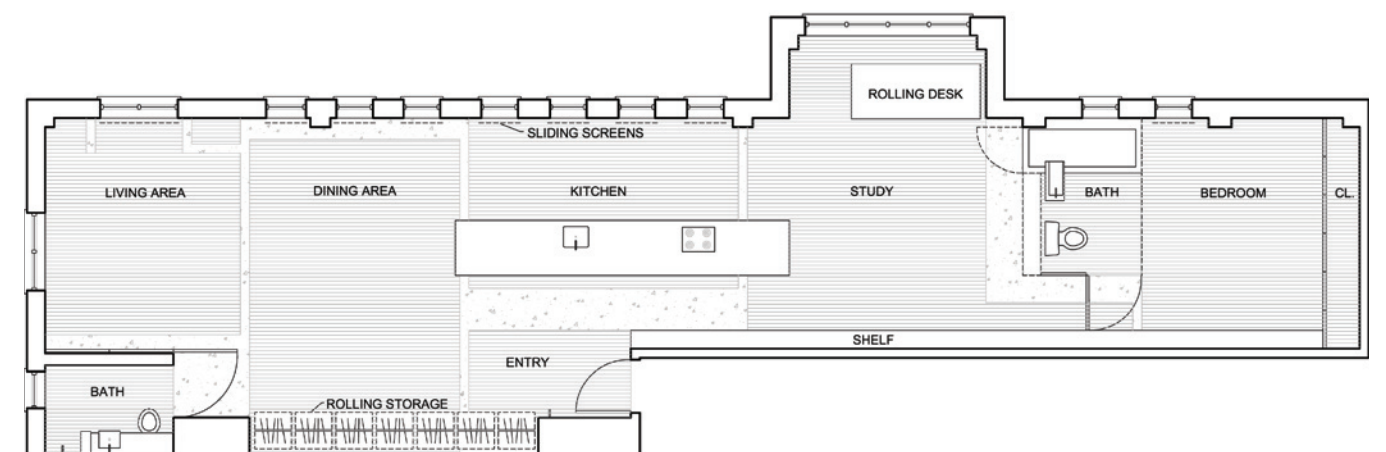
**Photography:** Photoloux Studios (Chris Lalonde)



**Above: revealing the original structure of the apartment provides a surprising aesthetic when the architects encountered the exposed steel structure and the bulging effect of the concrete.**



**Section**



**Floor Plan**