

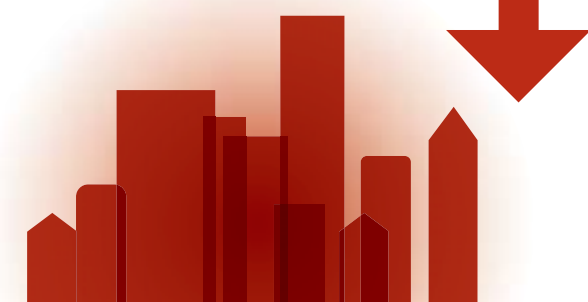


BY SARAH BROWN

THE UPSIDE OF DOWNTOWN

Really, how often does a New York City-based architect end up settling in Ottawa? And, once here, what compels him to buy an apartment that, in his own words, was dark enough that by the time he walked from one end to the other, he “felt like a mole?” Chalk it up to a vision and the love of a good challenge.

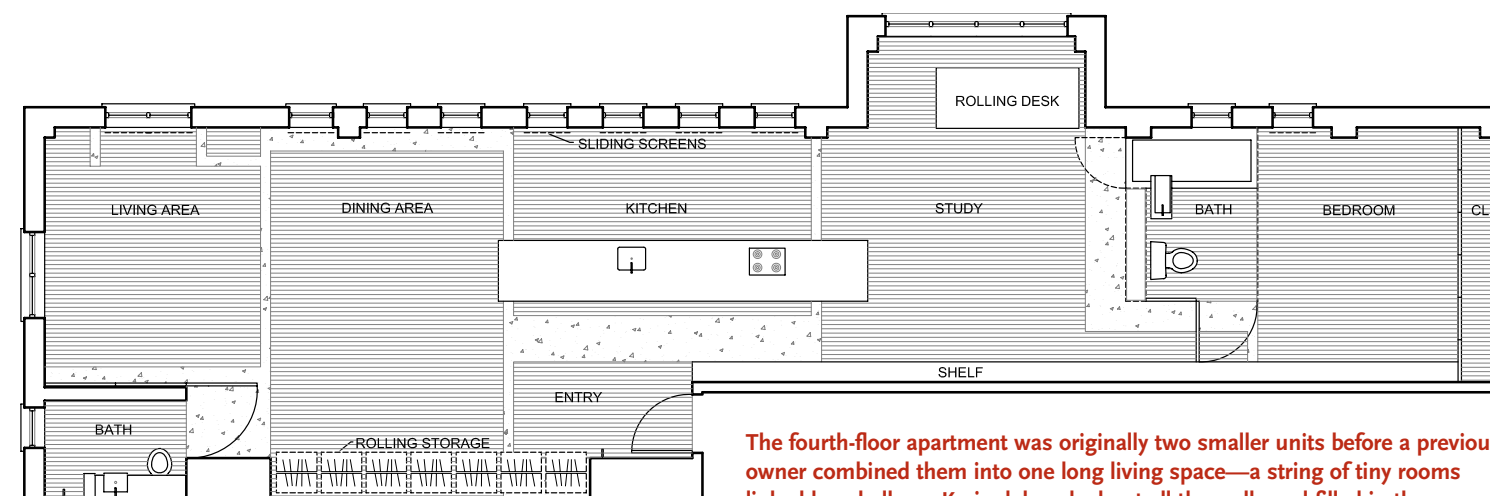
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The apartment's entrance looks decorative, but the slatted wooden floor actually covers a recessed drainable area. The couple use the shower by the door to wash mud and slush from human shoes and puppy paws. A series of tall cabinets on wheels is used for hanging coats and storing shoes. Backed by translucent glass on three sides and lit from within, the glowing light turns the clothing into "shade sculptures." Right: A long view takes in the entranceway, the kitchen counter, and the cerise silkscreened walls of the main bathroom.

the plan



The fourth-floor apartment was originally two smaller units before a previous owner combined them into one long living space—a string of tiny rooms linked by a hallway. Kariouk knocked out all the walls and filled in the gaps left in the floor with concrete. Thus the plan of the former apartment remains intact as a thematic reminder of change.

A practising architect since 1985 and a professor as well since 1995, Paul Kariouk made the move to the capital three years ago when he was offered a position with Carleton University's School of Architecture. He was already comfortable with the idea of living in Canada. His parents had emigrated from France to New York, but many of their friends had ended up in Montreal, so Kariouk got an early sense of the country through childhood trips. And he was very ready to settle in Ottawa, specifically. He liked that the city has a highly educated population that is receptive to innovation. "I also like slightly grey climates," he says with a smile. "I find them soothing."

Deciding to make the move turned out to be the easy part. The challenge became finding somewhere to live. Kariouk knew he wanted to be downtown. He knew he wanted a condo. He knew he needed to have a space in which he could both work and live. Unfortunately, there was nothing on the market that met these criteria. Then he discovered that an apartment in Centretown's Mayfair—a classic 1935 Art Deco condominium—was up for sale. He decided that it fit the bill... sort of. Now the challenge morphed into making it into a "more livable space" that suited all his needs.

The fourth-floor apartment was originally two smaller units before a previous owner combined them into one long and skinny living space, a string of tiny rooms linked by a hallway. "I had my reservations," Kariouk admits now, likening the original space to a bowling alley. Then the architect and designer in him kicked in. He embarked on plans for a renovation that would turn seeming obstacles into virtues. Everything he did would be based on three themes—a mantra—open up the space, bring in light, keep the design flexible. He moved in for a year, the time it took to "figure out what I needed to live," then moved out for the next year and a half, working on the renovation whenever he had spare time.

"As soon as I took out all of the walls, it immediately got a lot brighter and more open," Kariouk says. "But that led to the next challenge—giving the space a sense of height." When the walls came down, chunks of the ceiling inevitably fell with them, giving Kariouk glimpses of what he now calls "a found treasure." Hidden above was the original ceiling structure—steel joists and metal mesh with concrete poured over. Though concrete and steel might be considered "cold materials," the wet concrete had dripped through the mesh as it set, rusting it and leaving the exposed ceiling a deep red—warm and textured. And so he left some of the ceiling exposed.



“This is a home and a space that promotes marital bliss—you can’t carry on an argument too long when you live in a large open space”



During the day, Kariouk rolls the screens away from the windows, allowing the light to pour in. At night, he slides them back.



An incredible kitchen counter, some three feet deep and eighteen feet long, is fabricated from concrete but looks smooth enough to be polished granite. In a loft where everything is movable (note that even the refrigerator is on wheels), the weighty counter is just about the only thing that’s fixed.

Now Kariouk had a giant open room with windows along the fifteen-foot west-facing front wall and the eighty-foot north-facing wall. Kariouk installed mirrors on both sides of each and every window frame to ensure that what light there was would be magnified as it came through the open windows, but he knew he couldn’t just leave every window permanently uncovered. He would need privacy—this is downtown Ottawa, don’t forget. But how to accomplish this goal without sacrificing light?

The solution came in the form of a steel track running the length of the long wall. From it hangs a series of floor-to-ceiling glass screens. During the day, Kariouk rolls the screens away from the windows, allowing the light to pour in. At night, he slides them back. Backed with linen, the screens are translucent, giving those inside “the sense of being in a giant lantern.” Kariouk and his guests get their privacy but are still on display—passersby can see their shapes moving behind the windows.

Another huge design challenge in such a big open space was to create storage without sacrificing flexibility. Here, Kariouk solved two problems in one, making a series of tall storage cabinets on wheels. On a day-to-day basis, the cabinets sit flush against one wall as you enter the apartment, hiding the stuff of daily life. But they can be moved around, creating new “walls” if a visitor comes to stay. Keeping to the theme, the cabinets are also made of linen-backed translucent glass on three sides and are lit from within, the glowing light creating shade sculptures of shoes and jackets—“the human traces” stored within.

Other design features are stunning for their detail and the thought that went into them. An incredible kitchen counter, some three feet deep and eighteen feet long, is fabricated from concrete but looks smooth enough to be polished granite. Cabinetmakers Frank Prendergast and Lucy Chapman (see page 15), executed Kariouk’s design for the kitchen and then recruited two craftsmen from Little Italy—experts in troweling. Accustomed to using their great hands to lay perfect sidewalks, they welcomed the chance to use their skills for a countertop. In a room where even the refrigerator is on wheels, the weighty counter is just about the only piece in the loft that’s fixed.



Then there's the master bath: a huge cast-concrete tub. "I asked myself, 'How do you make a concrete box comfortable?'" Pendergast suggested, and Kariouk then designed, a comfy, curvaceous lounge seat to fit inside the tub. And Kariouk's design for the tub's filling system is a work of art: the overflow from the bathroom sink cascades into the tub like a waterfall, while a column of water falls from the ceiling. With even the bathroom walled with glass, Kariouk created privacy by lining the two panels of glass enclosing the plumbing with deep cerise silk. When the light is on, its density allows "just the suggestion" of the plumbing behind. Or, as Kariouk puts it, "The messiness of life becomes ornament." Luxury.

Kariouk and Hannibal the Bernese mountain dog finally moved into the loft eight months ago and, while Kariouk is still putting finishing touches on the loft, he is moving on to new projects, this time for other people. In addition to residential projects, Kariouk says, he would love the chance to work on a restaurant, playing with lighting to create a sensual environment; maybe design some edgier commercial interiors. Cottages, too, hold special appeal—opportunities to be more experimental and playful. "Part of the fun of working on someone else's project rather than my own is the give-and-take aspect," he explains. "I enjoy going back and forth with clients and the thoughtfulness and respect on both sides of the equation. A creative process starts up with clients as I begin to understand their needs, and then work to meet those needs with design solutions that are functional but also unique and artful.

"Kariouk is happy in his uncluttered but warm loft space. "I wouldn't say I'm a diehard minimalist, but the fact is that I don't need or even want a lot of stuff," he explains. "Just a few things that I love"—things such as his books, architectural models, some original art. Within the modern interior, family heirlooms also abound.