

By Andrew Blum

# MOBILE HOME



Paul Kariouk’s refrigerator is on wheels. So are his coat closet, his file cabinet and his wardrobe. They roll around his Ottawa apartment as if on a cushion of light, drawing power for their internal illumination from plugs in the open-framed ceiling.

There are practical reasons for this: Kariouk, an architect and professor at Carleton University, wanted the apartment to accommodate the shifting needs of his personal and professional lives. In work mode, the cabinets gather around Kariouk’s desk like a child’s fort; when friends visit, they can partition a guest bedroom out of the living room; for parties, he parks the fridge in the centre of the apartment and arranges the other units to form conversation nooks. “You can create a landscape of these storage pods,” says the 40-year-old transplanted American, “and it becomes this really nice, playful thing.”

Kariouk is an academic—the kind of architect who not only constructs buildings but also deconstructs them into ideas. For him, the built world is facile without the ideas that transform architecture into a reflection of society—something not only beautiful and useful, but insightful, too. There are philosophical reasons Kariouk’s refrigerator is on wheels: because he believes life is in flux, and architecture should follow; because the old image of home is outmoded, swamped by a culture of mobility and consumption; because the privacy and permanence we expect from domestic space deserve to be poked and prodded, both in theory and practice. His home may not be like our home, but it’s close: like all good art, it both reflects and refracts the world, helping us to see it in a new way.

This 1,100-square-foot condo in a 1930s building in Ottawa’s Centretown neighbourhood is Kariouk’s platform for needling away at our expectations of home. He’s made his bed—quite literally—and he intends to lie in it, turning this space for himself, and his Bernese mountain dog, Hannibal, into an architectural laboratory.



*Paul Kariouk’s apartment in Ottawa’s Mayfair building (left) includes a semi-exposed bathroom and cupboards on wheels (far left)*



For parties, Kariouk parks the movable-fridge in the centre of the apartment. The kitchen countertop is one of the few static features

But Kariouk explains it's not so imposing: "I could have done this identical apartment for one of my paying clients, and they wouldn't have been interested at all in this whole conceptual thing, but I could pitch it to them simply from the perspective of pragmatism. And I can imagine some clients out there would accept it, because it's sensible in its response to use and flexible space."

The bulk of the apartment is open, minimally defined by a 40-foot bookcase running along one wall and a 20-foot kitchen countertop at the centre of the room. Originally, the 15-by-80-foot space had been divided into a warren of small, oppressively dark, rooms. And since all but three of the apartment's 18 windows faced north to a semi-enclosed courtyard, the rooms got darker the deeper into the apartment you went.

The philosophphy behind apartment 4-D began with a travelling art installation Kariouk developed and built in 1998 with the architect Mabel Wilson, called "(a)way station: The Architectural Space of Migration." The installation consists of a series of tall, slender boxes, a sort of plywood Stonehenge, with cavities and drawers holding personal belongings—an ashtray, a family photograph, a woman's shoe—encased in translucent resin, like natural history specimens or the contents of a suitcase frozen in suspension. The project was conceived as a commentary on the possessions migrants choose to carry with them and the way those things influence the spaces in which they live. The exhibition has been well received as it moved among galleries and museums across the U.S., in the process living out the message of migration it contains. It's still moving: last year it was installed at the Design Triennial at the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, and there are plans to bring it to San Francisco this year.

Throughout, Kariouk has been moving, too. Something of a wandering academic, he taught architecture at different American universities while awaiting the right tenure-track position. The conjoined pair of one-bedroom apartments he found in the Mayfair, a seven-storey Art Deco building in Ottawa, were, he says, "an obvious place someone from New York would be drawn to." The moving truck made several stops on its way to Ottawa, picking up Kariouk's stuff, which was scattered across the United States from various teaching gigs.

When Mabel Wilson, his architectural collaborator, asked Kariouk what he was going to do with the apartment, he jokingly replied he was going to make the (a)way station—transforming a statement about migration into an ironic embodiment of domesticity. "(a)way station was still running around, and here I was moving, and suddenly I'm part of that tide of migration," Kariouk recalls. But he was also eager to embrace the paradox of permanent flexibility that the installation represents, as both a practical and philosophical stance toward life. He knew this would be nest-building—a major renovation that, in the end cost \$150,000—but the result would also be designed to survive the changes in his life, both day to day and year to year, which Kariouk has learned are inevitable and which he has even come to savour. "This may seem transitory, but it's actually a very practical way of making things permanent," he says. "I ended up with a space that's going to be adaptive."

Kariouk waited six months after moving into the apartment to begin renovations. "I realized that it would only really work if I gutted the whole thing,"



Kariouk has designed an open, adaptive space that blurs the conventional divisions between public and private

he says. "Everything had to come out if I was going to have light back there." He made sure to secure a spot on the building's board before beginning demolition. "Everybody moves into the building because they love all these Art Deco details. When I was getting rid of demolition debris, I kept hauling out these huge chunks of very elaborate plaster moulding, and people would look at me like I was carrying out the carcass of a baby seal that I had just clubbed, they were so horrified!" On the floor, Kariouk left the scars of the old room dividers as a visible reminder that spaces change over time—a sort of architectural fable. With all the walls removed, the space had the openness Kariouk craved. "In New York, my apartment was 500 square feet," he says. "So suddenly having 1,100 square feet was like putting an animal who had been in a cage all its life in the open."

That openness is philosophical as well as spatial. The master bathroom, for example, is not quite concealed behind a wall of glass backed in red silk, making silhouettes clearly visible from the kitchen. As well, a piece of the bathroom wall above the tub swings open, making a sort of panoptic bathub—a watery perch from which the entire apartment is visible. From inside the master bedroom, the glass is clear, albeit fitted with wooden blinds. Kariouk is playing with both "what we deem to be private," as he puts it, and the erotic. "Rather than having rigid, fixed zones, you have the flexibility all the time to rewrite the relationships in your life separating public and private," he says. But there's an architectural joke here as well: human bodies are visible through the glass, but so is the building's body—the plumbing and electrical conduit. Revealing "the banal artifacts and

activities of everyday-ness," as Kariouk puts it, is a declaration of honesty. It's the same impulse behind the see-through walls of the rolling sotrage cabinets. Typically, Kariouk says, "our most private life gets stuffed away in these dense, secret closets, when in fact if you treat them, like here, as these interesting sculptural, illuminated objects, where you can see the traces of things through the glass, you can just be frank about the fact that we have these things and they're part of our lives." Similarly, there's a shower head right inside the front door with a drain in the floor covered by green wooden slats. The shower is in part for washing off the dog's paws and rinsing away other bad-weather detritus, but it's also a fitting frontispiece for the apartment, in the way some people put stone lions outside their doors. In the distance, clearly visible from the front door, is the second bath: a disarmingly beautiful *tableau de toilette*.

If events, from profound life changes to a trip to the bathroom, are inevitable, why not integrate them into your life and its architecture? Like this apartment, the question creates a Venn diagram: a series of overlapping ideas that exist alone but become more meaningful together. The bathtub perch is sexy, but it's also polemical; the rolling frid-ge is convenient, but also political. Still, Kariouk knows that whatever statements this apartment makes about domesticity, privacy and permanence, it must also make, day after day, a home.

"In the end," Kariouk says, "the measure of architecture is, does it do its job? Of course you want it to be beautiful, but if you have a choice of beautiful and livable, you've got to make it livable." □



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