Carving Out a Retreat
In a Water Tower

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T
ative brick water towers right there on the roof. Another selling point is that the penthouse is being offered by the sponsor, meaning that whoever buys it doesn’t have to be approved by a co-op board. “It’s been rent-stabilized since 1943,” Mr. Ball said.

The couple who lived in the penthouse “used to throw big parties up here,” Mr. Ball said. “He tended the garden. There were blooming cherry trees, a hot pool and a waterfall. After he died, some of the things started to die,” and his wife gave a lot of the plants to the super, who had a garden at his own house. Mr. Zakrzewski (pronounced jack-CHEF-skee) has a French mother and a Polish father and grew up in Ireland—hence, his accent.

When he first saw the inside of the penthouse, he looked disappointed and fell back on the predictable: he talked about radiant heating in the concrete floor and drip systems for watering plants on the terrace.

He and Mr. van der Zwan talked briefly about taking out some closets, and wondered much of the kitchen wall you could see from the street—one of the criteria the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission considers when deciding on renovation in a historic district like Tudor City.

Then, the architect climbed up the iron ladder to the roof—and started getting some wild ideas.

Exactly one week and a day later, they set forth a surprising—and imaginative—solution of what to do with the penthouse.

“It ended up very differently than I thought,” Mr. Zakrzewski said. “The only thing in the right locale was the bathroom.”

What was the biggest surprise? “Sleeping around, we got into the water tower—Peter actually climbed into it,” he said. “There’s an empty room up there—18 by 18 by 18—the actual water tank is above that, with its own floor. We’ve been reading articles about how people in co-ops are buying space from the boards—you know, things like service halls and other space they don’t need—and incorporating it in their apartments.”

“We got the idea of buying that room, building a staircase up to the roof and a canvas-covered walkway leading to it. With 18-foot ceilings and huge Gothic windows on all sides, we’d make it the master bedroom and put a bathroom up there.”

As a sop to the board and as a space for classics and insulation, the tower bedroom would be a room-within-a-room, that is, a room with about three feet of space all the way around, with the Gothic windows above. “The board—and the city Buildings Department—might like the fact that the outside shell, made from brick, would remain largely untouched, with only a new glass interior leading into the bedroom.”

As for the original 650-square-foot apartment, that would become about 200 square feet bigger with an extra 10 feet tacked onto the river-facing side, where an awning now provides some shade.

“It’s actually checked into,” Mr. Zakrzewski said. “The building has plenty of F.A.R.—floor-area ratio—so we can build up on it.” They also considered the city’s landmarks laws.

“We could add a whole second bedroom without offending Landmarks by including space in the water tower,” said Marius Wyre, Mr. Zakrzewski’s wife and partner in the architectural firm.

The firm’s team—which includes brain-storming free of quarry sketching, all top secret,” she said. “In the end, the final scheme combined ideas from all three architects.

One of the concepts (of which few have come from Mr. Wyre) was to cover the roof of the original penthouse with prefabricated planted squares, which can be inter- stabled, watered and—presto—grown with grasses and colorful flowers. “If you don’t have to wait three years for it to look nice and provide insulation for the rooms below,” she said, “bridging some literature. It’s much better than buying a rubber roof that just seeps up heat, in a city like New York, people are desperate for green.”

The architects proposed covering the sides of the penthouse, whatever isn’t glass, not with stucco (too maintenance) but with “blackened steel, Cor-Ten steel, de- signed to rust,” Mr. Zakrzewski said. (That was obvi- ously his idea.)

The cost of the renovation might be $1.2 million to $1.4 million, but the floor space would almost double, to 1,200 square feet of living space, not including the terraces. The remodeling would result in two and a half baths—the half bath would be added next to the kitchen—while the existing space has only one. The project would meet all building codes, Mr. Zakrzewski insisted. “After all,” he said, “we didn’t want to come up with something totally fictitious.”}

THE SPECs

Sketch Pad focuses on an apartment, loft, house or shack now for sale that has unrealized potential. Each month, a different architect or designer is asked to create a vision of what the place might look like.

There are no guarantees that the plans would be approved by co-op boards, municipal building departments or planning boards. But they can help real estate shoppers learn to see past ugly paint, too-small kitchens and a warren of rooms.

ARCHITECTURAL TEAM
Zakrzewski & Hyde Architects
Stas Zakrzewski, Mariusse Hyde
Peter van der Zwan

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