

HOUSE PROUD; Town House Invites the Outside In

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WHEN Andrew Rasiej mows his lawn next summer, he won't be in his backyard. He will be on the roof of his four-story town house on Leroy Street in Greenwich Village. Mr. Rasiej, 45, has 18 inches of topsoil on his 800 square-foot roof.

The arrangement conserves water. "The topsoil is also great insulation," he said, "and you use less heat and less air-conditioning."

His house is a dream long deferred. For years Mr. Rasiej (pronounced rah-SHAY) was living in increasingly large quarters in Zeckendorf Towers on Union Square: after combining three apartments for \$945,000, he had a 2,200-square-foot, four-bedroom home. But he had always wanted his own building -- and his own private parking space. At 18, when he was living in the East Village and studying painting at Cooper Union and oversleeping every morning, he accumulated \$5,000 worth of parking tickets. "I pined for a house with a garage," he said. "The dream never left."

Three years ago, he found an available 19th-century building on Leroy Street, a quiet location, for less than \$2 million -- and it had a garage. He sold his apartment for \$1.75 million, bought the building and retreated to a studio in Zeckendorf Towers for two years while Wayne Turett, of Turett Collaborative Architects in Manhattan, who had worked on his previous home, turned his attention to the new building. Mr. Rasiej's mandate to Mr. Turett was to ignore convention.

"Typically in town houses, you expect low ceilings and small rooms -- modified colonial living in the West Village -- and you become squished," Mr. Rasiej said. Not only did he not want to live like a neo-colonialist but he also wanted his home to have the element of surprise and to be suffused with light. He wanted drama and minimal hardware.

"I admire John Pawson's focus on simplicity," he said.

But simplicity comes at a cost. The money to do all this came from the music business. In 1990, Mr. Rasiej founded the club Irving Plaza. After he sold that, he and Ted Werth, an Internet entrepreneur, started the Digital Club Network, which broadcasts concerts online and sells music on the Internet. (Not surprisingly, considering Mr. Rasiej's interests in music and the Internet, his home is wireless, outfitted with the Airport Extreme system.)

Last year, Mr. Rasiej and Mr. Werth sold a majority stake in their digital broadcasting operation, and Mr. Rasiej had more time to focus on his home and to indulge his interest in politics. After four years of working pro bono as a consultant for political figures in the Democratic Party, he became a volunteer adviser on technology for the Howard Dean campaign.

Mr. Rasiej thinks of himself as an architect manqué, having once considered studying architecture at Cooper Union. Mr. Turett was happy to have a collaborator. "Wayne is an architect who is as egoless as a client could ask for," Mr. Rasiej said. "It's not to say we didn't have arguments." Nonetheless, together for an additional cost of \$1.8 million, they transformed the 19th-century town house into a four-story skylighted loft. Walls were moved and removed, some floors became transparent, and the indoors and outdoors were wedded together.

The modern building is discreet at the street level, with horizontal panels of mahogany. It is at the rear where the building opens up

completely, with floor-to-ceiling, asymmetrically arranged windows. The light inside is dazzling, worthy of California. Ceilings run from double height to 10 and a half feet high.

Every floor has a surprise. The first-floor entry steps down into a wide-open living-dining-kitchen area. Mr. Rasiej's first idea was to keep it level. "I wanted to save money and not lower the floor," he said.

Mr. Turett won that fight. "By sinking the floor, there's more of a transition," he said. "It feels much more voluminous."

At the far end is a Zenlike garden. Diana Balmori, a friend and landscape architect in Greenwich Village, suggested a moss wall for the garden, but moss takes time to grow, and Mr. Rasiej did not want to wait. He not only uses his three-bedroom house for a constant stream of cousins from Poland, but he has regular fund-raisers there. Last month, he gave a fund-raiser for Soaringwords, a nonprofit organization for hospitalized children. At the end of this month, he will give back-to-back fund-raisers, one for Councilman Bill DeBlasio of Brooklyn and the other to start VoteAID, a Manhattan nonprofit group supporting voter registration.

It was Jessica Shaw, an interior designer in Mr. Turett's office, who found some fake flowers while shopping in SoHo with Mr. Rasiej. "I had a eureka moment," said Mr. Rasiej, who remembered the Jeff Koons show in 2000 at Rockefeller Center of the 43 foot-high topiary "Puppy," covered with fresh marigolds, begonias and lobelias. Besides, he said, "the beige and brown and warm black in the house are crying for color." In his garden, he wanted perpetual springtime.

The result was a metal grid 20 feet wide and 12 feet high covered with 2,000 red, orange, purple and yellow synthetic fabric flowers blossoming in plastic grass. An L-shape fish pond in the garden is kept at 55 degrees, even in winter, and has a dozen shimmering gold and white koi. For ease of feeding the koi in bad weather, one arm of the pond reaches into the living room, and a glass panel in the floor can be lifted.

Mr. Rasiej and Ms. Shaw found a low chrome coffee table for the living room, on the ground floor, which reflects light coming from the skylight. The bright gleaming table sits on a fluffy white rug. "It's cut-up T-shirts," Mr. Rasiej said. "It's washable, it was only \$400 from ABC Carpet. Nobody wanted it." (He bought two.) The rug rests on a white-tinted poured concrete floor.

The wood on the catwalk and staircases is the recycled pine from the building, which was a garage that housed small trucks for delivering coal. The original brick walls have been cleaned, but not painted. "Andrew wanted to paint the old brick white," Mr. Turett said. "I wanted the texture."

On the second floor, Mr. Rasiej's thoroughly wired study faces a patio whose glass floor doubles as a skylight. "When I have a party on the patio, I put a black rubber mat on it so people don't feel uncomfortable." (What he means is that women wearing skirts would not have to worry about the view from below.)

The patio deck is ipê, a Brazilian mahogany that became the trendy wood of last year. The sides of the house are paneled in reddish-brown Prodema, a stained-wood panel with a synthetic, weatherproof coating.

The third floor has two guest bedrooms, and the top floor, the master bedroom, has a spectacular view across rooftops and down to the wall of fake flowers. Above a black slate fireplace is a flat-screen television.

A place that has a koi pond, ipê wood and a flat-screen television would not be complete without an indoor-outdoor shower. Mr. Rasiej's shower, off the master bedroom, has a glass door that opens onto the grassy roof. He can step out of the shower, and walk barefoot onto his newly mowed lawn, a rare urban luxury.

To move quickly from one floor to another, he installed a \$75,000 high speed commercial elevator that goes 100 feet a minute. And downstairs, on the street side, is a two-car garage plus a lift for a third car. It is filled with his two Audis and one space for -- luxury of luxuries -- guest parking.

In December, his companion of two years, Florence Uchida, 32, moved in. She is a special-events planner at the Knitting Factory, the music club in TriBeCa. When they and their friends cook, he makes his specialties -- lamb chops, sole meunière and bruschetta. Now that he is living in the house, he sees where he cut some corners. He should have gone for a 30-inch wide Whitehaus sink instead of the 24-inch sink, he said. He also wishes he had put six more inches between the kitchen counter and the island.

"It would have made it easier for my girlfriend and me to prepare food together," he said.

Still, nothing pleases him more than playing tour guide to his new home. So far, a dozen architects have stopped by for a look. Most brownstones, said Hugh Hardy, of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, the Manhattan architecture firm, are a series of boxes that all seem the same. Mr. Rasiej's house "is a wonderful response to the problem of a single-family house," he said, adding, "Because of the configuration and of the natural light, no two places, no two floors are the same." And Artexture & South, a company based in Miami that markets the Prodema wood paneling, has asked Mr. Rasiej six times to show off the house. "One of the downsides of using innovative products like Prodema," he said, "is that your home has to be a showroom."

So add one more character to Mr. Rasiej's multiple personalities of music entrepreneur, architect manqué and political adviser: pitchman for Prodema siding. Unpaid, of course. A Wall of Springtime

IN Andrew Rasiej's garden in Greenwich Village, a wall of red, yellow and purple flowers remains bright and pert in blistering heat or freezing sleet. That is because the flowers are made of polyester and the grass surrounding them is 100 percent plastic.

Mr. Rasiej decided he wanted something similar to a Jeff Koons topiary sculpture, but with considerably less maintenance. Jessica Shaw, Mr. Rasiej's interior designer, from Turett Collaborative Architects in Manhattan, traced a source of fake flowers to Earthflora in West Lake, Ohio. Wayne Turett, the architect, and Mr. Rasiej designed the wall.

The flowers, which come in 10-inch squares (\$7.90 a square), were tied with plastic twist-ties to a trellis made of five metal grids, each 12 feet by 4 feet (\$205 each) from Greenscreen in Los Angeles. The trellis is anchored with hooks to the masonry wall. It took two and a half hours to tie 252 squares to the grid, four twist ties each. The cost of the flowers was about \$2,000, and the 20-by-12-foot metal grid cost \$1,400, including mounting clips and spacers.

"You could also grow moss, ivy, clematis or roses on the trellis," Mr. Turett said. "Or you could mount panels on the trellis and have a paint party and do a faux Jackson Pollock or a graffiti wall."

Earthflora is at 1568 Cedarwood Drive, West Lake, Ohio, 44145; (877) 252-1675; www.earthflora.com. Greenscreen is at 1743 South La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles 90035; (800) 450-3494; www.greenscreen.com. Turett Collaborative Architects is at 86 Franklin Street, New York, 10013; (212) 965-1244; www.turettarch.com. ELAINE LOUIE

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