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## New York's long love affair with loft living

Vast, industrial spaces have been transformed into romantic family homes

By Nathan Brooker

The New York loft apartment has come a long way since the 1950s and 1960s. Back then artists started renting these spaces in former commercial or industrial buildings for little more than \$100 a year. When Andy Warhol moved his studio to East 47th Street in midtown Manhattan, the Factory, as it became known, would serve as the crash pad for one of the most colourful crowd of bohemian acolytes in pop history.

Raw, cold and stark, these commercial or industrial conversions with their expansive floor space, their high, bright ceilings and low rents were perfect for striving artists, musicians and sculptors, but they weren't homes. Some of these properties – especially in the former manufacturing district of SoHo – lacked hot running water, and there was little in the way of local amenities.

“In the 1940s and 1950s nobody wanted to live in SoHo,” says New York interior designer Valerie Pasquiou. “It was dirty, it was dangerous, it was the worst place to be.”

It's no secret that downtown Manhattan is now one of the most desirable places to live in New York. The current hot topic in property circles is that businessman and property magnate Jared Kushner is to develop a series of six high-end penthouses in the district's Puck Building, rumoured to cost between \$15m and \$50m each.

So what, if anything, remains from the austere beginnings of loft living? And how did these neglected commercial interiors become some of the most sought-after spaces in New York?



Andy Warhol in the Factory, East 47th Street in midtown Manhattan, in 1965

Real estate agent Lida Drummond, of Prudential Douglas Elliman, has been dealing in New York lofts for more than 20 years.

“In the 1940s no one was living in these lofts in SoHo and Tribeca,” she says. “They were just commercial spaces but what happened in American art was that abstract expressionism came along. Artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning moved art away from easel-sized painting to a grand format, and needed the large spaces, the ceiling height and the light to not only create their works but also to often live and work in the same space – sometimes illegally.”

What happened, according to Drummond, is that first artists would move in, then the galleries would rent the ground floor spaces for exhibitions, and then the wealthy art-buyers would come to the shows, fall in love with the spaces, and buy the apartments for themselves.

The upshot is that Warhol's \$100-a-year lease has paled into insignificance compared with today's prices. “Even though the economy may be having difficulties,” says Drummond, “the real estate market is still very strong at the high end.”

That's why, in New York, loft rents per month start at around \$6,000, with \$10,000-\$20,000 being a more typical price range.

Consequently, the buying price for a midtown or downtown loft is very expensive, starting at around \$1.5m and going up to Kushner's rumoured top price of \$50m and beyond.



The Puck Building in downtown Manhattan, where there are plans to develop six high-end penthouses, rumoured to cost between \$15m and \$50m each

With such prices, the image of the striving artist living in his or her studio seems very distant indeed. But New York's true lofts – apartments that have been converted from former commercial or manufacturing buildings, rather than those built in the loft style – are still heir to some of their original issues, such as sparseness, poor insulation and soundproofing. It seems that once you've acquired your piece of high-end real estate, there might still be problems and pitfalls you'd need to overcome.

Ilene Osherow, who moved to New York with her partner and three children from San Francisco in 2008, loves the space and the high ceilings loft living offers. "The best part about living in a loft is the openness," she says, "You get tonnes of light." But she says that "the lack of soundproofing is a drawback" and plans renovations to improve the situation.

Valerie Pasquiou has worked on numerous loft conversions and has often had to consider the practicalities of turning a former factory into a family home. "They can lack cosiness," she says, but she has come up with a solution. "It's about creating spaces within spaces. You always need a room to retreat to: a little nest."

When designing a SoHo loft for Art Basel magazine editor Sue Hostetler, Pasquiou followed just this principle. Hostetler's home office is separated on one side from the main living area by tall glass doors, and from the master bedroom on the other side by full-length curtains.

It certainly has a secluded feel to it, without feeling totally cut off. The office has a warm fibre rug and is comparatively busy with a white suede deco sofa and contemporary steel and leather armchairs. The wall space, too, is artfully cluttered with Hostetler's photo collection.

For Pasquiou, the appeal of the New York loft is still steeped in romance. "Loft living is still a romantic idea,"

she says. "The way these lofts are renovated: from just bare bones to having the most beautiful original columns and structures and exposed brickwork, they definitely have a romantic feel." The "true lofts" that Pasquiou describes have many original features that are much sought-after by enthusiasts.

Lida Drummond describes how the market views the more attractive features. "Typically people respond to the cast-iron columns, the exposed brick walls and the original wood floors. Some still have tin ceilings and wooden joists – some even like to keep the metal fire doors and incorporate these original details into their own decor."

So there still seems to be a strong bohemian ethic to designing the interiors of loft apartments. As such, the mix of new and old styles was a driving force behind Pasquiou's choice of furniture for the Hostetler loft.

Pasquiou says: "The outcome is very personal, I think, and that was something Sue and I achieved together. Some of the pieces are really mixed – we picked up the sofa from a flea market, and we integrated it with some contemporary B&B Italia chairs, a Paul Evans table and a 1940s Jean Prouvé daybed."



Partitioning with glass doors and curtains gives Hostetler's office a secluded feel without cutting it off

Pasquiou's final piece of advice for decorating a loft is simple: "Just maintain the materials – the floors, the volume and the floor space and use it with integrity – so if you walk in you have appreciation for what is there, the shell."



321A Greenwich Street is on the market for \$22.5m. Although the 18th-century internal structure was deemed beyond repair, the current owners have kept the original façade and side walls

So popular has the loft look become to New Yorkers that many of the distinguishing features are being replicated in properties around the city.

Drummond has a property on the market at 321A Greenwich Street that, though it once had a commercial past, has had drastic alterations made to accentuate its loft appearance.

Built in 1797, this former restaurant is thought to have the oldest façade in Tribeca. Though the internal structure was deemed beyond repair, the current owners have kept the 18th-century façade and side walls, and built a new six-storey structure behind it.

Wherever possible original features have been kept – the staircase has treads that are made from the pine floor joists of the original building, and the original brick walls have remained – but perhaps the most dramatic alteration is that the new structure has had part of the third floor removed to create a spectacular, loft-sized 20ft by 20ft room on the second floor.

With a floor space of approximately 9,136 sq ft, the loft-style property at Greenwich Street is on the market at \$22.5m.

When the specifications of these loft conversions are so enviable, and the rugged and romantic histories of these conversions are worn so proudly in their decor, it stands to reason that these apartments have established an interior style all of their own.