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STREET-FIND MODERNISM

THE RAW APPEAL OF LOFT LIVING





# LOFT AND FOUND

ERIC MAILAENDER HAS FOUND HIMSELF A REFUGE FROM THE NOISE AND GRIME OF HELL'S KITCHEN - HIS NEW YORK LOFT APARTMENT IS A PILLBOX-LIKE FORTRESS OCCUPYING THE NINTH FLOOR OF A FORMER SWEATSHOP, FILLED WITH FURNITURE AND OBJECTS SALVAGED FROM THE STREETS OF MANHATTAN. TEXT: CAROL PRISANT. PHOTOGRAPHY: RICARDO LABOUGLE



THE OPEN-PLAN LIVING AREA IS DOMINATED BY A WORK/DINING TABLE, SURROUNDED BY CHAIRS FOUND ON THE STREET. ERIC DESIGNED THE LIGHT, WHICH CONSISTS OF HALOGEN BULBS ENCASED WITHIN SPENT FLUORESCENT STRIP LIGHTS





TOP RIGHT AND OPPOSITE: CORRUGATED FIBREGLOSS CONCEALS STORAGE. TOP LEFT: A TONGUE-IN-CHEEK 'EXIT' SIGN IS MOUNTED ABOVE THE FRONT DOOR. MIDDLE: IN THE FAR CORNER IS A SEATING AREA (BOTTOM RIGHT), WITH A CUT-DOWN EAMES TABLE, A ROW OF SEATS FOUND OUTSIDE A LAUNDRETTE, AND A RUG WITH A PLAYBOY BUNNY PATTERN. ERIC MADE THE LIGHT FROM A GLASS INSULATOR. BOTTOM LEFT: ERIC'S DIMINUTIVE OFFICE







'THIS IS A REVOLTING neighbourhood, but it's cheap,' says Eric Mailaender.

He's right. His loft, a former sweatshop (what is it with Manhattan architect-designers and sweatshops?) lies on the borders of Hell's Kitchen, a grubby limbo of dismal delis and outdoor parking lots. It's a respectable nine floors up, but it's cold in winter, hot in summer, and still noisy all year round. In fact, when Eric found it five years ago, there wasn't even water or electricity. So, yeah, it was just what he wanted: virile, tough, and cool – the design equivalent of extreme sports. Sort of like its owner, actually, whose trendy stubble and languorous eyes make him a clean-mouthed ringer for Colin Farrell. His shiny motorcycle has a lot of mileage on it, and sort of bespeaks the sort-of décor, too, if this tidy riff on the re-use of industrial materials can strictly be called 'décor'.

As budgets go, Eric had zilch, but he had compensatory Vision. It never crossed his mind to do the usual big white box. Initially, in fact, he planned to turn his loft into a tongue-in-cheek urban suburb: one part house; one part garage; one part garden. The 'house' would be a 'living module' built in a pre-existing alcove, the 'garage' would store his bike, and the 'garden' – chaste boxes of dense green grass – would line the windowsills. As it turned out, the 'house' got built, but somehow, as Eric explains it, 'the garden never happened, and the "garage" – like all garages – hides my junk'. He spent a mere \$14,000 on the fix-up, though, (which bought him water and light) and everything else was salvage, street finds, and stuff he snagged at the Salvation Army's loading dock.

The actual living module, a self-contained area comprising a narrow kitchen, a mini-bathroom, and an enclosed bedroom with knee-high louvers, was assembled out of unpainted MDF. Materials-wise, it's the architectural equivalent of strutting down Fifth Avenue in a thong. But though MDF and underwear-outerwear are so In they're Out now, Eric was years ahead of the curve. The kitchen is pretty straightforward, and one would have to term his spartan bathroom an ur-loo, but the bedroom is what it's all about. Eric calls it a 'cracked-open box', but it's really a room with horizontal slits about 2ft up from the floor that provide not just cross-ventilation for your knees (or nose, if you're prone), but winsome shelving for bitty stuff like mobile phones and chewed-out gum. His double bed nuzzles right up to one of the inside corners, and if you're a fan of World War II films, you might think you're in some homey German pillbox. A glass insulator caps a lone lightbulb dangling over the bed (Eric collects

glass insulators to make into innovative lighting. When there's a little too much cross-ventilation, they make handy paperweights.) A really nice 18th-century engraving, the first antique Eric ever bought, usually hangs on the wall above it. Our photographer deemed it anomalous, and in an unusual styling move (for us anyhow), hung a cooler picture there.

Things that have nothing to do with sleeping, cooking or bathing – things like work – happen in the rest of the loft: an open, sun-filled space dominated by a long table. Along with everything else, it's a paragon of recycling, its surface being those galvanised steel panels that are usually used for structural underflooring, its base of MDF. The chairs around this table are fresh off New York's streets, yet when Eric dines with friends here – with all that light pouring down on them – 'It's like', he says, 'The Last Supper'. Sort of.

Religious effects aside, the really big deal here is the storage. 'Large-scale storage structures with steel frames and corrugated fibreglass doors,' Eric points out, 'keep the space sparse and clean.' In fact, the convincingly techy 'corrugated fibreglass' is actually that nasty rippled plastic we've come to love on patio/carport roofs. Mounted here with corrugations running vertically, it glides gracefully across one wall to reveal some pretty well-organised storage for a single guy. A second giant panel, its ribs horizontal, conceals even more. This general-purpose space is centrally lit by a singular light fixture of Eric's own, rather brilliant, design: its cylindrical core is illuminated by three halogen floodlights sheathed in a ribbing of 'dead' fluorescent light bulbs, and the effect (war films again) is of a snowy, transubstantial Gatling gun. Other furnishings are entirely pacific. In a 'social' corner, a groovy George Nelson 'Coconut' chair and a cut-down Eames table are parental cast-offs. A bare-bones settee has a 'great aluminum frame' and probably lived in a laundrette once. The final touch – because this, after all, is a bachelor pad – is the rug patterned in Playboy love bunnies.

Eric calls his company Resistance Design. The 'resistance' being, in archi-speak, 'the great dissonances and tensions between structure and life'. Sometimes, too, it's structure versus life: home versus sweatshop, for instance; open windows versus grit; square footage versus storage. But face it – Manhattan is one tough town. It encourages resistance. A streetwise pillbox suits it fine ■

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THIS PAGE: A VIEW FROM THE SEATING AREA – WITH ITS GEORGE NELSON 'COCONUT' CHAIR – TO THE COSY BEDROOM MODULE. OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: HORIZONTAL SLITS PROVIDE VENTILATION AND STORAGE, AS WELL AS VIEWS THROUGH TO THE FUNCTIONAL KITCHEN (TOP)