

D is for Design

by L. Catherine Hader



For sale: Four-room basement level co-op unit in early 1900s building. No electrical service. Exposed ceiling pipes.

Most buyers would have run from this “fixer-upper.”

Eric Lamar, however, saw “a marvelous opportunity to do something really cool.” Working with KUBE architects Janet Bloomberg, AIA, and Richard Loosle-Ortega, Lamar cut, polished, and unearthed a gem.

The Challenge: A Total Transformation

When Bloomberg and Loosle-Ortega first met with Lamar to discuss the project, he was living in another unit in the building—a “very traditional” apartment, they recall. Lamar was looking for a change, however, and was determined that his new home would be very urban and modern.

The architects went to work and brainstormed. Options A through D emerged, a range of choices with the edgiest, most contemporary being Option D. To the architects’ delight, Lamar chose D. “We hardly ever get to do Option D!” exclaims Bloomberg.

To understand the boldness of Option D, one must first understand what the architects found in the basement unit. Two rooms flanked either side of a central hall (*see before plan*). In one of the four rooms, double doors led to a ground-level porch at the rear of the co-op building.

Then consider the desired outcome: the living space would double as an art gallery; the porch would become an extension of the living space as well as a private entry

for the owner; and the entire space would become as open and light-filled as possible.

All of this was to occur within a budget in the range of \$200,000.

Budgets of any size necessitate choices, and choices demand creativity. Where do the available dollars deliver the greatest impact?

As this project advanced, many of the choices would be made in the selection of materials and fixtures.

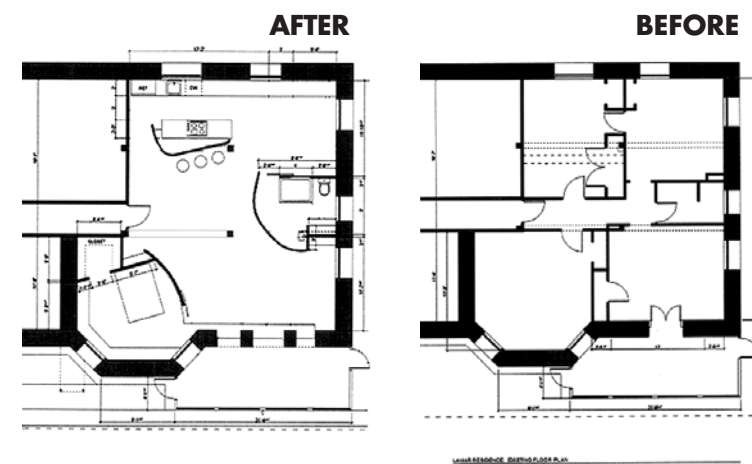
Option D: Three Curved Walls

Option D eliminated the existing interior walls. Through the addition of three curved walls, the architects carved spaces from the larger volume for a bedroom, bath, and kitchen. Stained mahogany panels slide on a curved metal track to reveal or hide the bedroom area. Across the room, a sweep of translucent plastic panels masks the bath area from the living space while admitting daylight. And in the kitchen, the curved bar/food preparation island is clad in metal mesh and capped with a zinc surface. Each of the materials was a deliberate choice to represent the activity within the space: wood represents warmth and comfort for sleeping; plastic represents water for bathing; and metal, heat for cooking.

“We designed the curved elements to feel more like furniture than walls,” says Bloomberg, and the curves do, in fact, appear as sculpture within an otherwise right-angled space.

Option D also perforated the two-foot-thick concrete wall between the living area and the porch with large openings. This stroke achieved two results: it extended the living area through the porch, and it increased daylight in the interior.

Finally, Option D created a welcoming exterior entry. (The unit has two entrances: one from the interior of the building, and the other from the parking lot through a small yard accessible only by the owner.) A handsome new gate of plank cedar and steel has replaced its chain link predecessor. Its slatted pattern echoes the jalousie windows of the enclosed porch on the floor above. Inside the gate, the former “welcome mat” of grass and brush is now a path of smooth white concrete and stones recalling a Japanese garden.



Materials, Fixtures, and Finishes

The architects built upon and complemented the in-place palette of brick walls, piping, stained concrete floors, and steel columns. They added a bamboo platform for the sleeping area and extended it as a step-down to the living area from the porch. A smooth black steel threshold marks the boundary between the porch and living area, separating the concrete flooring of the porch from the bamboo step-down.

Steel again appears in the kitchen, where it forms the backsplash for a slate countertop that runs nearly the full length of the wall. Lamar particularly liked the matte finish and dark grey of the Vermont slate and opted for this unique and more costly material over more readily available materials. In contrast, the shiny zinc on the bar was less expensive than other finishes he and his architects had considered.

Small details—such as exposed fasteners—are repeated throughout. Outdoors, they connect cedar to steel on the gate. Inside on the curved surfaces, they connect wood to its unseen frame, plastic to its visible wood framing, and metal mesh to steel structure.

Aesthetics and budget together drove the selection of materials, fixtures, and finishes. A substantial investment in lighting for the art collection meant compromise elsewhere. The plastic that shields the bath area from view, for example, originally was planned as glass. When cost became a consideration, Bloomberg brought to bear the experience of previous commercial designs and substituted a less expensive plastic. “I knew it would look good because we had used it in galleries,” she says.

“We mix commercial and residential materials,” agrees Loosle-Ortega, noting their commercial design backgrounds. As an example, “In the porch we used aluminum storefront, a system more often found in commercial design, to make it as open as possible. We found a very thin system from Canada; the aluminum framework practically disappears and all you see is the glass.”

The Realities of Renovations

Renovations can be unpredictable, particularly in older buildings where what you see is not always what you get. Such was the case of



Alan Karchner, Assoc. AIA

KUBE Architecture

this basement co-op, requiring the architects to confront the known and the unknown.

The known included exposed pipes. In the living area the pipes penetrated the space above the door, and they hung low from the ceiling. In the porch, one large pipe bisected the exterior wall. The seemingly obvious solution—cover them—was not an option, as these pipes serve the entire building and had to remain exposed for maintenance.

The solution lay in the architects' creative use of materials. Throughout the project, they had combined traditional residential materials—drywall, paint, wood—with commercial or industrial materials—concrete, metal, plastic—to achieve the contemporary urban effect their client sought. In keeping with this approach, they used the industrial appearance of the pipes as a design element within the residential format. In the living space, the pipes were replaced with thinner copper piping to improve their appearance and were raised to make them less prominent. In the porch, industrial materials turned the eyesore into an asset, camouflaging the pipe with a custom-designed perforated metal and steel surround and light.

The absence of electrical service was another known to be tackled. Beneath the original ceiling, the architects created an area to allow its insertion, in effect lowering the ceiling. This produced a secondary and welcomed effect of further minimizing the intrusion of the exposed pipes.

The unknown surfaced when the concrete wall was found to support all the floors above it. The original plan had been to remove this wall entirely to join the porch with the living area. Instead, two sections were removed, one on each side of the existing doorway. This opened the area to the maximum extent possible while maintaining the necessary structural support.

The unknown included discoveries that enhanced the design as well. The architects found two round steel columns inside square drywall enclosures, adding to the stock of industrial accents. With a coat of black paint, the first stands in the center of the large open space, and the other anchors one end of the metal kitchen bar.

Drywall also had hidden brick walls and niches. To the extent their condition allowed, these too were incorporated in the design, and the niches were selectively replicated to strengthen their contribution to the design. For example, a trio of copper ceiling pipes terminates in its own niche in the wall adjoining the door.

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Lamar Residence
Architect: KUBE Architecture PC
Contractor: Primos Contractors

Getting it Done

The design process, two to three months, was highly collaborative and, according to Bloomberg, “really fun. Eric was very open.”

“The design is the fun part,” agrees Lamar. He emphasizes that owners need to choose architects carefully; they need to be sure they can communicate with their architect because “things can get stressful in the implementation.” He is very clear that he made the right decision to retain KUBE to manage the project through construction. In this instance, construction stretched from a planned three months to five as the general contractor worked to get certain of the specialized details right.

Lamar handled the demolition portion of the construction himself. A former firefighter, Lamar “got in there with a sledgehammer,” and when it was all over, 13 tons of debris were hauled away, clearing the way for the general contractor to begin work.

This was Lamar’s first experience working with an architect. He began his search for an architect on the AIA/DC website, www.aiadc.com, by reviewing portfolios online. He identified five firms whose work mostly closely resembled what he had in mind for his space and then interviewed them by telephone. Four were subsequently invited for a site visit. He selected KUBE Architecture PC because, he says, “It was pretty clear they ‘got’ what I wanted.”

The result: Lamar got what he wanted. 🏠



Exposed pipes nest in a brick niche. These pipes serve the entire building, so they must remain accessible. KUBE turned that requirement into an industrial accent.

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