



Knife-edge ceiling planes of plaster over metal and laser-cut stainless steel help distinguish the entrance from the kitchen and dining areas.

By Suzanne Stephens

The good news was that the generously proportioned loft apartment of 3,200 square feet in New York's Tribeca district was a floor-through. On the north expanse, one sees the Empire State Building dramatically framed by two huge, arched windows; toward the south, there is a picturesque melange of rooftops. The bad news was that a ganglia of mechanical ducts and plumbing pipes clotted the central portion of the apartment, keeping daylight from filtering far into the apartment's recesses.

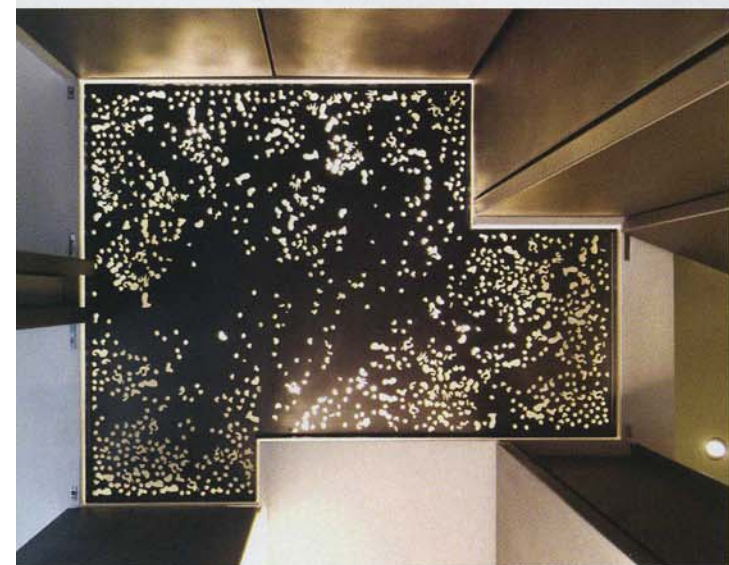
The Romanesque Revival light-industrial building, dating to 1905, was carefully but conventionally converted to residential use in 1999. In this particular apartment, the living and dining areas, separated only by a row of cast-iron columns that support the concrete barrel-vaulted ceiling, were segregated from the three bedrooms along the south wall by the dense, dark central core.

The clients encountered Dean/Wolf Architects' work on a tour of Tribeca lofts, and recognized its skill in combating New York's typically shadowy, crepuscular interiors. They soon enlisted the firm, founded in 1991 by Kathryn Dean and Charles Wolf, to bring a Modernist approach to the complex space.

The two architects differentiated the wall planes so that ver-

Dean/Wolf Architects devises ways to bring light into the core of a floor-through apartment in New York City called the **VIRTUAL LIGHT LOFT**





The laser-cut stainless-steel canopies over the entrance (top left) and the children's quarters (bottom left) signify

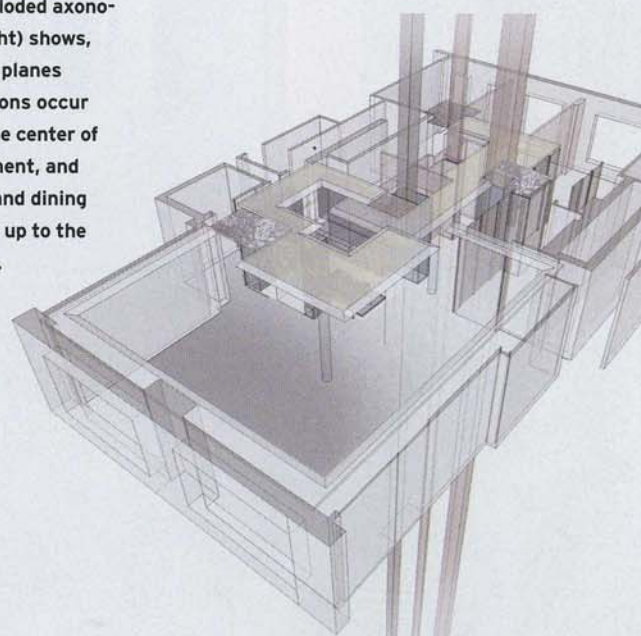
bounces against the stainless-steel-paneled wall (below), while cove lighting emphasizes the sculptural quality of the original barrel-vaulted concrete ceiling.

tical surfaces parallel to the east and west bearing walls are opaque, shimmering, stainless-steel panels. They fabricated the panels as folded doors to endow them with structural properties and obviate the need for wood frames. Next, they had the stainless-steel panels sandblasted by hand for a smooth, but not super-reflective sheen. Perpendicular to the existing bearing walls, smooth, translucent, laminated-resin planes conceal such elements as closets or shafts containing ducts. The laminated-resin panels vary subtly in color; one embedded with a copper and gray textile gleams with a particularly gossamery shine.

Now light bounces softly off the various surfaces or emanates ethereally from within shafts of laminated resin containing fixtures. Dean and Wolf were able to dematerialize the "supportive entrails," as they describe the mechanical and plumbing elements that cluster at either side of the central hall. "We wanted to turn these shafts into "haunting luminous presences," Dean says.

Besides the attention Dean/Wolf gave to the vertical surfaces in the loft, the firm focused on the often-neglected ceiling. Here the architects created a series of layered planes that spatially define areas of the loft and at the same time increase the opportunities for bounced and filtered light from above. The most unusual strategy was the firm's

As the exploded axonometric (right) shows, the ceiling planes and partitions occur in the dense center of the apartment, and the living and dining areas open up to the north view.



The architects hid plumbing pipes and mechanical ducts behind smooth, shimmering planes of translucent resin and stainless steel (below).





The central hall (above) leads past the kitchen to the powder room and deeper into the recesses of the apartment's bedroom area. The children's bedrooms (near right) and the master bath (far right) receive definition by the dappled light filtering through the laser-cut stainless-steel ceiling panels.

1. Entrance
2. Dining area
3. Living area
4. Kitchen
5. Master bedroom
6. Bedroom





Translucent panels of slightly different hues separate the bedroom (below) from the closet and add to the feeling of calm ethereality throughout the apartment.

design of five laser-cut steel ceiling panels simulating the dappled light of a tree canopy, where openings are filled with poured resin and backlit by fluorescent tubes. (The dimmable lights can be changed by unhinging one edge of the panel, although perhaps this is not as fast and easy as screwing in a lightbulb.) Elsewhere, Dean/Wolf suspended ceilings of knife-edge metal panels surfaced in plaster over certain areas. The floating, layered effect, punctuated by concealed light sources, gives areas such as the entrance and kitchen more intimacy of scale. In this ethereal *mise-en-scène*, floor surfaces function as the backdrop: In some places, they are concrete; in others, walnut planks take over.

The clarity and concision of the whole approach applies to the living spaces, bedrooms, and baths. New York-based interior designer Vicente Wolf (no relation to Charles Wolf) provided appropriately lush, Modern furnishings for the ensemble, adhering to a muted palette of colors and punctuating the spaces with an occasional grandly scaled, framed mirror.

In the Virtual Light Loft, as it is dubbed, softly glowing, evanescent, disembodied planes now dominate the central hall. But they do more than define the various precincts. The cool, almost color-free environment heightens the sense of serenity. The interior offers a

refuge from the noisy, gritty 21st-century city by virtue of its own *luxe, calme, et volupté*, to borrow the words of Baudelaire, writing during the frenzied growth of Paris in the 19th century, to describe a utopian place of ease, order, and sensual delight. This particular sense of luxury, calm, and pleasure has been present in much of Dean/Wolf's residential work [RECORD, January 2004, page 164; September 2002, page 147], but here the sophistication of the technically manipulated materials and various forms of illumination adds yet another dimension. ■

Project: *Virtual Light Loft, New York City*

Architect: *Dean/Wolf Architects—Kathryn Dean, Charles Wolf, partners in charge; Jenny Shoukimas, Gabriel Bach, ceiling pattern*

Interior designer: *Vicente Wolf*

Lighting: *Coonley Monaco*

Acoustical: *Audio by James*

General contractor: *VCD Construction*

SOURCES

Resin panel embedded with textiles: *3Form*

Laminated acrylic resin panels: *LightBlocks*

Paints: *Benjamin Moore*

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