

HOME



ROOM TO ROOM: The clean lines of classically modern style define the Le Parc living room of Richard and Nona Horowitz; the neutral palette defers to the couple's art collection. The room's structural changes included recessed lighting and an enhanced entryway to the master suite, back left. RINGO H.W. CHIU For The Times

DESIGN

Deconstructing the cube

Tired of feeling caged in uninspired '70s condos, owners are reinventing their spaces by breaking down barriers to create free-flowing, light-filled luxurious quarters.

By JANET EASTMAN
Times Staff Writer

RUMORS circulated all over a Century City complex that a third-floor condominium had broken ranks with the other boxy, late-1970s units. It had somehow gone grand. Even the ceilings — how could this be? — had been dramatically lifted.

Herman and Sofia Weitz, Le Parc residents since it opened, had simply had enough of being cooped up in their condo. They wanted a feeling of spaciousness. Height. Well-lit rooms. Walk-in closets. A master bath that wasn't broken up by a maze of walls. But given the confines of outer walls and homeowners association rules, they hadn't a clue how to pull it off.

So they gave the job to their designer and contractor with these instructions: Do whatever is needed to transform this drab little cube into an expansive penthouse. Make the floor plan flow.

That was four years ago. Since then, about 20 other residents have gone through the disruption of condo conversion, pulling out plumbing, opening up walls — in fact, copying the Weitzes' floor plan.

This comes as no surprise to real estate experts. "It's hard to find new construction, and everybody has become Princess Grace of Monaco," says Los Angeles real estate agent Sally Eminoff. "No one wants to live in something that's old, tired and helplessly hopeless."

It's expensive for Le Parc owners to remodel: from \$300,000 to \$500,000. Comparing the price per square foot, that's as much as new construction on the Westside. Part of that cost is hiring professionals who'll work on a tight schedule and using luxurious materials.



Drake General Contractor

BEFORE: The Horowitzes' function-first '70s kitchen was a testament to prefab, and its 8-foot ceiling and boxed fluorescents were uninspiring.

But there are plenty of ideas here for people who want to spend much less.

The first lesson is that the project isn't easy to manage. Working in multi-storied condominium buildings is like a platoon doing field drills in a pup tent — there's too much to do in too little space.

Making the process even more complicated are the restrictions placed on crews by homeowners associations.

At Le Parc, only five trucks are allowed inside at a time, so when an army of construction workers has to be at the site, they carpool into the gated complex. Burly guys with tool belts crowd the building's only elevator with 2-by-4s in the morning and, at the end of the day, they haul down trash cans full of debris.

If the work isn't finished according to a schedule set by the association, homeowners forfeit a \$10,000 deposit and are fined \$500 a day for up to 10 days. After

that, the guards won't let the crew in.

Some complexes won't allow extensive renovations. Owners don't want to endure the dust, noise and construction traffic. Other homeowners associations will approve plans only if a structural engineer ensures that the changes won't compromise the other units or affect the property's aesthetic.

The Le Parc complex consists of 15 three-story buildings. A typical 2,650-square-foot unit sells for \$1.8 million because of its location, near Pico Boulevard and Avenue of the Stars, and its setting on 15 acres of gardens and ponds.

Keeping residents happy means keeping construction in check.

"If this were a house, we would have had eight months to do a job and that would include weekends," says contractor Gary Drake, who has structurally changed a dozen units in the complex.



WELDON BREWSTER

AFTER: The ceiling, raised 2 feet, lends a spacious air, one illuminated by recessed and task lighting. Marble-topped mahogany cabinets add elegance.

"We have to do it in six months and that," he says with an exhale, "includes spending a lot of time answering questions from curious neighbors."

There was a lot to do at the Weitzes' home. Interior designer Jeffrey Hitchcock's plan to raise the ceilings to 12 feet and doors to 8 feet, meant pulling out the dropped ceiling and compressing the heating, air-conditioning and electrical ducts hiding there.

In the kitchen, a sculpted soffit with recessed lights replaced the plexiglass-covered fluorescent lighting. Workers cut double doors into living room walls for passage to the dining room and the master suite, and they converted a second bedroom into a den with a wide pocket door.

The crew closed off one end of a hallway and converted it to a walk-in closet and a wet bar with an arched ceiling above. To comply with Le Parc's rules,

soundproofing was added to buffer the noise from hardwood and stone floors no longer covered with carpeting.

The old master bathroom, which was compartmentalized into sections for the double sinks, tub and shower, "was so tight it gave you the feeling as if you couldn't move," says the Weitzes' daughter, Doris, who oversaw the project. "Now it is fabulous."

Overall, what was once "a place that looked like a second-class apartment with a little door here and a little door there" is now a sophisticated home, says Doris Weitz, whose own condo nearby was also remodeled this way.

"The condo is like a luxurious house," says Beth Spivak, an interior designer who worked on the second-floor Le Parc condo of Richard and Nona Horowitz.

Although neighbors in one of the complex's buildings now share some of the same breezy new features, their condos don't look cookie-cutter.

The Weitzes' home is like a gilded Paris apartment with embedded columns, crystal chandeliers and silk-upholstered furniture. Below, the Horowitzes' is classically modern with simple architectural lines, recessed lighting and lacquered tables. And Andrew Roth's bachelor pad, which sits on the ground floor, is spartan with commercial-style glass doors, track lighting and armless sofas.

Roth really tested the plan's versatility. His place is smaller than the others', but he made the most of it by keeping wall treatments and furnishings to a minimum. Drake, the contractor, was his interior designer.

"I went there to do the kitchen and new flooring but then he got the bug," Drake says. "We ended up redoing his whole place. It's very modern, very expensive and very complicated, because mistakes can't be hidden. My superintendent had to be replaced on this job. He had a melt-down because he couldn't handle the stress."