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The Cheap Fix

By *ALEXANDRA LANGE*

After three years as the editor in chief of *Dwell*, a shelter magazine based in San Francisco, Karrie Jacobs had had enough. Homesick for New York and frustrated with the editorial direction of the magazine she had helped to launch, she decided it was time to make a new life for herself. For Ms. Jacobs, that meant finding a place that felt like home. In her post-*Dwell* career as a freelance writer she did not have the deep pockets of her subjects. But as an architecture critic she could not buy just any old house.

Her book, "The Perfect \$100,000 House," published last week by Viking, chronicles her 14,000-mile road trip in the summer of 2003, the year after she left the magazine, in search of an architect who could deliver the stylish, custom-made house of her dreams for what she considered a reasonable price: \$100 a square foot. That figure was more a rough estimate based on instinct than a reality based on hard numbers. (Last year the median size of a new American home, according to the Census Bureau, was 2,200 square feet, and the median single-family house price, according to the National Association of Realtors, was \$219,000. Although no one with a passion for numbers would decide that the median home thus cost \$100 a square foot, that number sufficed to make her point when it came to writing the book.)

Her must-haves differed slightly from those of the average American. "Most houses offer an abundance of square footage, which I don't especially need," she said. At 1,000 square feet, she calculated, her house should cost only \$100,000 and be big enough for a single woman.

She found options worthy of serious consideration in a handful of cities, including Crestone, Colo.; Perryville, Mo.; and Troy, N.Y., but not in design centers like Manhattan and San Francisco. To even look at New York, where she had lived for most of her adult life, "seemed tragically pointless," she said. Tell a New York City architect you are seeking the local equivalent of the perfect \$100,000 house and you will receive one universal response (after a snort of laughter): "You mean the perfect million-dollar house?" Even after ignoring the

price of land, as Ms. Jacobs did to get around some of the regional differences in the real estate market (although the national figure she used as a benchmark did include the price of land), building in New York costs more than almost anywhere else in the country because of higher labor and material costs.

So what is the least one can hope to pay for the New York equivalent of building a modern house — gut renovating the interior of a town house, building out a raw loft, transforming a commercial space into a home? In a search that excluded the price of real estate and instead focused, as Ms. Jacobs’s book did, on finding spaces that could be made modern, stylish and filled with light despite a low renovation budget, six encouraging examples emerged. These are places so nice that you would never know their owners spent a fraction of the average renovation cost in the New York metropolitan area, a figure that is now about \$250 a square foot, according to local contractors interviewed for this article. Places so nice that the architects were hesitant to talk about them. (“I have colleagues who have quoted numbers like that,” said Reuben Jorsling of Face Design, based in Brooklyn. “People call and basically want a house for free.”)

As for Ms. Jacobs, she continues to search for her dream house. “One of the things I learned while doing Dwell was that my roots count for something,” she said. And that meant New York, where she had lived for 16 years and which still felt like home. “I have the perfect \$225,000 studio,” she said, in downtown Brooklyn. It is 550 square feet.



\$100 a square foot

Without the deep pockets of some of their neighbors, Andrew Barrett, a director in Citigroup’s investment research department, and his wife, Dana, a winemaker for Kendall-Jackson Wine Estates, still got a picture-perfect TriBeCa North condo: open floor plan, paneled bamboo walls, custom kitchen, even programmable L.E.D. lightboxes around the rooms. The Barretts live at the Greenwich Street Project, a glass-front

condominium where the units are sold as basic white boxes with minimal bathrooms and kitchens. On the recommendation of their broker, they hired Eric Liftin of MESH Architectures, who has made something of a specialty of the low-cost, high-style loft.

According to Mr. Liftin, the important thing was keeping décor simple. The wall that divides the master bed and bath from the public area was built out of Teragren bamboo plywood, which was also used for the kitchen cabinets; it costs \$250 a panel, is sustainable and has an edge that can be exposed without further treatment. Mr. Barrett bought their high-end (Sub-Zero, Miele) appliances himself from a store in northern New Jersey rather than a Manhattan showroom. Because they weren't picky about getting the latest model cooktop and wall oven, he shaved thousands off the \$15,000 they had budgeted.

Each chose a few nonnegotiable items at the outset. Mrs. Barrett insisted on a wine fridge. Mr. Barrett fell in love with Mr. Liftin's lightboxes. They added \$5,000 to the cost, but "small extravagances," Mr. Liftin said, "make the whole feel more luxurious."