

THE REAL DEAL

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From the Archives: Inside the home of Barbara Fox

High-end broker Barbara Fox makes room for pets, musical instruments and modern art

The doormen are dressed in liveried dark gray suits, and the elevator walls consist of antique wooden panels. However, most of the typical features of an Upper East Side prewar building end at the door to Barbara Fox's penthouse.

Fox, the founder and president of the high-end boutique brokerage firm Fox Residential Group, and her husband, James Freund, a retired attorney and former partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, bought the two-bedroom penthouse, which is just under 2,000 square feet, three years ago when they were looking to downsize from a 6,500-square-foot historic townhouse on the Upper West Side.

Fox, a North Carolina native who still has traces of a Southern accent, started her firm in 1989 with only five brokers, targeting high-end properties on the Upper East and Upper West Side.

She now has a staff of more than 40 brokers, and the firm has a strong foothold throughout Manhattan, with sales to celebrity clients like legendary newsman Walter Cronkite and actor Robert Redford to boot. A veteran broker, Fox worked at several firms before starting her company, including Stribling & Associates and Cross & Brown, where in the 1980s she created a 60-broker residential division. And she has managed to excel by staying ahead of the market, most recently by launching a new international division headed by four of the firm's multilingual brokers.



She and her husband moved into their current apartment after a gut renovation that included demolishing interior walls and punching out exterior walls so that they could install large picture windows in every room. To the left of the entranceway is a large open living area. To the right is a door that leads to the private living quarters and master bedroom.

Adjacent to the bedroom is a short open passageway lined with built-in cabinets that leads to Freund's study, which has an electronic piano he sometimes plays late at night. A long galley kitchen with a striking greenish-yellow countertop sits off the living room — Fox says that she doesn't like to waste space on kitchens.

Fox notes that here on the Upper East Side, she would have a hard time getting by many stringent co-op boards. "There are probably not 10 buildings on the Upper East Side that would allow six animals, which I had at the time," says Fox, a petite redhead whose casually elegant outfit consists of black suede loafers, black pants and a green turtleneck with a double-breasted olive-colored blazer.

“They either don’t allow pets at all, or they don’t allow pets over 15 pounds,” she adds, as a small, white terrier mongrel barks in the background. “But one of the real benefits of this building [a co-op] is that it is very pet-friendly.”

Perhaps the most significant feature of the apartment on East 79th Street is the wraparound terrace, which serves as a run for the dogs and a breakfast spot for their owners. “The only prerequisite was outdoor space,” says Fox of her apartment, which is on the corner of Third Avenue.

Fox did away with the elevator foyer, which she bought from the building, so that the elevator now opens directly into the apartment. “We did not have an elevator [previously], and there comes a time when it gets harder and harder to get up and down the stairs,” says Fox, who just returned from a ski trip in Colorado but will not divulge her age. “Even though we are both very athletic, we thought that it was probably a good time to move.”

Fox has a youthful demeanor, and many of the objects in her home are connected to the couple’s active life and wide-ranging interests. In the living room, there is a large stand-up vibraphone, a piano and a small box of assorted instruments. “When we have a party and people are here, everyone is playing an instrument,” Fox says. “It is very noisy.”

The couple also has a striking variety of art. Several works are haunting, Edward Hopper-like paintings. There are also a half-dozen neo-realist paintings by several Chinese artists, whom Fox became familiar with during a visit to Hong Kong. Fox and her husband also have their own art displayed. Photographs from his book, “Central Park: A Photographic Excursion,” adorn one wall. And in the den/dining room, there is a small abstract stone sculpture that she made. “It is very cathartic to do sculpture,” she says. “You get all of your hostility out by just beating on a stone.”

The Upper West Side townhouse where Fox and her husband lived for 21 years after they were married had a conventional layout and was furnished with antiques and traditional furniture. But Fox says she wanted to make a change. “The townhouse was very traditional, but here we went in an entirely different direction. We created a Downtown loft uptown,” she says.

Rather than doors compartmentalizing the space, most of the rooms flow into each other. Fox says she had originally intended to move Downtown but decided it was too far from her Madison Avenue office.

In addition to redoing the layout, Fox went through a complete domestic makeover with the help of her sister, Marjorie Hilton, a Manhattan interior designer. Most of the furniture from the townhouse did not get moved into the apartment. Fox either got rid of it or sent it to her 200-year-old country house in Connecticut.

On 79th Street, sleek modern sofas and chairs in dark colors punctuate the décor. Each piece has a unique feature, such as the leather couch with a purple hue and the custom-made round wooden table that comes with an expansion leaf to seat 12.

Interspersed with the larger streamlined pieces is an eclectic assortment of smaller items, such as a nicked church pew in the bedroom, a freestanding mid-century modern fire screen and a couple of wooden end tables with sculptural elephant bases. There are also seven plush animal beds scattered throughout the unit. Two of the dogs are rescues from Woof Dog Rescue, an organization Fox founded.

Although Fox has a strong aesthetic sensibility, she says she does not try to impose her design ideas on her clients.

“It is interesting because I can walk into an apartment house now, and I know exactly what I would do with it,” she says. “But I have to be careful, because a lot of people either don’t like, or have, my taste.”

The redesign and the furnishings added substantially to the value of the new apartment, Fox says. However, she adds that the additional expenses were worth it because they plan to live there for the rest of their lives.

“If we were to buy it today, I probably would not get the money out of it that I put into it,” she says.

“It has been a mindset that people have come to accept that if they buy something, it should enhance in value. I sell things to people, and they call me three or six months later and ask me, ‘How much is it worth now?’ And I will say, ‘It is worth how much you paid for it — it doesn’t enhance that quickly.’

“And things can always go down, but we don’t discuss that. You do it because you want to live there.”