

HOUSE PROUD: A MONTANA CABIN IN THE HEART OF MANHATTAN

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Cabin in the Sky

A slice of Montana in Manhattan.

BY JUDITH NASATIR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHUCK CHOI

YOU'VE GOT THAT PIONEER SPIRIT, but you are living in the wild, wild East. Can you still assuage your inner frontiersman? Stake a claim to a piece of unsettled territory? Sure. But if you are a filmmaker with an idiosyncratic point of view and a well-developed sense of privacy, you might not head for Jackson Hole or Aspen, like so many other celebs. You might, instead, try urban homesteading—in Big Skyscraper Country.

While a one-room log cabin on the roof of a Manhattan brownstone may not be the idealized vision of most city slickers, it happens to suit this couple's personal brand of irony.

As New York designer Abigail Shachat says, "He wanted to be able to say that he's going up to the cabin for the weekend—and just be going upstairs." He also loves the Old West and the independent spirit that it signifies. His wife, who is from Tennessee, had once promised her grandfather that she would have a cabin one day.

When Shachat's clients thought up this little lagniappe on the roof—which cannot be seen from the street four stories below, and which feels sufficiently exposed to sky and air to qualify for outpost status—they were expecting their first child. The couple wanted



Perched atop a filmmaker's Manhattan brownstone is an old-fashioned Western cabin, complete with old pine floors and a cowboy scone.



Contractor/cabinetmaker Ron Attinello created the bedstead and armoire. Quilts, rug and nightstand from Paula Rubenstein Antiques, SoHo.

to expand their modest two-bedroom apartment one floor below; also, he wanted space in which to write, sleep and, of course, dream. Neither the client (whose movies are celebrated as much for their eccentric, stylized sets as for their clever plots) nor his wife asked Shachat for much in the way of specifics, except for a crescent moon cut out of the bathroom door and a wood-burning

stove. They also showed her a sketch of a bedstead that had a bronco branded with the filmmaker's initials.

For Shachat, the project was both a little bit of heaven and a little bit of hell. Like all designers, Shachat welcomed the opportunity to explore a specific architectural genre unfettered by too many dictates. "My clients," she said, "were after something more primitive and old-fashioned,

like Abe Lincoln's cabin or even the one on Log Cabin syrup." With those parameters in mind, she went panning for ideas in books and documentaries.

The Big Apple being the urban jungle that it is, the one-room structure that should have been a breeze turned into a project that called on the can-do spirit and the survival skills of all its participants. The city's numerous zoning laws created conditions that could easily have ended in the design equivalent of the Donner Party, but for some good luck and smart moves by Shachat. The Cranbrook-educated designer pulled together a posse of experts, including Hannibal Galin, an independent expediter (in New York, you need a trailblazer to find your way through the maze of city permits and codes), and Ron Attinello, a Montauk-based contractor who is also a gifted cabinet-maker (he did much of the interior work by hand) and the clients' friend.



The 280-square-foot (400, if you include the front porch) log-cabin-that-isn't consists of a steel beam foundation with concrete block walls faced on the exterior with stucco and artificial stone veneer. It is reached by an existing stairway to the roof, and Shachat incorporated the small landing into the bedroom. Inside, the space is lined with hemlock log facings, factory-milled but with the bark stripped by hand; in fact, these pseudo-Lincoln Logs are the parts of the log that are commonly discarded during the mill-

ing process. Doors, window trim, rafters and floors are made of old pine, chestnut and oak recycled from barns in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The roof, says Shachat, is copper: "We used a little less insulation in it so that the clients could hear raindrops."

Everything in this project, Shachat notes, was selected either for practicality, which dictated nixing the woodstove, or for authenticity. Clever and quirky details abound,



Designer Abigail Shachat added period details, including a crescent moon on the bathroom door; inside is a Waterworks claw-foot tub.



With its copper roof, double chimneys and hand-carved porch furniture, the cabin is an idyllic rural retreat in the heart of Manhattan.

from fine antique quilts, rugs and paintings, cowboy sconces and posters of country-and-western and bluegrass performers, to the porch plantings and hand-carved furniture and picket fence. Windows on all four sides function like a sundial, explains the designer—the window over the bed faces east, so that sun hits the wall opposite the bed in the morning. The biggest windows face south, and so on. Multicolored Chinese slate lines the bathroom walls like the inside of a gorge; a white porcelain tub on claw feet with nickel fittings adds a period feel. But, says Shachat,

“When you soak, you can see the Chrysler Building.” The sketch of the bed has materialized, as has the crescent moon in the bathroom door.

Since their retreat was completed, the couple has bought, gutted and renovated the rest of the brownstone. Although it is not cabin style, it, too, is independent in spirit, with a fire pole running from top to bottom. Yippee ki yi yea! ☐

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