

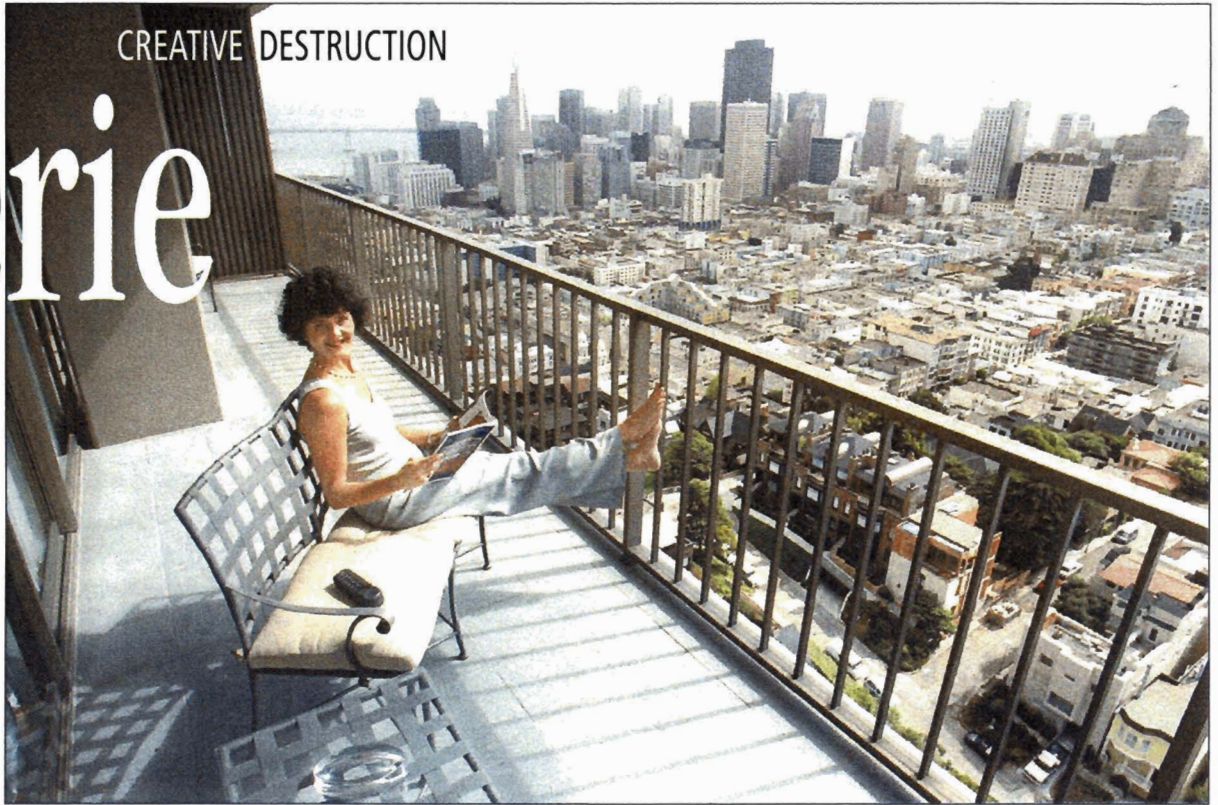
As seen in the

# San Francisco Examiner

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## Aerie for one

CREATIVE DESTRUCTION



Betty Brachman takes advantage of San Francisco's stunning city views from the balcony of her remodeled Russian Hill condo.

## Revamped Russian Hill condo combines openness of a loft and privacy of a spa suite

By Rachel F. Elson  
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

**B**ETTY BRACHMAN'S remodeling binder tells the whole story.

Ponderous and bulging at the sides, it holds magazine clips and idea-provoking photos, scraps of fabric and paint swatches, phone numbers and floor plans. It has tabs for rooms (guest room, office) and for pages for her contractors (painter, cabinet maker).

Brachman, a Pacific Union real estate agent and 30-year San Francisco resident, said she has bought and renovated four or five

other homes over the years. And each time she remodels a home, she uses her binder as a bible. So when she found her current home—a condominium in a Russian Hill high-rise built by modernist postwar developer Joseph Eichler—she pulled out another binder and started snipping pages again.

Her 1,800-square-foot apartment came with a spectacular view and a price tag just under \$1 million. Although the three-bedroom, three-bath unit would have afforded a small family with plenty of privacy, Brachman—who is single and lives alone—needed to find a way to open up the apartment.

She broke down walls, converted four-walled rooms to designated “spaces,” expanded doorways and divided the unit into two distinct suites: one public, the other private.

In the end, Brachman's binder tells the story of an “aerie-for-one”—a home that allows entertaining and meditation, that combines the open plan of a loft with the privacy of a spa suite.

The challenge that Brachman faced is not unusual in San Francisco. While Eichler was notorious for favoring public space at the expense of private—his stand-alone homes tend to have spacious, open



## Space and privacy on Russian Hill, Continued

living and dining rooms and tiny bedrooms—many of The City's Victorian flats and cottages also offer long hallways and multiple rooms. And much of the space winds up underutilized, as San Francisco's population of young singles and empty-nesters just fill the odd spaces with office nooks, workout crannies and guest alcoves.

Brachman's apartment originally opened into a long, narrow

hall, with the living room at the far end; to the left a door led down another short hall to the master bedroom, while two doors on the right led to a small guest bedroom and an even smaller galley kitchen. The dining area was on the far side of the kitchen, open to the living room and sitting alongside a long wall of windows, but boxed in by walls on its other two sides.

When Brachman found the unit on the market last year, it had been

a rental property – to the same tenant – for 17 years. Consequently, it hadn't gotten the upgrades an owner-occupied property in a landmark building might otherwise have received: Heavy drapes disguised the drama of the view, for example, and the small, dark rooms further discouraged potential buyers.

She tried to pass it along to her own clients, but when none of them bit, she began to consider buying it for herself.

"I made an offer," she added. "Then I realized I needed to figure out what to do with the place."

### From "rooms" to regions

Because Brachman lives alone, she didn't need "rooms":

"I wanted to be able to live in all the space," she said. "I have a home office, but I like to separate my work life from my home life."

What she did need was a way to let the whole unit take advantage of the light and views. Among the unit's drawbacks originally were the presence of old asbestos insulation and a fixed (and limited) plumbing infrastructure that made it nearly impossible to play an ambitious game of musical rooms. To seal off the asbestos and allow for concealed stereo wires and track lighting, Brachman had to drop three inches from the ceiling, which was 8 feet, 4 inches high. The reduction threatened to make the passageways feel even more claustrophobic. To compensate, she expanded most of the remaining internal 6-foot-3-inch doorways to 8 feet high with gleaming cherry doors.

Off the main hallway, a set of double doors open onto the master suite – which incorporates the other two original bedrooms and two bathrooms.

By ripping out the closet in the smaller of the two bedrooms, Brachman was able to widen the suite's central corridor. The smaller



*Brachman knocked out walls to open up the apartment. Now she can move freely from her den – which used to be a bedroom – to the dining and living rooms.*



room now serves as an office and yoga room, although a curvy futon chair will let her put an extra guest up in a pinch.

In the two baths, as in the guest bath, Brachman kept the original marble countertops and basins – the only finishes that remain from the apartment's original appearance – and had Glen Ellen woodworker Johannes Van Mourik design cabinets that fit below.

In a dressing area in her bedroom, the marble vanity sits on top of a wide console that includes a hair-dryer drawer perched in front of an electric outlet in the rear wall. ("I get these ideas from my clients," she said.)

## Armoire solves plumbing problem

In the "public" half of the apartment—comprising living room, dining room, kitchen, guest room and guest bath—Brachman removed the walls separating the guest room from the dining room and took out the guest bedroom's closet. The space still functions as guest sleeping quarters, she pointed out, but it now gets light from the windows facing the adjoining dining area.



**Betty Brachman's** most pressing plumbing problem – where to put the washer and dryer – was solved with a giant Spanish armoire, above. The other side contains the TV and stereo.

She also used the guest area to get around the biggest plumbing challenge: installation of a washer and dryer.

Because the only drains large enough to accommodate the new appliances were in the rear-mounted toilets, the washer and drier had to be located adjacent to a bathroom, and raised enough to flow into the elevated drain.

As a result, an enormous Mexican-style armoire stands at the cor-

ner of the guest area: The door on the right reveals an ordinary entertainment center, with a television set facing the pull-out bed, but the door on the left conceals a vertical washer/dryer set.

The rest of the public space also got a face lift. In the tiny kitchen, Brachman worked with Van Mourik to design cabinets and counters that maximize the available space. Countertop appliance garages wrap around toaster and food processor; a stainless steel backsplash brightens the space by reflecting the limited light; a 3-foot pull-out cutting board removes for cleaning, and matching bird's-eye maple cabinet faces conceal the refrigerator and dishwasher. (The only cabinet that's not concealed, in fact, is an under-counter wine cellar—an afterthought, Brachman admitted, after she realized that the floor-based radiant heating system was going to ruin any wine she stashed in her cabinets.)

In all, last year's renovation took three months, and cost between \$150,000 and \$170,000. But while the cosmetic changes are the ones most visible, both in her binder and in the apartment, it's the adjusted flow of the apartment – and in



**A built-in vanity** flush against a finished concrete wall adds an elegant touch.



## Space and privacy on Russian Hill, Continued



**The galley kitchen in Betty Brachman's Green Street condo is still tiny but lighter and less cluttered after the remodel. Design touches such as countertop appliance garages and a pull-out cutting board make the cooking area a model of efficiency.**

particular, the division of living spaces – that makes it so neatly accommodate Brachman's lifestyle.

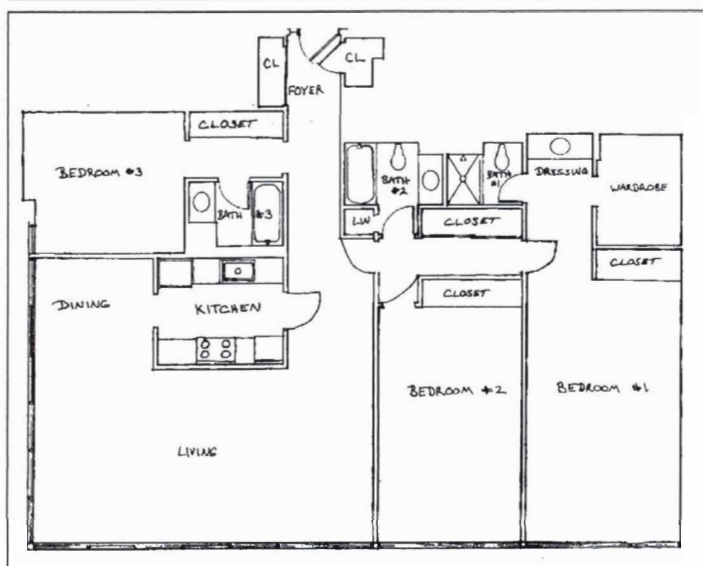
The wide doors allow open flow of light and traffic when open, for instance, but let her shut off her bedroom or kitchen while

entertaining. The sealed-off master suite lets her give early-rising house guests the run of the kitchen and living room; the location of her office inside the "private" space allows her to keep it spare and functional.

"I like to entertain," Brachman said. "I'm not home much—I work a lot, travel a lot—I wanted something that would be easy to live in."

*Rachel F. Elson is a Bay Area real estate writer. Photos by Penni Gladstone, staff photographer.*

**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

