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Up in the Attic, New Millennium Style



Above and Beyond The Angelovich family spent \$500,000 to turn an attic in their Austin, Tex., home into a space for their children. Aidan and Arielle, above.

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN Published: March 29, 2007

WHEN Elizabeth and Mordechai Kubany bought their house in Maplewood, N.J., eight years ago, its attic was dark and forbidding. "It was just a storage space," Ms. Kubany said, "but it had the ceiling of a cathedral. You could sense that the potential was enormous."

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Found Space The Angeloviches saw potential in their large attic, which now includes a bedroom for their son, Aidan, and a common area with acrylic storage niches and hardwood walls and stairs that visitors liken to "a very nice yacht."

Now that space is a light-filled, 45-foot-long master bedroom suite with a glass-enclosed shower big enough for a family — a space more suggestive of a New York City loft than the attic of a stately brick house not far from the Garden State Parkway.

"You move to the suburbs mostly for your kids," said Ms. Kubany, the mother of Lily, 4, and Benjamin, 7, who lived with her husband in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, before the children were born. The attic, recently renovated by Markus Dochantschi, a New York architect, is "a little bit of rebellion against the suburban aesthetic," she said.

Though attic renovations are nothing new, until recently they tended to involve hiding pipes, rafters and ductwork with Sheetrock or knotty-pine paneling, and learning to love the awkward spaces that were left.

But that was before architecture stars like Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Frank Gehry popularized an aesthetic that involves translucent surfaces and jutting angles. For homeowners who like that look, the attic can be an ideal place to create architectural drama.

The Kubanys' Maplewood house has four bedrooms, all on the second floor and all in the old-fashioned style of the 1934 house. But the attic, a raw space isolated from the rest of the house, offered a chance to try something different.

"Connecting it to the rest of the house through the architectural vocabulary didn't seem crucial with the attic," said Ms. Kubany, a public relations consultant for architects.

Mr. Dochantschi, the principal of the small firm studioMDA, agreed. And having spent seven years working for Ms. Hadid, he was primed to think of the structural oddities of an attic, particularly the angles formed by the roof, as elements to make the most of. "The thing that can work against you can also work for you," he said.

Taking advantage of the space's openness — the attic is the one floor of the house that isn't interrupted by load-bearing walls — he rebuilt it as a single large room with a bed at one end and a bathroom at the other.

New oak floorboards run the 45-foot length of the room, accentuating its sweep, along with a row of relatively shallow cabinets, which take the place of more intrusive closets. A large glass shower stall, backed by a wall of brown marble, juts into the center.

The Kubanys would not reveal the cost of their renovation, except to say that it was little more than the cost of a large bathroom renovation, and "a tiny fraction" of what Mike Angelovich spent to transform his attic in Austin, Tex. That project cost \$500,000, said Mr. Angelovich, a trial lawyer, and gave his family an additional 1,000 square feet of living space.

Mr. Angelovich saw the renovation as a way to make the most of a less-than-perfect house. He had always wanted to live on Lake Austin, he said, where waterfront houses, which are close to the city center, cost \$2 million and up.

"In this location, you don't always get the home you want," he said. "You look for the lot you want, and do what you can with it."

So when he found a house with 180 feet of lake frontage, Mr. Angelovich bought it, even though its vaguely colonial, 1980s architecture didn't appeal to him. He thought of tearing down the house and starting over. But that was before he saw the potential of the attic, which contained two tiny bedrooms and more than 1,000 square feet of raw storage space.

Unlike the Kubanys, who turned their attic into an adult playground, Mr. Angelovich and his wife decided to cede theirs to their daughter, Arielle, 17, and son, Aidan, 11.

After seeing a project by Calvin Chen and Thomas Bercy, the principals of the Bercy Chen Studio in Austin, in a magazine, he hired them to create a kind of children's domain. Two bedrooms, both of which open onto a new roof deck, are just the beginning.

Next to Aidan's bedroom is a playroom, "a place for him to get rambunctious with his friends," Mr. Angelovich said. The room includes a climbing wall, rising about 12 feet to the peak of the house. A secret passage from the playroom leads to the bunk bed in Aidan's bedroom.

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(Page 2 of 2)

At the other end of the attic is Arielle's hideaway, an ellipse with a curved banquette set into a wall covered in a 360-degree photograph of Yosemite National Park. One section of the mural conceals a pair of touch-latch doors that open to reveal a large-screen television.

Enlarge This Image



Ryan Murrell for The New York Times

Enlarge This Image



Chuck Chai for The New York Times

**Suburban Slickers** Elizabeth and Mordochai Kubany remade the attic in their New Jersey home into a light-filled master bedroom suite. The open floor plan and glass-enclosed shower might appear better suited to a Manhattan loft than to the couple's traditional red brick home, but the attic's isolation gave the couple a chance to experiment.



Chuck Chai for The New York Times

Between them is a common area where the children do their homework. Mr. Angelovich describes it as "a living room for the upstairs." Its floors, walls and ceilings are sheathed in massaranduba, a Brazilian hardwood that remains unscathed even under heavy use.

Interrupting the swaths of this wood are the building's dormers, which the architects rebuilt, replacing what Mr. Chen calls "gingerbread house windows" with large sheets of insulated glass. Inside, the dormers are sheathed in backlit translucent acrylic panels, some white, some red. The dormers contain mattresses, which can be used as either window seats or guest beds.

Acrylic is also used for storage niches, mounted in the massaranduba walls, and for steel-framed doors that open to reveal the children's quarters at opposite ends of the attic. The material reflects the dappled light that bounces off Lake Austin, which is about 50 feet away. The idea, Mr. Chen said, is to "treat architectural elements as minimalist art installations that interact with nature."

To make it easy to keep the attic at a comfortable temperature, Mr. Angelovich used a form of insulation called Icynene that expands to fill building cavities, reaching as much as 60 times its original volume in eight seconds. (Icynene starts as a liquid, but quickly takes on the consistency of angel food cake.) Though it costs about three times as much as the more common pink fiberglass insulation, Icynene is said to be more effective. It is easier to install in tight spaces like those behind the attic's acrylic panels, because it adapts to any shape.

Now Mr. Angelovich is renovating the ground floor of his house, which means he'll also be living in the attic for a while. It's not a hardship.

"People respond very emotionally to the attic," he said. "Some people say it reminds them of the interior of a very nice yacht. To others, it has a cathedral-like quality." Either way, he said, "It's all very exciting."

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