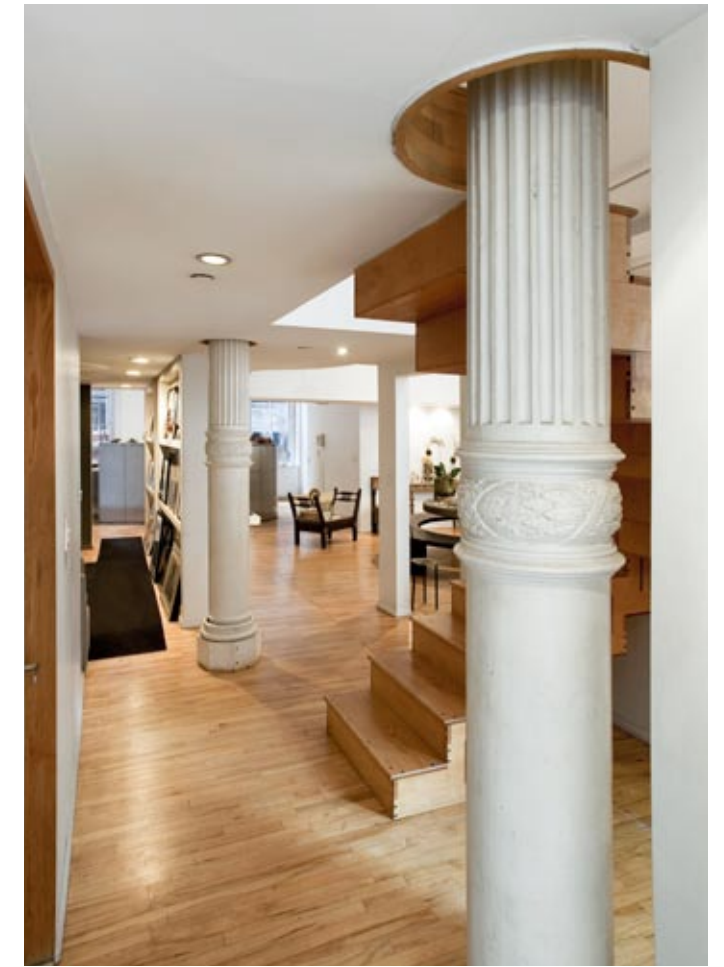


The Pioneer

Twenty-eight years ago, a brave sculptor and her family broke new territory with the purchase of a choice SoHo loft. It remains their home today.





Story by Cate West Zahl
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No matter what the market bears, we just can't seem to shake our desire for prime real estate. Long gone are the days when men on horseback galloped across the country looking for their piece of Manifest Destiny, yet the obsession with uncharted territory still lingers.

For city dwellers, the quest for land has turned into the quest for space. Especially for those who choose to live on the overcrowded island of Manhattan. It's hard to believe (and frustrating to no end) that just a few decades ago, shuttered-up factories sat empty in the one-time manufacturing district south of Houston Street, begging for discovery.

And sure enough, throngs of artists—our modern-day pioneers—bravely answered the call of SoHo's cast-iron canyons, staking their claims on massive industrial spaces that offered a new way of life. "The recipe of living in homes made up of little boxes had stuck for almost a century. Then, all of a sudden these large warehouses looked delicious," says one such pioneer, sculptor Michele Oka Doner.

Unlike the majority of early loft occupants, Oka Doner was married with two young sons when she moved to SoHo. But she and her husband thought: "What a moment, what a

lifestyle, what a way to live. It seemed so open, so free, much more unfettered. It called to us (like) a siren's song."

So in 1982, they left their suburban life in Michigan and moved to the second floor of a renovated button factory on Mercer Street. Suddenly, the cobblestoned streets south of Houston was their home. And years later, it still is. Oka Doner and her family are living witnesses to the complete transformation of their neighborhood, from abandoned to arty to its present incarnation as a tourist trap, littered with brand name luxury shops and five-star restaurants.

Today, Oka Doner's home feels epic. The all-white 5,000-square-foot loft features 16-foot ceilings, double-height windows, six neo-classical columns, and a freestanding zigzag staircase that leads to a second level mezzanine. The vast open living area functions as a 'multi-purpose zone.'

PREVIOUS PAGE: The main space features Oka Doner's favorite piece: a circular bronze table (10 feet in diameter) the artist made herself. THE LIBRARY: The library holds five generations of family books. CORINTHIAN: Corinthian cast-iron columns, two ringed with original radiators, bisect the mezzanine. NEXT PAGE: Oka Doner's artwork surrounds her husband's grand piano.



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“The wonderful thing is the lack of definition,” she says. “It returns us to the simplicity of life in the lived-in past, where shelter and space were not differentiated by use.”

While there are no actual rooms in the space, areas are delineated smartly. For example, Oka Doner’s sculpture studio, or “laboratory,” as she calls it, makes up the back half of her loft. On the opposite side of the loft is a den of sorts, with a mini-gallery for Oka Doner’s habit of collecting: photographs of her family taken by Amy Arbus, portraits from various sculpture shows over the years, and quirky artifacts from past trips. There are also collections in the main space: small piles of artifacts (fossils, shells, pieces of coral) grouped together on tabletops and neatly arranged on canvas strips spread out on the floor.

The Doner family added two major elements to the loft since they originally moved in: the library (added in 1990) and the kitchen (completed more recently in 2004). Floor-to-ceiling, ebony-stained shelves, complete with a librarian’s ladder, hold an extensive collection of books. The state-of-the-art kitchen, designed by architect William Georgis, is a stainless steel island with a curvilinear shape that conceals the inner workings from the living space.

If anything, the dominant theme of Oka Doner’s décor is the history present throughout the loft. “Five generations of family books make up the library and five generations of family objects are stored throughout the kitchen area,” she says.

It’s this unobtrusive layering of the past and absence of trendy, contemporary furnishings that distinguish the space. In particular, the original Corinthian columns—with their unique wraparound radiators—exemplify the loft’s origins and these references to the past define the interior’s overall aesthetic.

“There is history, there are layers in a loft,” says Oka Doner. “It’s not new construction. The space itself speaks. We’ve kept enough of a connection to the moment of revival for this building.”

EXIT

📖 PREVIOUS PAGE: A collection of family photographs are displayed on built-in shelves in the den. 📷 The sculptor works on a piece inspired by nature in her personal “laboratory,” located in the back of the loft. 🚪 The unusual catwalk on the second floor features only one railing. 📸 Collected pieces of coral are displayed on the stainless steel counter top in the state-of-the-art open kitchen.

