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In Dumbo, a Study in Industrial Chic

The former Brillo-pad factory at 200 Water St. is becoming a high-end condo

By Josh Barbanel

By 1950, when the Brillo Manufacturing Co. put up a four-story building on Water Street to make steel wool for its famous scouring pads, the character of this stretch of Brooklyn waterfront now known as Dumbo had long been set.

The new building was plainer than the older, redbrick factories and warehouses that surrounded it, with their rhythmic patterns of narrow, arched windows. In contrast, the Brillo building at 200 Water St. had irregularly spaced horizontal windows, a garage door for a main entrance and a cinder-block back wall with two truck bays cut into it.



A rendering of the renovated 200 Water St., once a Brillo-pad factory, in Brooklyn's Dumbo.

As the 100-foot-wide building went through a conversion into 15 condominium units, the challenge before the project's architects and designers was to convert a plain-spoken, postwar industrial relic into contemporary industrial chic.

Ariel Aufgang, the head of Aufgang Architects, said that when he first walked into the building, he

found "it was purpose-built, not made to be elegant or ornate in any way."

"You could tell that it was built to manage the equipment," he said. "Some floors had higher windows and some lower."

The solution Mr. Aufgang found, working within the constraints set by the city Landmarks Preservation Commission for the Dumbo Historic District, was to embrace the building's industrial past.



The former factory windows have been enlarged for use by condo residents.

The development team won permission to enlarge many of the wide, multi-paned aluminum windows that began inside at a height of 5 feet so they could flood many of the apartments with light.

Some bricked-up openings in the facade were reopened, including what had once been the entrance to a skybridge that connected the factory's second floor to another, now-demolished Brillo factory across the street dating to 1925. That skybridge portal has been turned into an oversize window that pops out of the facade like a large eye.

The rear 30 feet of the building were chopped off to create an outdoor space with trees and landscaping and to allow construction of two additional stories on top, including private rooftop penthouse patios with broad views of the Manhattan skyline.

The 1950 Brillo factory was recognized by the Landmarks Preservation Commission as an example of a "daylight factory" of its era. It was built of brick, but with a steel structure that allowed for bigger windows than older industrial buildings because it didn't need structural elements in the exterior walls.

Brillo, formed in 1913, was sold to the Purex Corp. in 1963. In 1970, Purex sold 200 Water St. as well as the factory across the street.

The property was acquired in 1995 by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, the publishing arm of the Jehovah's Witnesses. In the past few years, Watchtower has sold off many of its Brooklyn properties, as part of a plan to move its headquarters from Brooklyn to upstate New York.

Last year, development groups Megalith Capital Management and Urban Realty Partners acquired the site, and a vacant lot behind it, for \$30.6 million, according to Sam Sidhu, chief executive officer of Megalith.

The condo units at 200 Water St. are large, many with three bedrooms. Prices range from \$2.9 million to more than \$5.5 million. Since the project launched sales in September, six of the 15 apartments have been listed in contract.

As part of the building's rebirth, its original truck entrance on Water Street was retained as a main entrance, but it now opens onto an elongated lobby. Architect Gil Even-Tsur, who designed the interior spaces, created the lobby with a polished concrete floor to reflect the factory's history. The space is warmed by a row of floor-to-ceiling white-oak planks that project about 6 inches into the room.

Interior doors are 9 feet high, and some ceilings soar to 14 feet.

"We are keeping the rhythm and integrity of the factory, but adapting it to a living space," said Mr. Even-Tsur.

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