

The high life

Developer Rick Maron and his wife trade suburban living for a home atop a hotel

By STAN BULLARD

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When Rick Maron and Judy Eigenfeld announced two years ago to friends in the eastern suburbs that they were moving to downtown Cleveland, they got the usual reaction: Friends cited crime worries and wondered how the couple could consider such a thing.

After 30 years of living in Shaker Heights and raising their sons, Ari and Jori, in a house designed like a "milk carton," the East Side couple set their sights on converting the top floor of the Holiday Inn Express and Suites on Euclid Avenue into a suite they would eventually call home.



Rick Maron and Judy Eigenfeld converted the top floor of the Holiday Inn Express on Euclid Avenue into their own living suite, which features a view of the city skyline.

Photo credit: MARC GOLUB

Mr. Maron's vision for the space should not have come as a surprise, given the developer's background.

MRN Ltd. realty concern, which is Mr. Maron's family-owned company, is one of the pioneers in downtown housing.

Over the last decade, MRN has recast East Fourth Street, between Euclid and Prospect avenues, from a scruffy street with buildings dating to the 1870s into a home for new nightspots, such as the House of Blues and Pickwick & Frolic Restaurant & Club, and 160 lofts.

"Everyone was curious. They'd ask, 'What do you mean you're going to live on top of a hotel?'" said Ms. Eigenfeld.

Mr. Maron said the condition of the space made it difficult for visitors to imagine the area as a home.

The space was emptied in 1999 when MRN converted the office building at 629 Euclid Ave. into a hotel. Mechanical elevators and steam heat housed at the top of the building were replaced with contemporary heating, cooling and elevator systems, which opened up the top floor.

"It looked too scuzzy for people to see it as a home," Mr. Maron said. "They're used to seeing the (wood) frame go up for a new home."

Fifteen months after settling into their penthouse suite, the couple has no plans of trading in their downtown home for a return to the suburbs and they argue that any safety concerns are a case of mistaken perception.

Living downtown also has broadened the pair's appreciation of the city. Ms. Eigenfeld, who retired after 30 years as a special education and first-grade teacher, loves to walk and estimates she walks six miles daily.

On market days, she walks to the West Side Market, on Saturdays accompanied by Mr. Maron.

Over the last year they have explored the city by foot with a passion.

The suite is a cool refuge. Huge exposed steel girders joined by doorknob-sized rivets and bolts are visible in the ceiling. The girders form the top of the building, the first steel skyscraper on Euclid, according to the Guide to Cleveland Architecture.

The heart of the 4,800-square-foot suite is a single great room that has a small drywall ceiling that serves as a “floating ceiling” and gives visitors a cozy sense of arrival before it gives way to the tall ceilings of the rest of the room.

The suite’s center contains a kitchen and dining room that has enough elbow room for a football team. The foyer features a grand piano and a mural by one of the artists who decorated the interior of the House of Blues.

The great room’s heart is an open kitchen with granite countertops, stainless steel appliances and a view of the living room and skyline.

With the exception of three bedrooms with bamboo floors, the floor is primarily self-leveling concrete that the couple decided to seal rather than paint.

The master bathroom rivals that of any new home: a marble floor and walls, a view of the city and a shower the size of a walk-in closet.

Other rooms include an office, a comfortable, media room and library.

Large windows, 5 feet by 10 feet, ring the suite, offering sunrise to sunset views of Lake Erie and the city’s skyline. Originally, the windows were 2 feet by 2 feet, giving the space a dungeon-like feel; replacing the small windows was a priority for the couple.

While pioneering has its allure, Mr. Maron discounted other potential motives for moving near MRN’s other developments. No, he said, it wasn’t just to shorten his commute. Usually wearing a flannel shirt or T-shirt, blue jeans and work boots, he’s a regular at MRN construction projects.

He also didn’t move downtown to gain juice with Cleveland politicians as a constituent.

“At least that hasn’t happened so far,” Mr. Maron joked.