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UPPER EAST SIDE MANSION: LAVISH ON EVERY LEVEL

BY ROBIN FINN • DECEMBER 13TH, 2013



The sitting area in the 850-square-foot grand hall/living room has coffered ceilings trimmed with gilded molding, a walnut marquetry floor and an imposing fireplace of Brazilian travertine.

Photo: Emily Gilbert for The New York Times

An Upper East Side mansion whose stark limestone facade is a foil for six levels of elaborate interiors that take their cues from disparate locales like the Palace of Versailles, the historic castles and churches of Italy, and a red velvet movie theater that once thrived in Queens, is poised to enter the market at a genre-popping asking price of \$114.077 million.

The annual \$178,246 property tax covers 20,000 square feet of living space and 2,500 square feet of outdoor options crowned by a three-tier roof deck with glimpses of Central Park and the cityscape. This sprawling urban fortress, built in 1883, has a service entrance tucked beneath the elegant stone steps of the formal entry, an indoor heated saltwater pool with spa, and a “panic room”/dressing room off the fifth-floor master suite hard-wired for total security.

The house, at 12 East 69th Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues, has seven bedrooms, six baths and three powder rooms. Its rare width, 40

feet, guarantees mansion status, even though its limestone facade was stripped of ornamentation in the 20th century, when its usage changed to accommodate a suite of medical offices.

After Teresa Viola, the president of Maida Vale Designs, found out the building she frequently visited with her three sons — to consult their pediatrician — was for sale, she didn’t resist the temptation to transform it into a private palace whose ceiling heights range from 12 to 34 feet.

The mansion’s reincarnation as an extravagant residence began in 2005, when Ms. Viola and her husband, Vincent, an investor who in September paid \$250 million for the National Hockey League’s Florida Panthers, bought it for \$20 million and embarked on a gut renovation. Only the historic facade was retained.

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“We lived at the Waldorf Astoria for the first three years of the renovation,” Ms. Viola said. They moved into the 19-room mansion five years ago as soon as its kitchen was habitable. “I wanted it to feel welcoming, like your grandmother’s kitchen,” she said. So it’s a grandmotherly 40 feet wide, with four mahogany-framed windows overlooking 69th Street, a pizza-primed corner brick oven, brick-and-fieldstone walls, a butcher-block island with a cooktop, multiples of Viking ovens and other premium appliances, and three stone sinks. The floors are made from reclaimed railroad ties “sliced like bologna.”

Ms. Viola supervised every detail of the makeover. She went on worldwide shopping sprees to find precise shades of Venetian onyx (even the elevator is onyx) and other decorative finishes, and visited Versailles so that she could replicate its grandeur in her 900-square-foot dining room. She recently installed the finishing touches in the duplex library — a ceiling mural painted by an artist from County Cork, Ireland, and a two-story rendition of Kipling’s poem “If,” hand-stenciled by an artisan who has designed custom Christmas cards for the White House and the Vatican.

The grand staircase of Italian granite has a custom-carved mahogany banister, and many of the walls are decorated with gold-leaf filigree. There are service kitchenettes and powder rooms off both the parlor-level living room — which has a fireplace of Brazilian travertine, a coffered ceiling, a south-facing Juliet balcony, and a heated walnut floor with an inlaid stencil — and the third-floor banquet room, whose heated floor is black walnut with a marquetry border.

There are two bedrooms with en-suite baths on the fourth floor, with room for two more. Except for an opulent guest bedroom, the fifth is dominated by the master suite, with his (onyx) and hers (rose quartz) baths and his-and-hers dressing rooms. On the lower levels, which house a family room, a recording studio, a gym, a sauna and a pool, Ms. Viola recreated a tableau from her childhood: an intimate media room with red velvet recliners, flocked damask walls, and a balcony reminiscent of her favorite theater in Queens.

Because Mr. Viola, the principal owner/chairman of the Panthers, plans to be as involved in rebuilding his team as his spouse was in reconfiguring their mansion, the family is relocating to South Florida.

Gabriella Dufwa and Paul Anand of the Corcoran Group are the listing brokers. Ms. Dufwa likened the experience of entering the mansion to “stepping back in time, finding yourself at Versailles, and never wanting to leave.”

According to both agents, the property’s premier location, cornucopia of interior and exterior space, and turnkey condition justify the astronomical asking price (Corcoran’s data showed just three other 40-foot-wide townhouses on the market, the most expensive asking \$50 million).

“It’s a magnificent one-of-a-kind property with a level of craftsmanship that speaks for itself,” Mr. Anand said. “We don’t think people who are looking for something of this size in this neighborhood are going to be afraid of the price.”

With winter pending, the notion of going home to a showplace where the pampering begins on the sidewalk — both it and the exterior staircase are heated, as are the onyx floors in the foyers on the parlor level — could prove irresistible. Owning this house means never needing to hoist a snow shovel. Or order takeout pizza.