

# NYC Home

## Real Estate Guide

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# Finish line

After a stressful year of construction and cost overruns, Paul and Carolyn Zweben are settling into their new Upper West Side apartment.

## Mega-renovation and combination is a perfect union

By ADAM BONISLAWSKI  
 Photos by IMOGEN BROWN

The construction work on Paul and Carolyn Zweben's Upper West Side apartment began exactly a year ago this week. Both agents with Prudential Douglas Elliman, the busy couple (Paul is also a partner in restaurants including Calle Ocho, Bar-Bao and BLT Prime) had long wanted to combine the two apartments they

owned on Riverside Drive. Their plan called for renovating both co-ops (a fifth-floor two-bedroom and a sixth-floor one-bedroom) and connecting them via a staircase built inside an old ventilation shaft running up the middle of the building. And they were going to live there, in the construction zone, the whole time. Twelve months later, they've emerged from the often maddening process as happy residents of a 2,350-square-foot, three-bedroom duplex with new features like walk-in closets, dentil molding and high-end appliances. It's cost them \$300,000 — and possibly a friend or two on their co-op board. Yes, the Zwebens got what they wanted, but there was no shortage of drama along the way. They started preliminaries in the



summer of 2008, interviewing contractors (eventually going with Paul Hartigan of Cortland Contracting), drawing up blueprints and convincing their board to let them go ahead with the combination. With the help of architect Lawrence McDonald and design firm Marino & Giolito, the couple mapped

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## Know the drill

**Expect to spend more:** "There's no question you'll go over your budget," Paul Zweben says. The Zwebens' original \$200,000 budget ballooned to \$300,000 by the end of the project.

**Move out if you can:** In retrospect, Paul says, he would have rented another apartment to live in during the renovation. Not only would it have been more pleasant, but he thinks the work would have gotten done more quickly without them underfoot.

**Store your stuff:** Instead of trying to protect your items from the dirt and grime of construction, just put them in storage for the duration. "We spent 40 minutes after it was all done just cleaning dust off a light fixture," Carolyn says.

**Make sure you like your contractor:** The workers the Zwebens hired basically lived in their apartment for a year. Given that, it was nice that they all got along. "We were really fortunate," Carolyn says. "It was a perfect family to have working with us." In-depth interviews, Paul says, are key to finding someone you can work with.

**Make sure you love your spouse:** After many months of living at a construction site, you just might start resenting the person who talked you into this in the first place. "Your marriage has to be really strong," Carolyn says. "It's so overwhelming."

**Get professional advice:** The Zwebens came into their project with a fairly strong vision. Nonetheless, they found that consulting with design firm Marino & Giolito helped them bring about the look they wanted. "By the time you get to choosing paint colors, your brain is fried," Carolyn says. "I really needed guidance." — **A.B.**

**GIMME SHELTER SHANIA TWAIN TAKES PEEK AT PRICEY 4-BR CONDO**

# It takes two

## RENOVATION from Page 45

out plans. Construction officially started on Jan. 5, 2009, with the goal being to have everything wrapped up in time to host Thanksgiving dinner that November.

Did they make it? Well... sort of.

Rare is the renovation that goes exactly as planned, and while the Zwebens went into the process with more real estate experience than most, there's no foreseeing the unforeseeable.

For instance, inside that supposedly empty ventilation shaft was a pair of sewer lines that had to be cut out and capped before work on the staircase could go forward. That added an extra \$3,300 to the tab.

Then there were the changes they made mid-job, tweaking things like the wainscoting around the stairway, the molding along the living room ceiling and the floorboards in the living and dining rooms. By mid-September, such modifications had added another \$17,000 to the job, and, as Paul put it, had nearly given him a heart attack.

And then there was the plumber who clogged the building's main drainpipe in the process of installing hookups for their washer and dryer. Responsibility for that lay with the plumber's insurance, but it still generated some unhappy letters from the co-op board.

By early October, the couple had, in Paul's words, "officially mentally cracked." Eight-plus months of living out of boxes, waking every morning to the sounds of power saws and subsisting almost solely on takeout had finally worn them down.

"We miss cooking. We miss sitting at a table. We miss the neighbors that used to smile at us in the hall," Paul said at the time.

On the bright side, the job was progressing well at this point. The molding was up, the floors were sanded, the walls were being closed. Despite Carolyn saying several weeks before that she'd be "pleasantly surprised right now if we were ready for Christmas and Hanukkah," the Thanksgiving deadline was still within reach.

Perhaps even more important in terms of a home-



August

The Zwebens tore out an old bathroom and created a new one with a pedestal sink and a claw-foot tub.



Now



August

The couple's dining room, which opens into the living room, is now waiting for a new dining table.



Now

cooked Thanksgiving dinner, Paul had reversed a decision to scratch the kitchen from their renovation plans. Worried about cost overruns (at this point the couple was about \$80,000 over budget), he'd opted to simply slap on a coat of paint and call it a day. Carolyn suggested he

reconsider, and when an offer for a low-interest credit card later showed up in the mail, Paul used it to buy a new farm sink, a Miele dishwasher and a Viking stove.

The Monday before Thanksgiving, however, a glitch arose. The new stove had a cracked manifold, and



September

The foyer was a total mess when we visited the Zwebens in September, but it's now a gracious entrance to the 2,350-square-foot, three-bedroom Upper West Side co-op.



Now

it would be weeks before it could be fixed. The turkey would have to be cooked in a neighbor's apartment.

Still, in a larger sense, they'd pulled things off. The rest of the apartment was in good enough condition for hosting, and on the big day the Zwebens sat down in their nearly finished dining room with 14 guests. A month later, with all but a few final touches in place, they threw a holiday party for 75.

And while there are still some things the couple would do given the time and money — opening up the fireplace, changing the hardware on the doors — it's time, at last, for settling in.

"Last week, we had one takeout order all week," Paul says with a certain weary astonishment. "I looked at Carolyn and said, 'That's amazing.' Before that, we'd ordered every night for the last four months."

"It was crazy," Carolyn says of the yearlong process. "There were definitely moments when we were just like, this can't be done."



September

The living room was ready and decorated for the Zwebens to have guests over for a holiday party.



Now