

Living

living@thenews.com.mx



CREATING A COZY ROOFTOP PIED-À-TERRE

How an expat used color and creativity to transform tiny servants' quarters into a funky second home in Mexico City's Col. Roma

BY JIM JOHNSTON
Special to The News

When my writer friend Brad Conard first told me about his new apartment in Colonia Roma, I thought he was joking. "It's on top of a fabulous art-deco building. You walk down a narrow alleyway, past the old incinerator, up a rattling metal staircase, then zig-zag through lots of laundry cages to get there. It's got five rooms and a tiny balcony that overlooks a synagogue. Oh – and it all measures 32 square meters." Five rooms in 32 square meters! That's about 320 square feet. It sounded like a dollhouse to me.

Three months later, he invited me over for champagne to celebrate completing his renovation. After climbing and zigzagging to his rooftop hideaway, I was amazed to see what a combination of daring and imagination had achieved. This dollhouse is a real home.

FINDING THE PERFECT SPOT

Brad's base is New Orleans, but his connection to Mexico goes back many years. He owned a house in San Miguel de Allende that he recently sold, and started spending more time in Mexico City.

He's part of a new wave of foreigners who are fascinated with 'el D.F.' and who, in increasing numbers, are deciding to make it their home.

"I knew I wanted to live in Colonia Roma. It's a thriving place full of contrasts that never ceases to surprise me. It gives me the feeling of living in a small town in the midst of all the urban sprawl."

He found his apartment by walking around the neighborhood and writing down the phone numbers on any "for sale" signs he saw.

"I covered every street in Roma, and it took about 10 days to find this apartment. It's the only building in the neighborhood designed by Francisco Serrano, the architect of so many art-deco gems in La Condesa. Unfortunately, the building is in a sorry state. Nobody pays maintenance, so nothing gets repaired. But I'm up on the roof in my own little world."

The previous owner had lived there for almost 30 years. Original tile floors were covered with linoleum and dingy shag carpet. There were nails in every wall. Lighting fixtures were so low you had to duck. The kitchen looked like a street food stall that had crashed into one wall.

"It was pretty awful," he said. "But the place had good bones and the price was right."

As a foreigner, he needed a permit to buy property, which cost about \$600.



Brad's apartment is seen from the outside. Chipping paint, rust and cages for laundry belie the sophisticated space inside the former servants' quarters.



A small balcony opens up onto Calle Querétaro in the Col. Roma.

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BRAD CONARD

"In general, the buying process went smoothly. I had to find three Mexican citizens vouch for my character. That was a little difficult, but it all worked out, and now I have the 'ese (deed) in my name."

Two brothers, Eduardo and Alberto Á had been recommended to him as workers who could handle the renovation he planned. He did the painting and plastering. Alberto does electrical and plumbing work. "They were fun to work with and completely reliable." Brad said. "And it turned out to be a great way to improve my Spanish."

QUIRKY DECORATING

The apartment has a funky, retro look, while maintaining the integrity of the original architecture. The boldest move was to paint the living dining room and bedroom all one color. Ex-



The cool blues of the kitchen welcome visitors into the apartment.



The kitchen has a new stove and all the amenities Brad needs.



A welcoming corner is seen next to the kitchen, decorated with antique toys from La Lagunilla.



Brad even had enough space for a comfortable dining room next to the kitchen.



THE NEWS PHOTOS: BELLAVALA

MORE INFO

Check out the places where Brad shops for home furnishings in Mexico City.

- **The Lagunilla Market** is located along Reforma, near Jaime Nunó and the Metro Garibaldi. This Sunday-only flea market is the best in town.
- **Plaza del Ángel** is located between Hamburgo and Londres, near Génova in the Zona Rosa. This is a great flea market to check out on Saturdays.
- **Alantigua** is located at Guanajuato 133, near Jalapa, Col. Roma. This thrift and furniture shop is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday.
- **Segundo Aire** is located at Álvaro Obregón 187, Col. Roma. This is the place to find mid-century furniture and accessories.



Brad opted to paint all the walls and the ceiling in a strong "bugambilia" pink.

over the sofa of an indigenous girl by Alfonso X. Peña, a contemporary of Diego Rivera who hasn't yet gotten the recognition he deserves.

"I'm not sure I'd have the nerve to do this kind of thing anywhere else but in Mexico. There's something about the light, about the culture in general, that makes strong colors feel natural. It's one of the things that keeps me coming back."

"I love the old architecture of Mexico City, and I tried my best to restore the original details where I could – something I encourage anyone to do with an old building."

"It drives me crazy when I see them tearing out all the old stuff and replacing it with generic, sterile things. I think there's a growing awareness of preservation here in Mexico, but it still has a way to go."

Brad made a special trip to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, but the time between trips to Mexico City is getting shorter and shorter.

"There's a special energy here. You can just feel that something's happening, and more and more people are starting to pay attention. It's a great time to be in Mexico City."

Jim Johnston's blog is www.mexicocitydf.blogspot.com, where you'll find more tips for apartment hunting in Mexico City.



The living room is seen from the bedroom, where Brad can admire his Alfonso X. Peña original.