

UNIT 8408 | CHICAGO | VLADIMIR RADUTNY ARCHITECTS

Bracing for Change

A Chicago skyscraper’s distinctive exoskeleton gets a new look on the inside of an updated top-floor apartment.

BY JAMES GAUER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIEN WILLIAMS

EIGHT-SEVENTY-FIVE North Michigan Avenue is one of Chicago’s most recognizable Modernist landmarks. Formerly known as the John Hancock Center, the 100-story mixed-use skyscraper, with condominiums on floors 44–92, was designed by the SOM team of Bruce Graham and Fazlur Rahman Khan. Completed in 1969, its tapering elevations are distinguished by steel cross bracing. Given the eminent architectural lineage and the posh location, you might expect its upper-floor apartments to be fabulous. Alas, they usually are not. One elegant exception is an 1,800-square-foot, south-facing unit on the 84th floor,

recently renovated by Vladimir Radutny Architects. This project was a good fit for Radutny, a 2020 Design Vanguard. Well versed in high Modernism, he teaches in the College of Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, whose campus was designed by Mies van der Rohe, and he and his family live in a Mies tower just a few blocks from the jobsite. The apartment’s floor plan was boxy and banal. The kitchen’s enclosed volume protruded into what might otherwise have been a large rectangular living area, which was further compromised by the building’s signature X-bracing, buried deep within bulky layers of

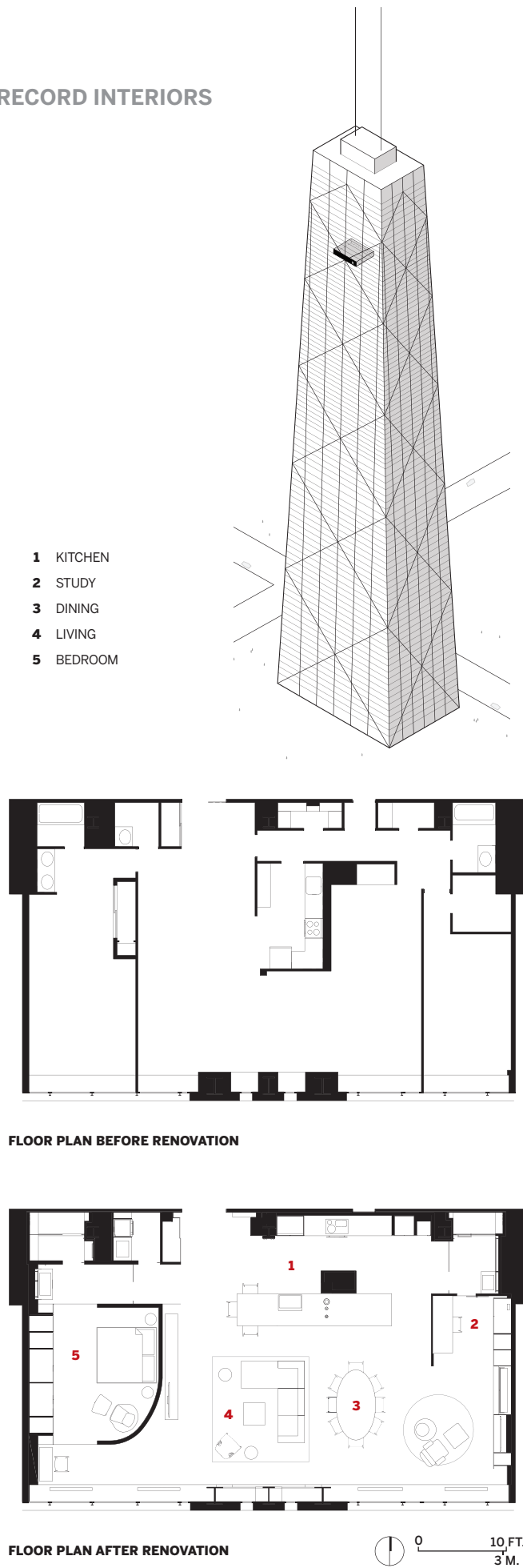


DISTINCT cross bracing (right) continues throughout the apartment (this image).





RECORD INTERIORS



fireproofing and drywall. “On our first visit,” Radutny recalls, “we were surprised by how compartmentalized and dark the unit felt. Unless we stood directly at the exterior wall, the deep footprint, built-out structure and low ceilings severely limited outside views and natural light.”

Radutny saw past these flaws to the apartment’s potential and devised a strategy to realize it. “Open up the space” might sound like a shelter-magazine cliché, but here it was the right move. The architect eliminated the partitions perpendicular to the exterior wall, transforming what had been the windows of three separate rooms into one continuous 55-foot-long aperture. Next, he cleaned up the footprint of the central area by relocating the kitchen to the back wall and adding a large parallel island, its location determined by plumbing stacks.

The result is a model of spatial clarity. A gracious, well-proportioned rectangle of public space for living and dining is flanked by semi-private quarters. One is the bedroom, partially enclosed by a wall that curves to widen the viewing angle from the kitchen. The other, more open, serves as a study, TV room, and guest bedroom. It can be screened by ripple-fold drapery on a recessed track. Interior perimeter walls are unified by wood paneling and cabinets. The entire apartment now enjoys unobstructed views, both within it and out to the Chicago skyline and Lake Michigan.

Radutny has detailed this project with his usual minimalist precision. (It helped that contractor Matt Harder was trained as an architect.) Below the windows, continuous wood cabinets in high-gloss white, and topped by quartz counters, conceal HVAC units and storage. White-painted drywall and frameless etched-glass doors integrate seamlessly with wood flooring and horizontally grained millwork, both made of engineered walnut. Bathrooms glow with white porcelain tile on walls and floors. Kitchen counters of graphite-colored engineered stone punctuate the otherwise muted palette. Classic midcentury furnishings, including an Eames lounge chair and a Saarinen dining table, seem right at home. “This combination of refined finishes and period furnishings,” says the architect, “creates a link with the building’s legacy.”

The artistic masterstroke is Radutny’s handling of the X-bracing. He stripped away drywall and fireproofing to expose the structural steel members at the window wall, along with a ceiling beam that spans to a column at the back wall. These have been fireproofed with an intumescent coating, which required a lot of persuasion at both the building and the Department of Buildings, since its application in the residential portion of the tower was unprecedented, and Chicago’s code had not caught up with this technology. They are painted black, and dramatically illuminated by LED strip lights recessed in linear ceiling channels. What had been a bulky obstruction is now a riveting—and riveted—structural artifact so refined it reads as sculpture. “The steel bracing becomes a visual and tactile element that stretches across the living space, bringing the building’s exoskeletal frame inside,” says Radutny with justifiable pride and pleasure. ■

Credits

ARCHITECT: Vladimir Radutny Architects — Vladimir Radutny, Ryan Sarros, Fanny Hothan
CONSULTANTS: Midwest Fireproofing (fireproofing); One World Consulting (m/e/p)
GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Harder Brothers
SIZE: 1,800 square feet
COST: \$600,000 (construction)
COMPLETION DATE: January 2023

Sources

LIGHTING: Perfect LED, Artemide, Flos; Lutron (dimming)
DOORS & PANELING: Alpi
HARDWARE: FSB (locksets); Krownlab Kor
INTERIOR FINISHES: Wood Harmony (woodwork); Benjamin Moore (paints); Fiandre (tiles)
FLOORING: Saroyan
PLUMBING: Hansgrohe, Alape, Kohler, Rohl



WALNUT and midcentury furnishings fill the apartment (above and top) while bright white porcelain tiles line the bathroom (left).