

BY LAWRENCE KREISMAN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

UPTOWN DOWNTOWN

FALL HOME DESIGN 2004

*Above the city,
a sophisticated serenity*



THE WINDOWS show off a decorative terra-cotta column on the Seaboard Building façade and the stone-clad Bon-Macy's department store on Pine Street.

HANK RITTER WAS NEW to Seattle when he opened a branch of his acting and modeling studio here in 1997. Accustomed to a suburban Sacramento home, he envisioned a part-time home in Seattle as an opportunity to experience "living downtown," where workplace, shops and dining would be at his front door. The Seaboard Building provided the perfect solution.

The Seaboard Building was designed by William Van Slicen and began its service as the headquarters of the Northern Bank & Trust Co. Completed in 1909, this 10-story, trapezoidal building responds to the converging angles of Westlake Avenue and Fourth Avenue. It was one of the earliest substantial office buildings in this end of downtown and reflected the community's confidence that commercial and banking activity would expand from lower Second Avenue — the acknowledged headquarters of major banks at the time.

While the base of the building and its interiors have been significantly altered, the entablature and cornice at the top boast some of the most elaborate terra-cotta ornament in Seattle, replete with vines, flowers, oval shields, garlands, swags and lion heads. The architectural firm of NBBJ was responsible for transforming this designated city of Seattle landmark from an offices-only building to one that includes living space on the seventh through 10th floors, with penthouses above.

Ritter watched with interest as work on renovating the building proceeded. Good friends showed it to him as he started to think about pleasant, convenient places to live. A >



FROM HIS CHAISE, Hank Ritter has a view of the Bon-Macy's department store and the Space Needle farther to the north.

TO DRAW ATTENTION away from the elongated room, ceiling coffers and support beam, Hensel installed a manzanita tree divider, visually separating the living room from the TV and reading area. The rug is assembled from two colors of wall-to-wall carpet. The pear-shaped table lamp is hand-blown Murano glass.



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year later, as units began filling up, he made a decision. It proved to be a good one. "This is the best building," he says.

During his first year there, he lived the minimalist lifestyle, "with an air mattress on the floor."

But recommendations from his neighbors brought him in contact with award-winning interior designer Steven Hensel in late December 2003. Hensel had already done interiors for several other clients in the building, and had come to delight in its ornamental terra-cotta upper stories, the odd angles forced by the orientation of the building along Westlake Avenue, and the urban views of buildings that shifted from day into evening.

Ritter had some ideas of his own, developed with the help of a number of magazine articles he had saved. He told Hensel, "I want it to feel like I'm still in California." With these huge windows, I didn't want heavy window treatments. My only instructions were that it be bright and airy and have some kind of link to nature." His taste in furniture was distinctly mid- ➤

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century modern. "I didn't want heavy or dark furniture sitting directly on the floor. I also had to have a bench and a chaise. And I didn't need a dining-room table because this is a place I use infrequently, and more for cocktails than for dinner parties."

With these guides, Hensel set to work on the 880-square-foot unit.

His goal was to create a calm, serene environment in this very urban location. And with hardly any furniture or accessories to work with, he had a clean slate — almost.

The kitchen and bathroom were attractively done with cherry cabinetry, granite ➤

THE KITCHEN has cherry cabinetry, granite countertops and a neutral tile palette. Italian-glass lights hang above the counter.

THE BEDROOM REFLECTS the owner's request that rooms be bright and airy. A paper Naguchi lamp is at the right.



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countertops, and a neutral tile palette. But walls and ceilings were painted white throughout. In the kitchen, Hensel downplayed a column and walls by painting them a reddish-brown color that blends with the cherry cabinetry. In the main space, the walls and ceiling were painted in a neutral selected to match the color of the terra-cotta columns and sill that can be seen from all the windows. In the bedroom, the color is a darker, mustard tone.

Despite the seeming simplicity of a one-bedroom unit, there were challenges forced by a number of odd architectural features, including heating, ventilation and

air-conditioning systems, hidden behind ceiling coffers, and a structural ceiling beam.

Hensel's solution was to put a screen directly below the ceiling beam that visually draws the eye away from the oddities or, as he says, "tidies it up a lot." The screen also met his desire to have the room feel more spacious by keeping it open yet dividing it into a living area and a den. He met Ritter's request to bring in a bit of nature — and California nature at that — by fashioning the screen from the dried branches of a manzanita tree. "Since he's not in town all the time, he can't keep plants, so

this is a great solution that doesn't need attention."

Hensel designed some of the tables and selected all the fabrics for draperies and upholstered pieces, as well as the area rug, lighting fixtures and furnishings, down to custom-designed pillows. A variety of resin and glass fixtures add interest, along with a clean-lined couch on legs with a mid-century modern look.

Ritter was impressed by the efficiency of the design process. "A month and a half after our initial discussion, Steve brought over things to look at. Four months later, he told me the day everything was coming in. They showed up at 9

o'clock, and at 5:15 I came and everything was finished — in one day."

As to the experience of living downtown, Ritter couldn't appreciate it more. "It's three blocks from work. It's close to shopping. The building has no parking, but that's not a problem for me, since I don't have a car here. I absolutely love it." 

Lawrence Kreisman is program director for Historic Seattle. He is author of "Made to Last: Historic Preservation in Seattle and King County." Benjamin Benschneider is a Pacific Northwest magazine staff photographer.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER, 2001

WHILE THE GROUND FLOOR of the Seaboard Building has changed frequently with retail comings and goings, the upper floors of the building retain some of downtown's most flamboyant terra-cotta cornices, which are covered with shields, garlands and lions.