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Real Estate



Where The Secrets Were Kept

By **CONSTANCE ROSENBLUM**

IN New York City, houses and apartment buildings typically conceal their private sides when you are introduced to them. But tap the walls or peer into the back of a closet, and who knows what you might find? A hidden staircase, a secret passageway, or walls that pivot could lead to unknown territory.

Some of these oddities are legacies of singular historic moments, like Prohibition. At a town house for sale in Greenwich Village, which operated as a speakeasy in the 1930s, a second-floor window was a false door that led to the fire escape and from there to the adjoining yard — very handy when enforcement agents raided the place. Other secrets were the work of architects with a flair for tricky detail, or reminders of an era in which building codes were less rigorous and apartments were re-

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PRESTO! In a mansion on Central Park West and 85th Street, a secret room is revealed. More pictures can be found on Page 8.

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configured with impunity. Still others had specific purposes, like hiding the family silver or keeping servants out of sight, that are less relevant today.

Such secrets are often unearthed unexpectedly. A sixth-floor co-op in the Osborne, which was built on West 57th Street in the 1880s, has a staircase that was hidden when the original apartment was divided into four parts. The staircase was discovered in the 1990s, when parts of the original apartment were reassembled

into a single unit, now listed for sale at \$1.7 million. In an apartment on East 67th Street, a closet hidden for decades in the master bedroom was revealed when the place was being prepared for sale. In an 1840s row house in Chelsea, soon to go on the market for about \$8 million, original knotty pine wide-plank flooring was discovered beneath the parquet during renovation.

Some secret spaces are winsome, among them a hard-to-reach room in a house in Prospect Park South, Brooklyn, that looks like something out of "Alice in Wonderland." Others, like the gloomy tunnel leading away from the basement of a mansion on Riverside

Drive in Manhattan, probably served less innocent purposes.

In the opinion of S. J. Rozan, a New York architect and the author of multiple crime novels, some of which feature construction as a theme, hidden details are especially cherished by New Yorkers. "In this city, everybody's an architecture critic," Ms. Rozan said. "And so a secret about a building is a secret New Yorkers can get behind."

When these properties go on the market, the hidden details become part of the sales pitch. Here are five homes in which all is not what it seems.



Lost for Decades

The secret closet in the master bedroom in the penthouse apartment in the Milan House had been hidden for decades. The 10-room apartment, on East 67th Street, had been owned since 1987 by David Margolis, president and chairman of Colt

Industries, and his wife, Barbara, a former city commissioner of protocol. They had lived there until they died, he in 2008 and she in 2009.

Last spring, their children began the laborious process of readying the apartment for sale.

"My parents had a canopy bed, a very opulent affair with rich, billowing brocade," said Nancy

King, the couple's daughter, a freelance book editor. "The brocade hung from the ceiling and entirely covered the wall behind the bed."

She watched as workers dismantled the parts. "Finally the last nail was taken out and the fabric came tumbling down. That's when I saw the door. It was like being in a movie. For a second, I won-

dered, what on earth will they find there?"

The closet was empty. But to Jennifer Bowden, the Stribling agent selling the apartment for just under \$10 million, the discovery had particular resonance for prospective buyers. "In New York," she said, "a fourth closet in a master bedroom is pretty exciting."