

Part of an East Village Synagogue Long Inhabited by Artists Is for Sale

By Adriane Quinlan, an Emmy Award-winning Curbed writer

June 28, 2023



Abstract photographer Jack Sal lived here for more than 30 years in the front rooms of a former synagogue on East 6th Street — just up the stairs from his former roommate William Wegman. This was the section where the women of the Proskurover Zion Congregation would have prayed separately. Photo: Allyson Lubow Photography/Allyson Lubow

In the early 1980s, photographer and East Village resident Timothy Greenfield-Sanders was obsessed with his neighborhood's stock of old religious buildings. He'd just closed on an old rectory on Second Avenue when a synagogue nearby on 6th Street went on the market. "It was a building that longed for a new beginning," he says. The problem was he didn't have money for another down payment. So he started talking it up to other people who might. Like the photographer William Wegman, who was quickly gaining fame for shooting his own Weimaraner dogs. On a shoot, Greenfield-Sanders found out Wegman had just lost his apartment to a divorce and was living with a roommate, the abstract photographer Jack Sal. Wegman and Sal were interested, and so was Greenfield-Sanders's teenage neighbor on Second Avenue, Maria von Hartz. "I'd just been discovered and suddenly had some money," says von Hartz.

Together, the 18-year-old model and the three professional photographers bought the building in 1982 for \$154,500, dividing up the price and the space. Wegman paid five-eighths of the mortgage and taxes for the main worship room — a first-floor duplex with 20-foot-tall ceilings and a second story that overlooks the grand space thanks to two wide balconies. Sal paid two-eighths for the front of the building, where the women of the congregation would have once worshiped separately, a bright, cheerful space thanks to high arched windows. For one-eighth, Greenfield-Sanders took the smallest apartment on the fourth floor — believed to have belonged to the building's former caretaker. And for two-eighths, von Hartz took the third floor, the home of what Greenfield-Sanders remembers as a former Polish or Ukrainian social club when he arrived in 1982 but was archived in a 1923 copy of *The Worker* as Katz Hall, the meeting place for "sympathizers" of the Polish Branch of the Workers Party.

“It was this cavernous space,” says von Hartz. “This huge loft with urinals in the front, pool tables, a 30-foot Art Deco bar with beer signs, neon signs, card tables, four pool tables. I was like, ‘Oh my God! I’ll take it.’” She and her friends would often run into Wegman’s crowd. “He was always coming in and out with his dogs, and there would be famous people in the halls. I’d be coming in with all my makeup on from a modeling shoot and the B-52’s are in the hallway, getting their album cover done.”

“I remember once Bill had a shoot with Steve Martin, who came to pose with the dogs,” says Greenfield-Sanders. “It was kind of glamorous in that way.” For Wegman, it was a perfect workspace — the balconies meant he could shoot from overhead, the high ceilings let him work with bigger lights, and the space was so immense that he could carve out a separate small apartment in front where his assistants could crash. “Another thing that I used, not legally, was the yard,” he admitted. But the neighbors, which incidentally included the playwright Lee Breuer, were friendly and gave Wegman’s dogs freedom to roam.

Things changed when — per Wegman — “the Pyramid Club kicked up.” The club — which opened in 1979 — meant bass lines made a constant *boomp boomp boomp* in Wegman’s bedroom from midnight to 4 a.m. despite all efforts at soundproofing. For Sal, whose rooms faced the street, the noise came years later. “Towards the end, there was this horrendous bar called Death & Co.,” he said. “There’d be people out at all hours. We tried to fight them.”

Wegman officially grew out of the studio when he had kids. “With children, it became a kind of hair-raising space,” he says. So he eventually found 40,000 square feet across two empty buildings in Chelsea. In 1996, he sold his share

of the synagogue to Paola Iglori, an artist and writer who had just published American Magus, a book about Harry Smith, the Beat Generation artist and visionary. “Harry Smith would be there all the time,” Sal remembered. “And all these other crazy people. Crazy in a good sense of the word.”

“I always had huge parties with, I don’t know, Allen Ginsberg and the rapper Killah Priest from Wu-Tang Clan,” Iglori says. She furnished the small apartment Wegman had built for his assistants with furniture from the Chelsea hotel suite that had once belonged to the artist and poet Rene Ricard, whom she wrote a book with. In 2014, Iglori bought out Sal, too, taking over his apartment but renting out Sal’s basement studio to Vito Schnabel, who, before he opened his own gallery, used it to stage shows for the Bruce High Quality Foundation. “I’m like the godmother of Lola Schnabel,” she says. Julian Schnabel’s ex, May Andersen, moved into Sal’s old apartment for a time, and Andersen’s friend, the performance artist Kembra Pfahler, ended up using the basement studio. Greenfield-Sanders got out of the building in 2004, in part because despite only owning one-eighth, he found himself doing an outsize portion of upkeep. “It was too much work.”

Von Hartz was on the third floor—through most of this mayhem, gradually transforming the space to match her life, which later included a husband and children. She added bedroom walls, upgraded bathrooms, and expanded the kitchen, getting rid of the old bar, which never stopped smelling of beer. “It kind of just morphed into a kitchen bar.” Recently, she rented the space to a tenant and moved into the townhouse her parents had bought when she was a kid, right next to the former rectory on Second Avenue where Greenfield-Sanders still lives. This year, she listed the loft at 431 East 6th. “I have to go to therapy about actually selling it,” she says.

Igliori refuses to move out entirely, keeping Wegman’s old duplex for herself. But this week she listed Sal’s front apartment, the small studio apartment Wegman built for his assistants, and Sal’s basement studio — an offering of three stories at the front of the building that broker Brian Goldfarb is marketing as a “maisonette.”

On tours, Goldfarb has found himself forced to explain who Wegman is. (“I say, ‘You know, the guy who takes the photographs of the dogs?’ And they’re like, ‘What?’ and I explain.”) But Wegman’s career is sometimes less confusing than explaining how the building’s ownership was divided up into eighths, and how that agreement still stands, 41 years later. “It’s basically an agreement between friends.”



The 1851 building was turned into a synagogue in 1927 by Ukrainian immigrants, according to nonprofit Village Preservation. It was home to the Proskurover Zion Congregation and Kranken Untershtitsung Verein (KUV, or Sick Benevolent Society). Photo: Rachel Kuzma/Sotheby's International Realty



Tin ceilings are original to the synagogue. This section, where Sal lived on the second floor, was where the women of the congregation would pray separately. Photo: Allyson Lubow Photography/Allyson Lubow



Sal lived here from 1982 to 2014, when he sold to the poet and author Paola Iglioni, who had already overtaken Wegman's duplex in the back of the building. Photo: Allyson Lubow Photography/Allyson Lubow



The tiles in Sal's former kitchen he bought in Delft, the Netherlands. The stove is a turn-of-the-century model. Sal found one just like it at an old appliance shop on Kenmare Street and loved it so much that he insisted on taking it when he left. Igliori agreed but made him replace it with an exact match. "I love that stove," she said. Photo: Allyson Lubow Photography/Allyson Lubow



Sal turned the 2,500-square-foot basement, which extends to every property line, into a studio. When he got here in 1982, the basement was a kitchen for a yeshiva. He turned one bathroom into a darkroom and kept the other. Photo: Allyson Lubow Photography



Iglori rented the basement out to her family friend Vito Schnabel, who ran it as a gallery before running his own name-brand space and staged shows by the Bruce High Quality Foundation. Later, Iglori let artist Kembra Pfahler work downstairs. Photo: Allyson Lubow Photography



Upstairs, on the third floor, is what Maria von Hartz calls "the loft." She first saw the floor-through apartment when she was in high school and working as a model, making money her parents were hoping to invest in property. Photo: Rachel Kuzma/Sotheby's International Realty



The skylight once loomed over an old clubhouse. Von Hartz remembered "urinals in the front, a 30-foot Art Deco bar with beer signs, neon signs, card tables, four pool tables." Photo: Rachel Kuzma/Sotheby's International Realty



The loft was ideal for throwing ragers. "When you're 20 and people are coming into your party that you're throwing and it's a 1,900-square-foot loft, it was kind of magical," von Hartz said. Photo: Rachel Kuzma/Sotheby's International Realty



Eventually, she got rid of the old bar, which never stopped smelling of beer, and expanded the kitchen. "It kind of just morphed into a kitchen bar." Photo: Rachel Kuzma/Sotheby's International Realty



There was no kitchen when von Hartz saw the place: This was where a row of urinals was. The social club was a Polish or Ukrainian club when von Hartz bought, but it was listed in a 1923 copy of *The Worker* as Katz Hall, the location of a party given to "sympathizers" of the Polish branch of the Workers' Party. Photo: Rachel Kuzma/Sotheby's International Realty



She changed the apartment so often over the years, adding and removing walls, that it inspired her to pursue a career in interior design. She now runs her own firm. Photo: Rachel Kuzma/Sotheby's International Realty



William Wegman remembers barricading this door back when the East Village "wasn't exactly completely gentrified." But down the block was the studio of Walter De Maria, who gave him advice. "He told me I should get a cat and name it Anaïs Nin and start working with a cat." Photo: Rachel Kuzma/Sotheby's International Realty