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Every Piece of Art Needs a Home

This Louisville penthouse is a blank canvas for one couple's growing collection

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With 2,000 works and counting, Kentucky collectors Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson were running out of space to display their contemporary-art collection. Their solution: build a second home, a penthouse in downtown Louisville with lots of white walls.

A Blank Canvas



The lobby of the couple's 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, which their home sits atop. *Tyler Bissmeyer for The Wall Street Journal*

Ms. Brown, the 72-year-old great-granddaughter of the founder of liquor company [Brown-Forman](#), [BFB +0.33%](#) whose brands include Jack Daniel's and Southern Comfort, and Mr. Wilson, a 65-year-old former public-relations officer for four Kentucky governors, had attempted to address their need for more wall space before. In 2006, they opened 21C Museum Hotel in Louisville, which doubles as an art museum. Over the past two years, they have opened 21C hotels in Cincinnati and

Bentonville, Ark. Each displays some of the couple's collection in guest rooms, foyers, restaurants and in vast on-site galleries that host rotating shows curated by a staff of 10 in their museum department.

But Ms. Brown and Mr. Wilson also wanted a more private space for their art. So they hired New York architect Deborah Berke to design a modern, 2,000-square-foot, \$1.35 million penthouse atop their Louisville hotel, which they moved into in 2007.

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Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, philanthropists and founders of the 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, Ky, spent about five years refurbishing their home, which is set on a 1,000 acre, 19th Century Georgian estate overlooking the Ohio River and reflects their artistic sensibilities.

"It's a contemporary space for our contemporary work," says Mr. Wilson. The couple use the two-bedroom, three-bathroom apartment as a pied-à-terre, a place to stay and entertain when they aren't at their 1,000-acre farm about 40 minutes outside the city.

The penthouse is reached through what looks like a normal hotel room door on the fourth floor but which opens to reveal a private elevator and a stairway with gold-leather-wrapped handrails and LED lights that change colors. A hallway with art-packed walls leads to a large, open room with floor-to-ceiling glass doors on two sides and an expansive outdoor rooftop terrace that almost doubles the size of the apartment. The effect is that of a glass box perched above the mostly historic low-rise buildings of Kentucky's largest city, with views over the Ohio River to Indiana.

Ms. Berke, who also designed the couple's modernist hotels, is known for her minimalism. Paring down the design was especially important here because of the desire to showcase the art. "The architecture has to be background to the art," says Ms. Berke. "We didn't want it to take away from the art."

The other challenge was to make the space feel open while ensuring there was enough wall space to accommodate enormous pieces of art, including works by Makoto Aida, Timothy Cummings, Carlee Fernandez and Marvin Francis. An almost floor-to-ceiling photograph of a man in tighty whities by artist Sam Taylor-Wood dominates the living room. Nearby hangs a chromogenic print of a woman's head surrounded by pink and white chrysanthemums by artist Valérie Belin. A dramatic black-and-white photograph of trees by Bae Bien-U is in the master bedroom. A piece of video art—a scene with people in formal wear sitting at a long table in the front yard of a traditional house trying to eat yet unable to because they're wearing dog cones around their necks—doubles as a television.

Art may be the main attraction but the home's design elements offer a rich canvas on which to paint. The intentionally neutral palette comes in richly textured materials: beige terrazzo floors with brass seams, oak floors, nubby wool carpets, and furniture covered in natural linens, silks and wools. The

lighting, recessed so it doesn't stick out, can be moved to fit different artwork. The bathroom has 10-foot ceilings and a glass shower that opens out to an outdoor courtyard with a glass ceiling and lots of plants. A small kitchen off the main living room has limestone walls, bamboo cabinets, an orange-enamel stove, green marble counters, and a chandelier made of forks and spoons.

Ms. Berke says the penthouse is the first pied-à-terre she has designed outside of New York. "There's a much greater sense of privacy here," says the architect, who has also designed homes for artist William Wegman and gallery owner Marianne Boesky. Downtown Louisville's lower density also means there is less reflection coming from surrounding buildings, allowing more light and a sense of open sky to infiltrate the space.

Ms. Brown and Mr. Wilson both grew up on farms along the Ohio River, which is what attracted them to their main home, a 5,000-square-foot, four-bedroom brick house that dates back to the 1790s. But the couple, who married in 1996 and have traveled the world looking for contemporary works that push the boundaries, also craved something more urban.

When the revitalization of downtown Louisville gained steam in the early 2000s, they looked for ways to participate, checking out prospects for converting abandoned buildings into apartments. At the same time, their personal collection had grown and they wanted somewhere to show it. The couple came up with the idea of an art hotel, converting former warehouses on Main Street into a modern space.

At first they were worried other museums might not take them seriously since their exhibition space is in hotels. But they say they are now lending and borrowing works with established institutions, from the Cincinnati Art Museum to the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. They use their penthouse to test out the newest purchases. "It gives us a chance to get familiar with them," says Ms. Brown.

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