

Deliberately designed: A couple's approach to creating their Near North Side townhouse



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By **Lisa Skolnik, Special to Tribune**

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Some homes come together in a snap. Others require a little more thought. And then, there are those that are weighed, debated ... pondered. Which was the approach a Chicago couple utilized — time and time again — while buying, renovating and furnishing a 2400 sq. ft. Near North Side townhouse built in 1981.

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more; well-reasoned trade-offs and fixtures, furnishings and artworks that can all be deemed forever finds that the couple will build on in the future — it also reflects today's sustainable mindset.

Even buying the home was an exercise in that ethos for the couple. "We had a long check list of requirements," admits the wife, who conducted the search. Tops on their list: Natural light, clean architectural lines, outdoor space, parking, room for the family they planned and proximity to shopping, public transportation and easy access to his job at a Loop bank, since he bicycles there year-round, regardless of snow or sleet.

After a two-year search, the house they found — with a giant skylight that floods the second level living areas with light and an enviable back courtyard — was almost a perfect fit. One caveat? It needed a total gut renovation, save for one bathroom.

Maximizing the square footage and performance quotient of the home, and imbuing it with the sleek, 21st Century aesthetic the couple admired, was accomplished in nine months with the help of architects Abby and Greg Randall, who run an eponymous River Forest firm. A friend recommended the husband-and-wife team, but Abby's "thoughtful, measured approach and passion for minimal design," — not to mention the appetite for culinary exploits she shares with the wife — earned them the job. "If we had a problem, she was clearly the type who would lay awake at night thinking about it until she figured it out," laughs the wife.

And despite the easy simplicity and understated elegance now evident in the home, there were plenty of complications that did just that, such as eking a powder room out of the already trim kitchen. But designing the kitchen itself, was the hardest part of the job, admits Abby.

"We had to flip it entirely around to fit the powder room in and still get all the features they wanted. And we had to work around some really awful structural details, like an ugly glass block wall that really made the room look outdated," she explains. Greg solved that problem with a frosted glass overlay that gives the natural light it yields intriguing luminescence.

Now, the trim kitchen also sports "an induction stovetop because it's fast, powerful and far more energy-efficient," says the wife. "But I added one high-octane gas burner because you really need it for certain culinary techniques, such as using a wok," she explains.

They also got an adjustable exhaust fan to account for their 11-inch height disparity; higher counters in the zone he uses most (the cleanup and coffee area); two sinks geared to specific functions and a hard-wearing honed finish on the marble island.

The tiny bathroom and outdated hearth on the first level were transformed into hardworking showstoppers — the former enlarged to accommodate a deep Japanese soaking tub, a spa-quality shower and storage, and the latter given a dramatic makeover with a completely redesigned limestone tile facade. New sliding glass doors lit up the master bedroom, and door headers were removed to accommodate the husband's height.

The couple was equally deliberative about their furnishings and art. A case in point is the dining room table, which required a three-month search. "We didn't want anything fussy made of materials we'd have to worry about with kids," explains the wife. They finally settled on a massive Corian and wood Established & Sons design from Luminaire.

Finding the right dining chairs — curvy to counter the table's lean, long lines; comfortable; and indestructible to withstand kids — took another three months. "We were eating at Terzo Piano (in the Modern Wing of the [Art Institute of Chicago](#)), saw the chairs ([Herman Miller's Nelson Swag Leg](#)), had a eureka moment and ordered them online," says the wife.

They had long-admired Ingo Maurer's 1998 Zettel's chandelier but still thought about it a year and "considered literally every other ceiling lamp in existence before we finally realized this is the perfect one because it's so free-form to balance the straight lines of our other pieces in the dining area," says the wife. "You can change it with what you choose to clip to the arms."

Only the sofa, Patricia Urquiola's Tufty Time designed in 2005, was a shoo-in. "We've loved it ever since it first came out, and it's incredibly comfortable. We can both lay on it side by side," says the wife.

Today, the architects have come to the same conclusion about considered design as the couple: "it takes a tremendous amount of thought and effort to create a lower-stress, more sustainable lifestyle. It's about making a place feel and live effortlessly," says the wife. "But the more you work on it, the happier you are with the results."

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