

NEXT PROGRESSIVES

# CLIENT CONNECTIONS

AT DSPACE STUDIO IN CHICAGO, FOUNDER KEVIN TOUKOUMIDIS FINDS THAT CHALLENGES BREED OPPORTUNITIES, AND THAT A CLIENT'S QUIRK CAN BE A PROJECT'S DRIVING INFLUENCE.



Introduction by **Danielle Rago**  
Portrait by **Ari Gabel**

**FOR CHICAGO-BASED** design firm dSPACE Studio, architecture is not only about the synthesis of art, science, and technology, but also about human connections. After earning his M.Arch. from Syracuse University, dSPACE founder and principal Kevin Toukoumidis, AIA, traveled the country, working in different cities before choosing to open his practice in Chicago in 2007, having fallen in love with all the city had to offer. Recently, Toukoumidis spoke to us about his burgeoning practice, now up to eight people, and his love of a challenge.

**Approaching a project:** When I started this firm, one thing that was important to me was not to lose track of my passion for

combining architecture, interior architecture, and landscape architecture. Our process looks at a holistic approach whenever possible. We're multifaceted, and we care about all of these different elements, phases, and aspects of a project, approaching every project with the idea of innovating and doing it better. Architecture is all about creating an experience, and if you can create an experience that people feel excited about, or even just get them to notice the architecture, it's just as important as creating architecture that is absolutely functional. We try to bring an element of fun and innovation. We want to enrich lives.

**Concern for the human element:** With the Wave, a seasonal three-dimensional art object that is a bench, lounge, table, and playground on Chicago's Southport Corridor neighborhood,

Kevin Toukoumidis and dSPACE Studio innovate whenever possible, mainly with projects in and around his adopted hometown of Chicago. Here, he takes a break at the Wave, a dynamic bench in the city's Southport Corridor neighborhood that doubles as almost anything else.

we were thinking about what a parklet could be, beyond tables, chairs, and coffee. So during the design phase, we looked through three lenses: architecture, landscape, and urbanism. It had to be a permanent piece of sculpture that was multifaceted and multifunctional, so we created this extremely comfortable, functional, and flexible space for lounging, relaxing, and reading that can be used 24/7. Whether it's the bar crowd on a Friday night or kids playing on a Sunday afternoon, it addresses the needs of many different age groups and uses.

We have a lot of clients that have very specific needs, and we tailor our design projects to work with how they live. For example, we have a client who was fond of fireman's poles when he was a kid, and right away we decided we had to put one in his house. And now that's how the family and kids get downstairs—they jump down the pole.

**Custom design:** We excel when we have clients who want to innovate with us. A lot of our clients hire us because they are looking for that and appreciate our process, because we're

really into the details, not just the big picture. When one piece touches another piece, how does it work, how does it feel, how does it look? Some of the things we love are the unexpected features, like the fireman's pole or the Wave parklet, which is completely unexpected in the middle of the city. All of these features are part of the innovation and creativity that make a project one-of-a-kind. We want people to walk by and have that sense of awe or inspiration when they use that space.

**Working with historic buildings:** A lot of our work in an urban environment is taking the old and adding something new onto it. In the Wicker Park Escape Pod project in Chicago, we added a steel-and-glass addition to an amazing brick Italianate two-story house. The result is an amazing contrast between this beautiful brick 1880s house and a contemporary addition, one with an aircraft hangar door and a roof deck with a hot tub.

**Climate control:** For us, the most important thing is making the building thermally

efficient. We're always considering how the sun enters the building. We're in a climate, here in Chicago, where we want the sunlight in the winter months. And we have these hot, humid summers, so it's really important to shield the interior from that harsh sunlight. We focus more on windows, insulation, and the thermal envelope than on anything else. If you can build a house that handles the weather and keeps the occupant comfortable, while minimizing the cost of fueling that house, then you've done a great job as an architect.

**On deck:** One project that we're working on is the contemporary glass-and-steel Sand Box beach house that is propped up on columns over a protected sand dune on Lake Michigan. It's going to be two floors and will have an amazing roof deck with a swimming pool. It's a 1,800-square-foot vacation house for a client that has a very large family that is used to having 6,000 square feet. So every space has been utilized, and we've had to be really creative. Anytime we get a challenge, it's actually something we look at as an opportunity.







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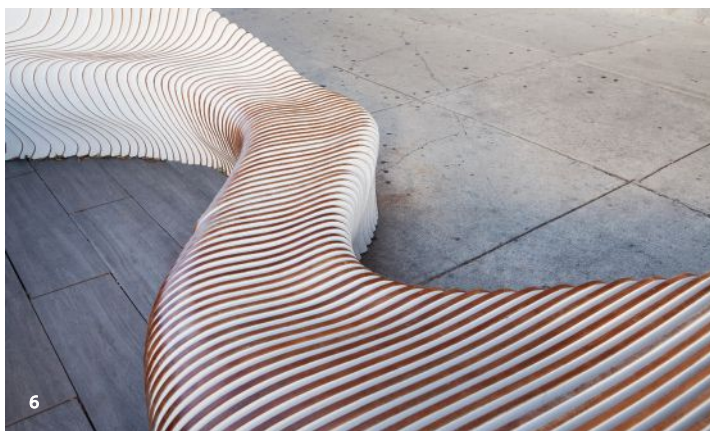
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**1:** The Rustic Modern Vacation Home was a victim of the Great Recession, with its construction halted during the downturn. Toukoumidis and company are hoping to find a client who will allow them to finish the house, which blends barn styling with a more contemporary aesthetic, and uses its linear form to maximize southern sun exposure. **2, 4:** In the Atrium House, a 2014 AIA Chicago Small Project Awards winner, stairs bend to become shelves and seating. The firm worked with the clients on a complete renovation of this 1978 house, and named it after the two-story central atrium, which clients felt was severely underused in the original design. **3:** In Wicker Park Escape Pod, a 2013 AIA Chicago Small Project Awards winner, the firm added a glass-and-steel volume to an existing Italianate house. **5:** The Sand Box house, located on the shore of Lake Michigan an hour outside of Chicago, supports a rooftop deck with a pool, has piers that lift the house over the protected dunes, and has an operable steel drawbridge staircase to access the beach. **6:** The Wave is a three-dimensional art project that won a 2014 AIA Chicago Small Project Award.