

# Bright exposure

BY R.J. WEICK



In transitioning from modernist brick home to one of playful contrast—complete with a three-story atrium capped with a pyramidal skylight—for its new owners, there was more than just additional natural light captured in the extensive renovation of the Chicagoan historic row house.

With its clean-lined, charcoal-hued metal addition; setback from its property lines; and large windows offering passers-by a glimpse of new life within; this contemporary home's edited palette of materials achieves a balance of modern-inspired warmth in which both architecture and unexpected features shine through.

For Kevin Toukoumidis, AIA, LEED, principal and founder at dSpace Studio Ltd., creating a sense of surprise and inspiration in the right-sized home for their clients—a young family of five—in its urban setting was important for the design team to achieve with the project.

“The fact that this family stayed and decided to have a city home instead of moving out into say the suburbs or more of a rural area was great and we wanted the home to have a sense of wonder,” Toukoumidis said.

“We know architecture can shape lives and experiences, especially of children and they have three young children who are going to grow up in this house. We certainly wanted to create an environment that can inspire them.”

dSpace Studio is an award-winning, full-service architectural firm employing nine architects on staff and specializing in architecture, interiors, and landscape services. For the last decade, the firm has built a portfolio consisting of both residential and small commercial work, such as urban and vacation homes, boutique restaurants, retail, and innovative office spaces. dSpace Studio also recently marked its 10th anniversary by completing an expansion project into the space adjacent to its own office location in Chicago.

“Our focus is on innovative architecture and our style is always generated from our clients. We want to tell a story with our project on our clients' lives, experiences, and things that are important to them—whether it is a fireman's pole in the home the kids can take from the second floor to the lockers in the mudroom, or designing around a family

heirloom dining table that has been passed down for generations,” Toukoumidis said. “It is very tailored to how our clients live.”

In transforming the existing brick home originally built in 1979 into the reinterpreted open-plan living space the new owners were looking to create, dSpace Studio began the design process by listening and learning about the clients and their needs. It quickly became apparent the vision or goal for the project would not be driven by increasing its spatial footprint, but rather by capturing natural sunlight into the home while reinterpreting the layout, flow, and size of rooms for a flexible home that could grow with a modern family.

“We felt square footage wasn't the driving goal of this house and that an innovative floorplan with a triple height atrium space with a glass roof to bring light into the home and a three-story glass wall with the staircase is very unique—especially to a city home—where we have to take advantage of light where there is opportunity,” Toukoumidis said.

“This house was designed more than 30 years ago—almost 40 years ago—and it had

not been touched. We built on the good aspects of the home and we transformed areas that needed to be reinvented,” Toukoumidis added.

The position of the home itself is rather unique for its urban setting in the Chicago neighborhood. Setback from the south property line since its initial construction, the brick house exchanged additional square footage for a glimpse of both sun and sky,

resulting in light to permeate through windows in the built environment. Building upon this existing infrastructure and idea, dSpace strove to maximize the use of space while creating an open layout that would allow for natural light to flood the deepest portions of the home.

Maintaining the shell of the home, dSpace extensively renovated the interior to accommodate a contemporary-inspired

kitchen with metal stove and range hood, and striking white countertops; dining room with a banquette and bay area; media and family room; and mudroom on the first floor that flowed effortlessly from one space to the next. While open, each space is defined and made distinctive by creative design solutions such as leveraging different ceiling heights, using a glass roof on one area, and installing a custom walnut ceiling plane that appears to float over the dining table.

“I think the design of this home relates to the client on a personal level. It is inspired by them. The materials that are in the home and the layout of the home are functional and beautiful,” Toukoumidis said. “The portion and scale were very important in this house and one of the most important things for us is you can see all the way through the home, which is unique in the city.”

The three-story home is complete with five bedrooms, including a master suite and spa-like bathroom, sundeck, and second-floor loft, which is left open to the kitchen below through the use of glass-paneled walls. The third-story addition, which was a structural feat not only from a construction standpoint, but also due to its location in a historic landmark district, features the master bedroom and bathroom, private sundeck, and lounge area. With the collaboration from a structural engineer and upon working through several review boards, the team was able to build the third floor onto the modernist home. Based on its limited footprint, dSpace also employed the use of ½-inch-thick sandblasted glass for a wall in the hallway since it allowed for an additional four-and-a-half inches that a normal wall would not have accommodated.

“We needed that space, so the glass became a really creative way to make the floor-plan work under the constraints we had. It also let the streaming light from the skylight from one side of the glass wall come into the room on the other side, which is the master bathroom,” Toukoumidis said. “You have the benefit of shared light.”

While the interior layout and the third-story addition are feats in their own right, it is the dramatic staircase suspended in the atrium below the pyramidal skylight that truly leaves a visual impression in the home. It ascends in sculptural fashion alongside a floor-to-ceiling glass wall, its steel elements tempered by the open and warm wood treads, and glass railings that allow for light and sight through and among the staircase.

“It is suspended in this atrium space so as you walk up each stair, you are walking along a glass current wall that is softened with a mesh drapery, you have this warmth of the material and the natural light flooding



in, and the lightness of an open-tread staircase all supported on simple, raw, natural black steel—which has patina to it to add to the warmth and richness of the home,” Toukoumidis said.

There is also the matter of the custom-designed chandelier that appears to float effortlessly in the center of the open atrium. Engineered to hang from the skylight, the chandelier was carefully placed within reach to change lightbulbs, but not close enough for small hands belonging to a child to touch the pivoting rods of light.

“It is a very dynamic light fixture,” Toukoumidis said.

“I think we are inspired by adding unexpected features to our work,” Toukoumidis added.

At a glance, the visual aesthetic of the home is simple—intentionally so—to allow the architecture to speak and shine. The edited palette offers a timeless design to the renovated home, and weaves a cohesive ambience throughout the three levels.

“We work hard to have an edited material palette that is thoughtful and allows for a cohesive feel and experience through the home,” Toukoumidis said. “It really provides a calming environment that highlights the architecture.”

From the white walls that not only allow natural light to bounce and reflect deep into the house, but also provide a beautiful backdrop for the owners art and photography collection; to the contrasting dark-stained wooden floor, and metal accents; the home achieves a balance of richness and depth with its more modern-inspired foundation. The home also features custom walnut cabinetry designed to conceal everyday necessities and provides a unified thread as it weaves from the kitchen, wet bar, and media room to the master bathroom vanity.

“For the addition, we chose a very quiet and elegant dark metal so it doesn’t overwhelm the existing architecture. We really embraced our intervention as a point in time in the history of this house from 2017 and the original house from 1979 we kept intact, especially the front façade, windows, and doors,” Toukoumidis said. “It certainly respects the modernist brick home that was designed by an architect in 1979 and is a home the neighbors love.”

The residential project, which has gone on to receive a 2016 AIA Chicago Award Winner Citation of Merit for a small project between 1,001 square-feet and 5,000 square-feet, was completed by dSpace Studio in collaboration with Goldberg General Con-

tractors, Stay Straight, Dynamic Iron, and Illinois Glassworks. Sustainable elements were also integrated into the project, such as a high-efficiency mechanical system, durable finishes, energy efficient LED lighting, a green roof, and an upgraded thermal building envelope.

“Our clients are design-forward and really have a commitment to quality design, so they are inspired by good design, they are inspired by art, and they are inspired by travel; just like us,” Toukoumidis said. “Designing a home is a very intimate process and we really want to understand their lifestyle and help them think about the future. Good design improves the quality of life.”

With its rich brick and striking metal façade, large picture windows blurring the boundaries between interior and exterior environments—in many ways reiterating its connection with the neighborhood—and its setting in an almost quintessential-like neighborhood within its larger urban surroundings, it is not difficult to imagine the sense of wonder one may experience while gazing upon the unexpected surprise nestled between historic buildings.

“It is a really unique home that has a playful contrast to its neighboring historic row homes,” Toukoumidis said.

