

By opening up the atrium of a historic residence in Chicago, an architect shows it may take more than a first (or second) draft to make a home.

Let There Be Light

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PROJECT
Atrium House
ARCHITECT
dSPACE Studio
LOCATION
Chicago, Illinois



In Chicago's Buena Park, dSPACE Studio transformed a disorganized 1978 home into a bright retreat that revolves around an expanded atrium. SoCo pendant lights by Tech Lighting draw the eye up to the double-height light well.

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Taking advantage of the improved atrium was a priority (right). "They wanted to eat in the sunlight, that's what pushed the breakfast area into this space," architect Kevin Toukoumidis says. Because the house is located in a historic area, the exterior updates were limited to new windows and ipe cladding around the front door (below).



**"If you can make a room flow without hallways, you've done a good job."
—Kevin Toukoumidis, architect**

Defining interior spaces often becomes a matter of perspective. When Eric and Nicolette Nijensohn began searching for a family home in Chicago in 2011, they expected to end up in a multistory space on a narrow urban site—imagine a series of stacked levels like in the film *The Royal Tenenbaums*. But when they stumbled upon the perfect spot in the Buena Park neighborhood—a sleepy stretch of historic homes within walking distance of Wrigley Field—they found themselves dealing with different conditions altogether.

Set upon three connected city lots, the two-story brick building they chose was spread out horizontally, but its disjointed interior was suffering from multiple personality disorder. From an atrium that recalled a Spanish hacienda to a 1970s-style kitchen and a living room decked out with antelope horns, the house needed light and latitude. A *Chicago Tribune* article about the structure, originally designed by Marcel Freides in 1978, quotes a confused neighbor inquiring about when the new public library had arrived on the block.

To remodel the house, the Nijensohns recruited someone who, they'd learned, had already attempted to reimagine it. A year earlier, architect Kevin Toukoumidis and his team at dSPACE Studio had drawn up plans to turn the home into a bachelor pad and hired a contractor before the potential client decided to sell. The firm agreed to rework the house's eccentric layout to fit a family with two children and a dog. The result was a radical change without dramatic intervention. >



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First Floor



Second Floor

Atrium House Plan

- A** Living Room
- B** Entrance
- C** Office
- D** Half Bathroom
- E** Bathroom
- F** Studio/Bedroom
- G** Garage
- H** Family Room
- I** Kitchen
- J** Atrium
- K** Dining Room
- L** Master Bedroom
- M** Master Bathroom
- N** Bedroom



To create privacy, the residents opted to keep the family room separate from the other living spaces (above). The sofa, chair, and rug are from Room & Board. In the updated kitchen, Ernestomeda cabinets are paired with quartz countertops, a Miele cooktop, and a faucet from Dornbracht (below).

“How do you take this space and make it great?” was Toukoumidis’s first question when tasked with the project. “It wasn’t about a mass gutting of the property, it was about how you chip away and bring new life to the space.”

While Toukoumidis altered the entire floor plan, slicing away at walls like a surgeon with a scalpel, his bold gesture helped to remove any fortress associations from the building. The house was originally planned to be U-shaped around a central courtyard, which was closed off during construction, leaving a small atrium at the center. Toukoumidis decided to transform that add-on into the centerpiece, aiming to turn the resulting two-story well of light into a focal point. The skylight was doubled in size to a 10-by-20-foot pane that lets sunlight shine through the glass railing on the second floor. On the right evening, it frames the full moon.

“In the end, I wanted light and simplicity, clear-cut lines to give the home some warmth,” says Nicolette.

While the atrium illuminates, the redesigned area below provides an additional feeling of openness. Curved banquette seating angled around a sunken floor resembles a streamlined amphitheater, a reference reinforced by the unlikely choice of material: concrete. To satisfy the clients’ desire for curved seating to break up the home’s straight lines, while being careful not to overload the interior supports, dSPACE Studio >





**“It bothers me when you have too much of the same thing—it becomes boring.”
—Nicolette Nijensohn, resident**

A wall of bamboo adjacent to the atrium floor provides a dramatic and seductive green entrance—“natural art,” Eric calls it (left). Sistemalux’s integrated LED Step lighting adds a dynamic touch to a passageway (below).



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“When people walk in, they’re amazed to see a glass atrium in the center of the room.”
—Kevin Toukoumidis

A newly expanded window over the atrium allows glimpses of the surrounding neighborhood (left). A freestanding Antonio Lupi tub defines the updated master bath (below). Previously a maze of partitions divided the sauna, bath, sink, and toilet areas (right), the master bath now features an open-plan layout and a skylight by Velux.



experimented with applying spray-on concrete to fabricated pieces of medium-density fiberboard. The resulting seating, soft to the touch, offers both a sense of permanence and a center for family activity.

Like the light that streams through the glass roof, a feeling of free movement filters through the home. Where the main floor was initially a series of uneven platforms and stairs, with hallways connecting back rooms, dSPACE leveled it out and created perspective, knocking down a wall and adding a breakfast nook. A limited material palette and oversize four-by-four-foot porcelain floor tiles connect rooms while magnifying their size. LED lighting set behind handrails, in shade pockets, and around the floor trim draws subtle attention to various architectural features.

“There was already a ton of space, so the biggest challenge was how to reinvent it,” says Toukoumidis. “We could have said, ‘Let’s take this away and have four columns,’ but that would have been incredibly invasive.”

While the transformed atrium in the Nijensohns’ home cuts a unique profile, with Brutalist benches that look like the steps of some university, the space functions more like a hearth—a warm gathering place for family activity. “You get the kids chasing the dog in a circle, a circle around the hearth,” says Eric. “That’s what I love.” □

