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once upon a dive bar

by steve slack

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When a French poker player and a practical lawyer say 'I do' to an old Chicago saloon, they prove love—and a good architect—conquers all.



ON A GET-ACQUAINTED TOUR OF HER NEW NEIGHBORHOOD IN CHICAGO'S BOHEMIAN BUCKTOWN AREA, Jacquie Vidmar mentioned to a group of locals that she and her husband had just bought property on the next block and were getting ready to renovate.

"Oh," one said. "You must have bought the house across the street from that dive bar that's such an eyesore."

Jacquie paled. "No, actually we bought that dive bar that's such an

eyesore," she said. She had had her misgivings before, but now she felt them in spades.

The building that Jacquie, an attorney specializing in environmental law, and her husband, Jean Francois Gribinski, a writer and professional poker player, own had been a beloved watering hole for working-class Polish families. Down on its luck and down at the heels, the bar closed in the mid-1990s and was divided into apartments.

LEFT: Jacquie Vidmar (with daughter Julia) ordered this maple cabinet to box in the kitchen and create a foyer. On the entry side is a built-in coat closet. On the kitchen side are storage and a built-in refrigerator. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Matte-black steel plates replaced plate glass windows to ensure privacy in the Chicago bar-turned-home.





"We had looked all over for a house in the city we could buy," Jacquie says. "Jean Francois had always wanted to live in a loft. I am so traditional—I wanted a nice single-family home. When we saw this place, my husband said, 'It's perfect.' And I was like, 'Are you kidding me?'" It was this dilapidated building on the corner. It had broken glass in the front, Pepto-Bismol-pink brick, and a crumbling chimney. I couldn't believe it. Jean Francois was saying, "That's it! That's the house."

His rapture, it turns out, revolved around a quaint, though under-employed, coach house that was attached to the upper level of the old bar via a dangerously unstable two-story walkway. Previous owners had used the building for storage. Although Jacquie saw only a two-story dump with no parking, her husband and Chicago

BELOW: Minimal walls throughout the loftlike main level demanded carving out cabinet storage areas wherever possible. The dark band above the cabinets is painted drywall, which mimics the iron headers that encircle the exterior of the home.



• the luxury of privacy

Even in an open, loft-style living space, privacy is an attainable amenity. In Jacquie Vidmar's kitchen, transoms are used instead of standard windows to admit glorious light but deny prying eyes. Also along the streetside wall, a bank of cabinets muffles city noise, allowing for quiet family time.



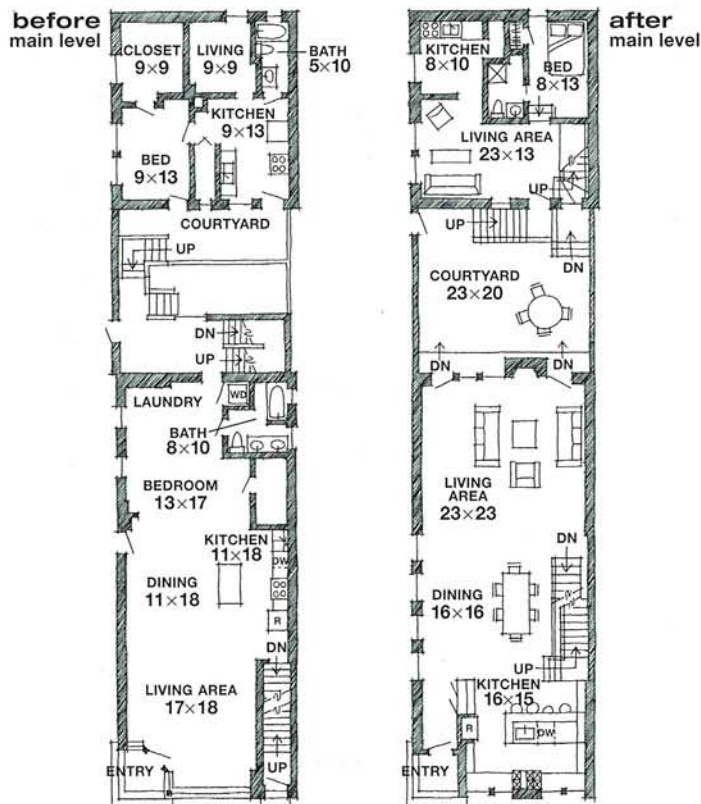
architect Fred Wilson of Morgante-Wilson Architects began to envision an urban dwelling with industrial-chic components—warm, but with a contemporary edge that fit this trend-setting neighborhood.

Eventually the “dive” began to develop into an artful arrangement of highly differentiated, functional spaces—a loflike main level, unstructured, open, and bathed in sunshine; an

upper-level getaway with tucked-away closets and luxurious baths; and, finally, Jean Francois’ loft, hidden away in the antique coach house.

“At first, the architects were trying to figure a way to create the feeling of rooms in the open space where the old bar used to be,” Jacquie says. “They were talking about using columns to do that, and then Jean Francois said, ‘But I will run into them when I dance.’”

ABOVE: A stone courtyard between the main house and the 1890s-era coach house is both a fair-weather extension of the main living space and a transitional area to the more secluded environment of the coach house. The staircase leads to a guest apartment, and the bridge reaches from the main house’s master bedroom to a writing loft. **RIGHT:** A glass-top dining table in the middle of the long, open main level separates the kitchen from the living area. The steel staircase is affixed to vertical steel wall supports.









Warm, lightly stained oak flooring and flowing silk draperies provide textural contrast to the raw-steel, wood-burning fireplace that dominates the far end of the living room. Floor-to-ceiling windows looking out on a courtyard and the coach house flank the fireplace, giving it an even more dramatic presence.



before



OPPOSITE: In counterpoint to the main level, with openness enough for waltzing, Jacquie says, "Upstairs is the traditional family home I wanted—bedrooms with doors that close and everything." RIGHT: The centerpiece of the master bath is the whirlpool, which sits between dual shower and vanity areas. BELOW RIGHT: Serene soaks in the tub gain decadent atmosphere from an Absolute Black granite deck and sculptural Roman tub set with hand shower.

He wasn't kidding. "I wanted room to waltz," Jean Francois says. "I don't mean a metaphor. I mean I wanted to be able to waltz around the room—that much open space."

The architects redrew the main-level plans to emphasize openness and a linear floor plan. The kitchen anchors one end of the long, rectangular space. It's balanced at the other end by a massive, raw-steel fireplace. Like a sculpture, an open steel staircase climbs the wall, hanging almost like a mobile from the upper level.

"It actually looks fragile," Wilson says. He designed the staircase and worked with a metalsmith, who welded and pounded the stair parts into shape in the home's basement.

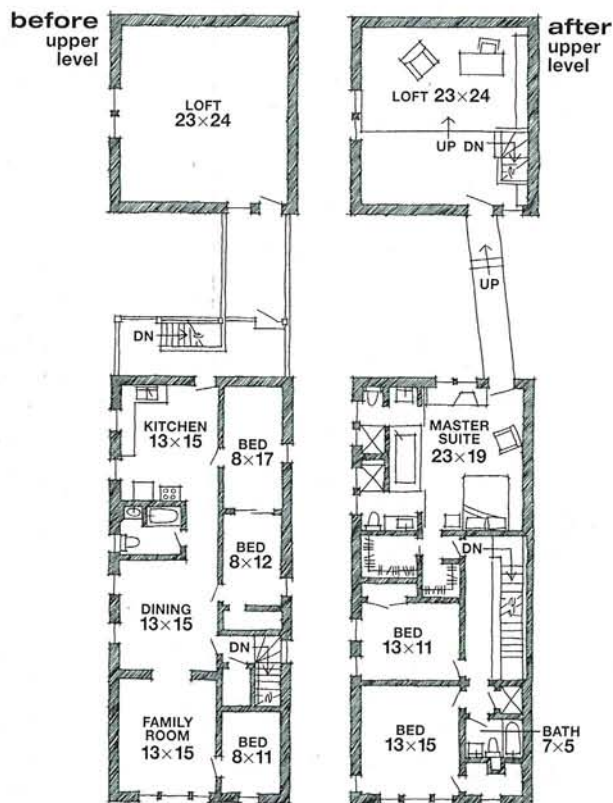
"The strength of steel allowed us to make the staircase very minimal—very delicate and very light," Wilson

says. "What I thought was cool about this is that we could use the strength of the actual steel and keep the pieces very thin."

Loftlike elements—exposed brick and a series of floor-to-ceiling windows—satisfy Jean Francois' tastes, though the architects had to use some opaque glass in the lower window frames for privacy.

"There were compromises we had to make," Jacquie says. "Just like our marriage is [based on] compromises. He is a risk taker, flamboyant. I am practical, and he is dramatic. In the end, it really is about us, though. We tried not to have preconceived notions about what a home is supposed to be like. It is like us." ■

Architect: Fred Wilson, Morgante-Wilson Architects
For more information, turn to Sources on page 118.



the luxury of privacy

Sliding partitions allow the bathroom to be subdivided in several ways, opening for gregarious morning chats and closing for rejuvenating evening retreats. The whirlpool can be enclosed with glass, or doors on either end can be moved to create shower stalls.