

Emotional rescue



When two architects tackle a renovation gone wrong, the result is a home that perfectly marries her yin to his yang

By Tiffany Meyers
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It's a story that starts, as all good page-turners should, with a moment of high drama.

Thanksgiving weekend 2004: Elissa Morgante and Fred Wilson hear a knock on the door of their Wilmette home. It's their neighbor.

He's in over his head, he says. Way over. And he wants out.

More specifically, he wants out of the renovation he has undertaken on his house across the street, a do-it-yourself gut job that has gone horribly wrong. The-whole-house-shakes-when-you-jump wrong.

He wants to know: Can his architect neighbors think of anyone who might take it off his hands?

The founders of the award-winning, Evanston-based architecture and interior design firm Morgante Wilson Architecture, whose residential projects (there are eight on

this block alone) range in style from Georgian to ultramodern, head across the street to survey the scene.

With the entire back wall removed, the home can't be resuscitated. It's nearly tipping over. But Morgante and Wilson know that a host of developers would be pleased to buy the land and throw up a new McEyesore in its place. And, from across the street, guess who would have the best view?

The couple's intervention seemed only natural.

What happens next, in this old house tale, has to do with reinvention and real life. Not to mention a love story.

"We thought about it for all of three minutes before we realized we should buy it," says Morgante, peering at the house she and Wilson built on the site.

Morgante and Wilson, partners in life and design, fell in love while earning graduate degrees in archi-



In the master bath, a sculptural tub's curves contrast with angled cabinets.



The exterior of Elissa Morgante and Fred Wilson's home marries Chicago common brick with other local materials, such as Indiana limestone and Douglas fir. **JON MILLER/HEDRICHBLESSING PHOTOS**

ecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Disregarding his lack of culinary finesse, Wilson offered to cook Morgante a meal.

What, other than nascent love, could have rendered insignificant the bachelor-style menu of spaghetti, onion soup and root beer floats? (Wilson believes this crowd-pleasing dessert saved him.) But, anyway, dinner was beside the point. They got married in 1987.

They're one of those enviably in-tune couples who finish each other's sentences, and something similar happens in their work. Wilson is fastidious, Morgante organic—and, as they design homes, one tendency completes the other.

"When we're both on a project, you get this very layered approach to design," says Morgante.

That's why, on the home's exterior, you'll find 1880s Chicago common brick—all that was left of the original house and a dairy barn in back—living out its new millennial life, along with local materials such

as Indiana limestone and stained Douglas fir. "Even though these are all ordinary materials, everything is bespoke," says Morgante, "because they're woven together in a way that's not ordinary at all."

Inside, the materials are as cutting edge as the exterior brick is "Chicago common." Even so, every element allies with nature in some way. In the first-floor powder room, for instance, a translucent, back-lit wall is embedded with thick stalks of prairie grass. In the dining room, carved panels of undulating, cream-colored waves form the doors of a custom-designed buffet.

Architecturally, the interior hosts a running conversation between angles and gentle slopes. Upstairs, a hallway arcs across the second floor like a dancer's leg in a *rond de jambe*, turning what would have been a long, straight hike from A to B into an elegant gesture. Elsewhere, expressed dormers and vaulted ceilings play off curved walls.

The dining room in particular is



In the dining room, repeating shapes give the space rhythm.

museum-worthy. An Italian brass chandelier is swathed in flaky gold leaflike good chocolate in its foil packaging. Underfoot, a cowhide



The family room is designed to be both comfortable and high-end.

rug in ivory subtly references the waves that move, in sculptural relief, across the custom buffet.

But MWA doesn't do museum

homes. People eat pizza in this room. Life happens in this house. Three kids happen. So does a cat named Kubie. But the overall look holds—because the architects made sure of it. That cowhide rug, for instance, earned its place in the room only after passing Morgante's red wine test (it wipes right off).

The dining table—the room's focal point—is the aesthetic and functional inverse of the Chippendale furniture the family had lived with (or rather, lived around) for two decades. "It was beautiful furniture," says Wilson. "But it was also intimidating. And because the furniture took so much work, the dining room became this space no one ever used."

Morgante and Wilson had to get fancy for the inherited Chippendale table, in other words, hauling out the protective pads, tablecloths and silverware. Today, the antique is resting comfortably in storage. And the new table—a custom design using a color-infused, semi-transparent resin by manufacturer 3form—works with modern life as it is.

"When you design a home properly, it can help people live their lives—including all the activities of having a family—without disrupting the overall aesthetic," says Wilson. "It's difficult to achieve, but when you do, you have a home that doesn't need to be a stage set to look good."

On one dining room wall, more than a dozen black-and-white family photos hang in frames of various sizes and shapes. The composition keeps the cluster of images from dissolving into chaos: Taken together, the frames form a unified shape, which shows up on the opposite wall, where the same thing happens—only with color photos.

Clearly, it's an expression of family love. But, conceptually, the wall arrangements also call to mind the partners' point of view as designers: that the best-designed homes can hold it all, every part of daily life—big and small, color and black and white, pizza and Thanksgiving and cats and kids—without ever losing sense of the crisp, clean shape of things overall.