

NESTING INSTINCT

A designer builds a stylish foundation that celebrates a young couple's life together.

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Interior Design: Michael Abrams, Gina Valenti and Robert Diamond, Michael Abrams Interiors Home Builder: Marcin Bijos, Superior Pad Construction
Landscape Architecture: Jake Gazlay, Chicago Roof Deck + Garden, and Benjamin Himschoot and Clare Johnson, Himsben Design Studio

There's something undeniably romantic about assembling one's first real home as a married couple. Beyond paint swatches and the search for that perfect sofa, a home is a poetic declaration of what is yet to come. This was true for an engaged Chicago couple who found their future abode in Bucktown. Dreams of barbecues, family gatherings and lazy Sunday afternoons crystallized in this dwelling, with its spacious rooms, outdoor deck and tall ceilings flooded with natural light.

When it came to furnishings, the couple was unafraid to start from scratch, looking to acquire all new pieces for the main living spaces. They embraced the opportunity to develop their shared sensibility, says designer Michael Abrams, whom they recruited to flesh out their residence in time for their spring wedding. "They were creating their first true home together," explains Abrams. "They wanted this house to reflect that."

Working closely with Abrams, design director Gina Valenti and senior designer Robert Diamond, the couple felt drawn to a tailored aesthetic, defined by a pared-down palette and streamlined furnishings. The existing interior, however, didn't match this style. Built circa 2000, the house was bogged down with outdated details like thickly painted cabinetry and clunky brick fireplaces. Alongside builder Marcin Bijos, the team revived these spaces with crisp white crown molding set against black doors and window frames. They also replaced the bulky fireplaces with streamlined mantles. These new additions feature rich finishes like Venetian plaster and hand-applied concrete, "which added tremendous texture," notes Abrams.

The greatest structural transformation happened in the kitchen, rebuilt from the ground up. As part of the expansive open-plan family area, the previous kitchen seemed disproportionately small. "They have these airy spaces you don't always get in Chicago, but the kitchen was just wedged in the corner, not making the most of the space," notes Valenti. With clean lines and smoky oak woodwork, the new generously-sized Italian cabinetry and island helped the kitchen feel more integrated into the home.

Color also proved key to building cohesion. For furnishings, Abrams favored the classic simplicity of black and white with soft notes of blue.

Yet simple doesn't mean dull, as the designer introduced nuance by mixing various materials and textures. Upholstery played with subtle variation, from speckled wools to geometric patterns. Wood surfaces were blackened into a dark rich hue that still preserved the natural grain. Accent pieces brought swaths of glossy ink tones, like the family room's river-stone-style cocktail table and modular steel bookcases flanking the fireplace. For a more serene effect, the couple's bedroom included cool slate blues.

However, when it came to establishing a new art collection, the couple steered in a slightly different direction. "When choosing the artwork, they trusted us and made some interesting selections with bold colors and unique forms," says Diamond. Abrams incorporated Chicago artists to help ground the home in the city's deep well of contemporary art. This Midwestern pride shines through in pieces like a photograph diptych by Lincoln Schatz in the family area and a vibrant abstract piece by painter Colt Seager in the monochrome living room. "Art is paramount to me," explains Abrams. "Outside of people, it's art that evokes the emotion in a room."

The outdoor space also begged for personality, especially the deck. "Maximizing the square footage was key for this intimate urban backyard," says landscape designer Jake Gazlay. The small structure was replaced by a larger elevated platform to accommodate room for lounging, dining and grilling. Gazlay favored durable materials that didn't sacrifice style, like hardy ipe wood fencing and porcelain tile with bluestone finish. He then brought in landscape architects Benjamin Himschoot and Clare Johnson to create a colorful setting using hearty evergreens, classic boxwoods and ivy, as well as a seasonal rotation of annual plantings.

This dramatic transformation was unexpectedly disrupted by the pandemic, which also ultimately dashed the couple's spring wedding plans. The team rallied to complete the space, feeling a deep duty to provide an abode that could be an anchor for the couple, who eventually married in the fall. For Abrams, changing a dated dwelling into something that felt completely theirs was the most rewarding. "It's very much a new home," says the designer. "We delivered an incredible transformation for them to start their life together." ■



The team at Michael Abrams Interiors updated a Chicago couple's abode with modern maturity—achieved by streamlining key interior architectural details like the main stair railing. They also worked with the clients to build their art collection, with new pieces including *Winter Sky* by Kate Drewniak, displayed on the landing, and two handmade block prints from Los Angeles-based Block Shop over the Noir console.



Right: Starting from scratch, the team created a modern kitchen that felt more suitable in scale to the large space, featuring custom cabinets fabricated by Vesta, Caesarstone countertops and a Thermador range. They composed a gathering space by the island with Blu Dot counter stools and a Sonneman fixture.

Opposite: Following the home's overall focus on simple yet sophisticated design, the dining area features timeless pieces like a Hickory Chair table and upholstered chairs by Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams. Above hangs a chandelier by Tech Lighting. Artwork by Atlasbaba overlooks the space.





Above: When selecting furnishings and finishes, the couple favored colors that would stand the test of time. Cue the family room, which features classic black accents like the glossy River Stone cocktail table by Phillips Collection and two sleek steel bookcases by Robert James Collection. The streamlined fireplace was also refinished in textured concrete by Concrete Age Artworks.

Opposite: The couple's beloved pup, Blueberry, presides over this cozy corner of the family room, complete with a matching Blu Dot lounge chair and ottoman set, and a marble side table from CB2. Behind hangs a breathtaking diptych by Chicago-based artist Lincoln Schatz. The piece is from his ongoing "Lake Series" photographing views of Lake Michigan.





Above: For the powder room, "We wanted to keep that space a statement, as it's where your guests are going to come and visit," says Abrams. So, the designer composed a dramatic, moody atmosphere with a black Vycon wallcovering, a dark custom floating vanity by Builders Cabinet Supply and a glass Teardrop pendant by Tracy Glover Studio. Artworks by Gail Peter Borden add jewel-toned pops of color.

Opposite: The team layered soothing gray and blue hues throughout the main bedroom with a Villa Nova wallcovering, a custom chair covered in Zoffany fabric by Urban Craft Upholstery and window treatments made by Unique Creations using Zinc Textile fabric. Above hangs a pendant light by Crystorama.



Taking advantage of precious Chicago sun, the outdoor deck was transformed into a true entertainment area by landscape designer Jake Gazlay. The designers fleshed out the new gathering space with a Cane-line outdoor sectional sofa, a Janus et Cie lounge chair and a Gloster dining set.

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—JAKE GAZLAY