



**A MIX OF TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY DETAILS**  
*The combination of Victorian columns with steel I-beams, and antique furniture with new furnishings works well for a modern family, while respecting the building's history.*

A growing family turns a dramatic 19th-century townhouse into a contemporary home filled with natural light

BY JESSICA KEENER

# New life behind old walls

A third child was on the way, but Susan and Ian Schwartz had no intention of leaving their eclectic neighborhood in Chicago's Lincoln Park to live in the suburbs. They needed more space for their growing family, but they loved the Victorian townhouses that lined the streets and they were comfortable in the urban setting with its proximity to parks and shopping.

## Harmonizing old and new

"Ian and I wanted a house that was old on the outside and new on the inside," says Susan Schwartz.

While the typical Chicago row house sits on a narrow lot about 25 feet wide by 125 deep and has small, dark rooms, the house they finally bought was an exception. Built in the 1880s as two apartments and later converted to three, the building, with its classic red brick façade and pink sandstone lintels, gave no indication of modernity. Inside, however, asymmetrical spaces and a light-saturated atrium circulating through its core told a



**KEEPING THE HISTORIC CONTEXT**  
A Victorian façade belies the modern, asymmetrical spaces and light-filled atrium inside. The newest part of the house, the family room (top), is a big, bright space open to the breakfast area and kitchen. It serves as a casual retreat for Ian Schwartz and his youngest child, Justin.



The open stairwell  
allows light  
into previously dark  
hallways and rooms.

A narrow lot and nearby neighbors made side windows a less than attractive option for bringing light into the house. As an alternative, Morgante-Wilson Architects took a daring tack. They tore down bearing walls and gutted the structure so the front and two masonry sides were all that remained. They inserted new beams and posts, punched a hole through the roof to create a dramatic skylight, and built a three-story staircase in the middle of the house. The resulting open stairwell allows light into previously dark hallways and rooms.

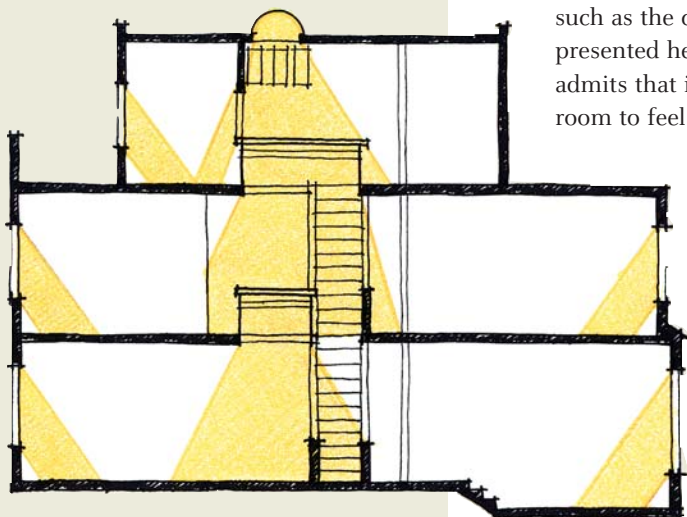
Even though the central stairs eat up space, “most people are willing to give that up to gain sunlight,” says Elissa Morgante. “We knew it was really important to get sunlight in there and to make the space flow so the rooms didn’t feel so small.”



## Abundant daylight from above

**B**ecause many of the interior walls were replaced with steel beams and columns, this townhouse is open on all floors to light from the skylight shining down through the atriumlike stairwell.

In addition, clerestory windows above the floor-to-ceiling bookcases, which start on the first floor and end on the third, let in even more light (above).



far more contemporary story. This row house, formerly owned by another family with children, had been strikingly remodeled by Morgante-Wilson Architects (see sidebar, facing page).

The townhouse had been gutted and then reshaped with a fresh interior. Steel beams and columns meant fewer walls were needed; a skylight and open stairwell filled the house with light. “The funky architecture and the exposed beams and columns are something I never would have envisioned,” says Susan. “Yet it’s very successful in its drama.”

The firm completed the renovation by adding a three-story addition to the back of the house. This allowed for a family room with cathedral ceiling off the kitchen, a good-size master bedroom suite on the second floor, and a library and a fourth bedroom at the top (see floor plan, p. 76). Before moving into the townhouse, the Schwartzes enlisted Morgante-Wilson to renovate the garden level to include an apartment suite, a children’s playroom, and an exercise room.

“That the reconstruction has worked so well for two families is very fulfilling,” says architect Elissa Morgante.

### Small changes make a big difference

With so much going on architecturally, Susan, who worked part-time as an interior designer until the birth of their third child, found herself in a quandary. Many of the structural elements that intrigued her, such as the columns and stairway, simultaneously presented her with a furnishing challenge. She admits that it took some patience to get the living room to feel right. She flip-flopped the couch one way, then another, regrouping it with upholstered chairs around an area rug, and finally came up with an arrangement that suited her.

Susan found that her decorating tastes differed significantly from the previous owners’. In the master bathroom, she replaced the pink marble vanity tops with white. She also chose white for the first-floor steel I-beams, which had been painted green. “I



**WARMING UP THE MASTER BEDROOM** Chimney flues split above the fireplace, making room for a picture niche and a small window high up on the wall.



For visual consistency,  
start with a  
**neutral palette**  
and add repeated  
**accent colors.**

#### TONE DOWN WITH NEUTRALS

The use of neutrals as a consistent, unifying design element is seen throughout the house. Quiet colors

**R**epeating colors is a good strategy for harmonizing rooms, says Susan Schwartz. “The rooms relate to each other better and have visual consistency.”

With white walls and neutral tones for the larger pieces of furniture—the dining room chairs are slipcovered in taupe, the living room couch is gray—Susan applied livelier colors to throw pillows and floor coverings.

The tomato-red rug in the living room (photo, above) is echoed in the red hues of the pillows as well as in the striping in the family room’s window seat cushions (top photo, facing page). Similar window treatments throughout the house, like the white venetian blinds, contribute to the home’s serene ambience. Lamp shades are white, tailored, and similar in style. Repetition in something as simple as lamp shades organizes the interior, giving a calm and cohesive feel to the house.



are repeated in all the rooms, brightened here and there with splashes of color.

Susan stained the natural-oak handrail (above) to match the dark wood floors on the first level. Initially, she did not like the look of the copper pipe running beneath the handrail, but once she stained the wood, the copper became a subtle accent.

Originally green, columns and beams were repainted white to blend (left). The result is that the architectural details are revealed subtly, in shadow and light.



## PUNCH UP WITH COLOR

A red leather accent pillow, striped window-seat cushion, chunky wood table, and cozy celadon chair combine to make this a warm and welcoming area in the family room (top).

From the first floor to the third, the white bookcase serves as a blank canvas for colorful books and photographs (center).

The second floor landing offers a bright spot to stop and rest. Cushions in a crisp red and royal blue stand out boldly in a sea of white.



didn't want to call attention to the beams. I wanted them to blend," she says. By choosing a neutral backdrop, she gained the flexibility to change colors with accents: "I knew if I didn't like a color I wouldn't have to repaint the whole house."

Similarly, in the living room she painted the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves—formerly two-toned natural oak and white—all white. This put the emphasis on the books, not the shelves, and brought a sense of tradition, warmth, and coziness to the asymmetrical space.

Continuing her customization, Susan replaced shiny brass faucets in the bathrooms with brushed nickel. "I think nickel has a richer look than brass," she says. She switched knobs on the bedroom doors from brass to antique bronze and stained the doors a darker hue. The result unifies the color scheme in the second- and third-floor bedrooms and baths.

Other subtle changes included replacing a glass-block window in the master bath with a traditional venting window. "I thought the block looked dated," she says, "and it's nice to have fresh air in the bath."

A clear preference for contemporary lines and neutral tones drove many of the changes. "Susan had a vision," says Ian. "Her changes made a big difference."

## Making the house work for family

But some things can't be altered with color or easily remedied. The three steps separating the kitchen from the breakfast area have turned out to be a minor inconvenience (and doing something about them would be expensive). With small children, it would be nice if it were all on one level, says Susan. "We're always forgetting something in the kitchen when we're sitting down at the table to eat."

The main stairwell's safety was another cause for concern when the Schwartzes first moved in, but even with three children under the age of seven, it has not been a problem. "We established stringent rules," says Susan pointedly. "I tell the kids to stay off the railing. No climbing. Don't throw



*A departure from the rest of the house, this child's bedroom is painted a lively green.*

# A townhouse gets a dramatic makeover with more space and natural light.

The old interior was dark, getting most of its light from windows on the front and back. The redesigned house revolves around a center atrium stairwell that brings daylight into the core of the house. In the living and dining areas, columns and beams—rather than walls—define the rooms but allow them to remain open and receive light from above.

An addition in the back made space for a family room adjoining the kitchen on the first floor and a master bedroom suite on the second floor. An extra room on the third floor was turned into a library. Bisected by the central stairwell, the first floor is divided into public and private areas. And while the second floor accommodates kids' and parents' rooms, the third floor bedroom is dramatically separated from the library by a bridge.





**CABINETS FLOAT BETWEEN THE KITCHEN AND BREAKFAST ROOM**  
 Custom kitchen cabinets act like a wall between the kitchen and the eating area. The wood grid above the cabinets lets light flow into the kitchen from windows at the rear of the house. Three steps down from the kitchen is the breakfast area, with its modern take on school chairs and a long, cushioned bench. Mom can watch the goings-on through an opening in the upper cabinets.

things over the edge. They've heard it so many times, they've accepted it as the way it is."

In fact, waist-high walls form protective sides to the atrium. A wide hallway, thickly carpeted, wraps generously around the stairwell on the second floor. The hallway, which links the girls' bedrooms and master bedroom, offers a comfortable space for the children to play. "We spend a lot of time up here," says Susan.

"In terms of everyday living, the house makes sense to me," says Ian. "It's not missing anything. It's very functional and versatile." The same can be said for his wife's redecorating efforts. By deftly synchronizing con-

temporary and traditional styles, colors and furnishings have come together, skillfully reconceived.

Regarding things old and new, Susan says, "I like having a foot in both doors, but it was a process to get it right. If I see something I like I copy it. I think that's often what design is: taking ideas and making them work in your own space." ■

*Jessica Keener, a veteran of several house remodels, has been writing about home design since 1997.*

**See Resources on page 90.**