



Zinc planes

Text: R.J. Weick

Bold, artful, and spatial, this 6,000-square-foot home located in Chicago, Illinois tells a narrative of concise gestures and lines, nuanced mass and form, and a playful dichotomy of light and space. Purposefully set back from the streetscape within the Lake View neighborhood, the property unfolds in an intentional manner as landscape and layout, openings and planes provide a striking, yet softened and sheltered impression from the

winding path.

It is a creative, balanced composition, where the warmth of standing-seam, zinc panels and wood laminate are paired with the modernity of glass and weathered steel in an integrated construction on grade with the landscaped property. Its exterior is both intricate and simple in design, where the indoor-outdoor experience is a key element throughout the L-shaped structure and allows the interior to tell a compelling story

about the homeowners' dynamic lifestyle.

"The design is without ornamentation," said Kevin Toukoumidis, AIA, LEED, founding principal at dSPACE Studio Ltd. in Chicago. "It is really an expression of pure form and mass, and openings and planes. We have all these elements coming together to create what you see spatially."

dSPACE Studio is an award-winning architectural and planning firm specializing in architecture, interiors, and landscape

work. For more than a decade, the firm has built a portfolio of residential and small commercial work defined by intention, innovation, and integrated sustainability, and is supported by a team of architects, designers, and business professionals. It is a studio that has embraced its philosophy of effective communication and attention to detail, leveraging its recently expanded studio location near the Lincoln Park and Lake View neighborhoods in Chicago to showcase creative design solutions, materials, and its affinity for natural light.

While this Lake View home is rooted in the International Style—defined by rectilinear forms, taut plane surfaces, open interior spaces, and an overall visual weightlessness—the program and urban-based design is as unique as its inhabitants and the collaborative design-and-build team that helped realize the envisioned home within its scheduled timeline. At its core, its success is in its understanding of the clients—an insight that led the design team to authentically channel the family story into the home.

"On our first introduction, we knew this house was going to be anything but conventional," said Jennifer Kranitz, designer at PROJECT Interiors Inc. in Chicago. "The family collectively projects a sharp playfulness. They are smart and sophisticated, but there is an enviable ease about them. They are confident and bold in their aesthetic—each wearing different shades of the rainbow like it is the new black."

PROJECT Interiors is a female-led and boldly-driven firm located in Humboldt Park and for the last 14 years has created thoughtful, unapologetically distinctive, and soulful environments for their clients. Founded in 2005 by Aimee Wertepny, principal and designer, PROJECT has curated a portfolio of residential, retail, hospitality, and commercial projects defined by a signature style of texture, contrast, and organic-glam.

"Our strength lies in getting involved in projects from the ground up," Wertepny said. "I think some of our biggest, best projects—or where the magic happens—is when we are involved from the very beginning."

It was also an approach shared by the clients, who built their team from day one. For Toukoumidis, who noted having a connection and synergy with homeowners is important for a mutual understanding of priorities, said he could sense the clients' excitement to build their dream, contemporary home from the very first meeting and

had goals that aligned with some of his own personal ideas.

"We absolutely wanted to work with them," Toukoumidis said. "Right at the initial start of this project there was a team in place and a true collaboration of great minds from contractor, architect, and interior designer and I think that was part of the success of this project: the layers of design, the thought, and concept in this home."

Toukoumidis also noted while aesthetics and how a house looks is important, there is a decided emphasis on how it lives and its functionality—which requires an intense evaluation, discussion, and research period to understand the clients. In this case, the active family of five—plus dog—had spent nearly a decade planning—including acquiring adjacent property—and dreaming about their custom home.

"In fact, they tore down the house they were living in to build this house. They had two city lots and their vision was to eventually clear both pieces of land and start from scratch," Toukoumidis said.

"It was a very fast-paced project. The clients really wanted to maximize their time enjoying the house as their kids were getting older and knew every day counted. They put a high value on completing the house with quality and great design, but they also valued the schedule, because they wanted to move in," Toukoumidis added.

While its two-lot silhouette is striking amid the diverse architectural typologies of the neighborhood—from the late 1890s to the 1950s and more recent—there were a number of very clear goals established at the onset of the project: privacy from the street, strong connection to the outdoors, and an open, light-filled interior. Rather than utilizing the maximum buildable volume of the double lot, which would have been disproportionate in scale to its neighboring homes, dSPACE Studio stepped the volume back to allow for privacy and natural light. The massing was also subdivided into three planes that are framed with vertical windows.

Robert McFadden, AIA, LEED, principal at dSPACE Studio, or dSPACE, said as a two-lot home with a pretty substantial volume and elevation at three stories tall, part of the strategy—in combination with addressing the need for privacy—was to look at softening the massing so it didn't have an overly large presence on a street with characteristically narrower houses.

"By pushing further into the site, we actually gave up some square-footage that we



could have otherwise taken for the house, but it was a very intentional move to allow it to recede into the site a little more and let some of the landscaping wrap around the front in combination with the dark, zinc facade,” McFadden said. “I think it works pretty well together to create a very modern and unique elevation, but also has a certain kind of reverence. It works with the neighborhood. It is bold, but not too bold.”

While privacy and creating an open, light-filled interior at face value can be at odds with another—and proved to be one of the challenges of the project—the team balanced the objectives by creating the L-shaped structure with southern exposure, a shielded facade, a private back yard, and a rear, stepped elevation feature multiple gathering areas, live roofs, passive solar shading, and expansive, high-performance

windows. Though its exterior facade appears solid, complete with steel, fin louvers to obscure sightlines of drivers on the street, there is an unmistakable interplay between the interior and outdoor environment.

McFadden noted the homeowners liked the idea of not having a basement to establish the indoor-outdoor living experience at the main level and the team worked to reuse and reconfigure a lot of existing landscaped trees and succulents the clients had previously planted.

“We tried really hard to integrate that into the experience of the site and of the house, so there are moments where you are going up the stair from the first floor to the second floor where you are pulled out of the house and focused suddenly on a tree outside, and then come back into the house,” McFadden said. “We tried to do that wher-

ever we could so you really start to lose that sense of inside-outside, while still maintaining that sense of privacy from the street that they were looking for.”

Floor-to-roof glass slots were integrated into the sides of the standing-seam, zinc planes on the front to allow natural light into all rooms of the house; the hydronic, radiant slab-on-grade construction establishes a strong connection to the outdoors at the main living level; its L-shaped layout creates a courtyard effect by embracing the outdoor dining, lounge, pergola, and landscaped rear yard; and the window wall in the nearly 20-foot-tall, double-height living space dissolves boundaries.

Toukoumidis noted maximizing natural light is not only important in what the team at dSPACE does to create energy efficiency in their projects, but also goes to a

fundamental need as human beings.

“We need light; we like light as human beings. It is important to how we function and this house has so much natural light. It was a driving goal of the client—and home and design—to have an abundance of natural light,” Toukoumidis said. “The lightness and airiness of the home can be felt from every room.”

Yet, the home offers a sense of intimacy as well despite the dramatic living space and considerable glasswork. Ceiling heights throughout the home are set lower at a comfortable nine-feet—such as in the kitchen, gallery, breakfast nook, and offices—and there are designated areas for family members to gather separately. On the second floor, there is an entire kids loft with built-in bunk beds and sofa, which then opens out onto a roof deck above the garage complete with a basketball net, trampoline, and other sports equipment, according to Toukoumidis. There is also an outdoor spa on a small terraced balcony accessible off of the master bedroom.

“It is one of those moments where there is an indoor-outdoor connection even on the top floor of the house. You have a way to get outside on every level on this home. These spaces were carefully designed and not wasted,” Toukoumidis said. “You can overdo balconies and terraces, because they are not always utilized, but this house was very carefully thought out and curated to have outdoor spaces that are hyper-functional.”

The functionality and flow of the home—integral elements for the indoor-outdoor experience—were equally salient for the interior design, which highlights the homeowners’ contemporary art collection and an affinity for the bold set against a bright, neutral backdrop. It was a composition identified early on during architectural development as the homeowners discussed different facade options and whether to pursue zinc, despite its potential for polarization, according to Kranitz.

“From then on they just wanted to embrace every bold move. For us, the inside had to be just as courageous as the architecture and to just acknowledge the architecture as first and foremost,” Kranitz said. “We were involved from the very beginning and engaged in helping fill out some of the architectural elements that were still in development. The space, the volume, and the openness: the footprint is amazing.”

The intent then became straightforward as PROJECT strove to curate a home that conveyed the gutsy sensibility of the close-

knit family with an atmosphere that evoked their personalities. Despite the few parameters given at the onset—modern, color, and an easy, carefree ambiance using durable, resilient fabrics and materials—Wertepny said the clients were ready to see what the team could come up with—and were open to almost all of their ideas.

“We always throw in the wild card; we always try to throw in something a bit more safe—although we don’t like to play it safe at all—and they were definitely those clients who were enlightened by these wacky ideas and color combinations,” Wertepny said.

From the requested pink banquette by the husband and the orange, Mongolian fur chair in the living room by the wife, to the high-gloss, blush-colored bar with custom heights designed for the husband’s tequila bottles, and artwork sourced from a personal trip to Cuba—including the nearly life-sized, topless elderly woman suffused in pink; there are vibrant threads woven throughout the more contemporary-modern home that tell a compelling story about its inhabitants.

“They really have distinctive taste that is not at all understated. It is gutsy and it is bold and I think so many of the selections in the house reflect that,” Kranitz said. “It was a really fun process, because in many ways, they pushed us to go even further than sometimes we would even think to go.”

There are also dynamic moments found in the custom-rendered kitchen backsplash, white-gloss kitchen cabinets with bronze detail reveal and interior, the uniquely patterned concrete floors created by dSPACE, and in the powder room where the control valves are purposefully designed to create an experience in discovery for its user. It is a space that is intentional and unfolds with elements as surprise as one moves through the space and ascends from the high-contrast main floor upon floating treads with a view of the outdoors.

The staircase, which features step lights in the side wall and glass guardrails, leads to the second floor where the hallway is open to the double-height living area and acts as a gallery for art pieces. Here, the home’s contrast level shifts into one decidedly more light, white, and ethereal, with use of brass and silver tones—the exception being the designated kids loft featuring vibrant, Moroccan rugs, color, and plants.

From there, a second, sculptural staircase leads to the third floor and rather than using wood or another traditional material,

the staircase is composed of very thin, bent steel plates folded in origami reminiscence.

“That staircase gracefully, architecturally floats through the double-height space and it had to look good from all angles, because it is on fully display from top to bottom. It also had to be light, but architectural,” Toukoumidis said. “It is strong and yet it is made with quarter-inch material. It is so light weight and paper-thin in appearance. The goal was to create sculpture and art, because it is a focal point of the space.”

The third level houses the master suite, which is complete with a walk-in closet, outdoor deck and spa, and an indoor bathroom where a golden metallic wall stands behind a floating tub. The bathroom also features two marble countertop sinks and a shower encased in white Corian.

“We have a lot of impactful moments, but functionally, everything in this house is pretty much bulletproof. They have a big dog, they have three kids, and they were very clear from the beginning that they were not interested in tiptoeing in their own home; they are going to live hard,” Kranitz said.

From the use of stepping and materials to create an engaging dialogue from the street—one that courts slowly in respectful scale within its context—and the textures, greenery, and materiality of its exterior; to the interior where each element is expressive, dynamic, and functional; this Lake View residence gives voice to those who call it home.

“I think the success of the house isn’t just about the steel and the glass and the design. I think it is about connecting deep with our clients and changing their lives through design,” Toukoumidis said. “I think the other success of this project was the amazing collaboration. It takes a village to do a house like this and stay on budget.”

For Wertepny, who has dedicated her entire life’s work to the field and has a passion for charitable work such as partnering with BuildOn to help build schools in rural areas; design is education, function, and community.

“Having traveled the world and having done charity work in a lot of other countries where interior design isn’t even a concept, it really is such an honor to be a part of something like this,” Wertepny said. “Interior design matters so much, but at the end of the day it is not necessarily a basic need, which is what I love about how PROJECT has sort of played out in the last decade with helping build schools and take our design work and let it translate into the world.”

