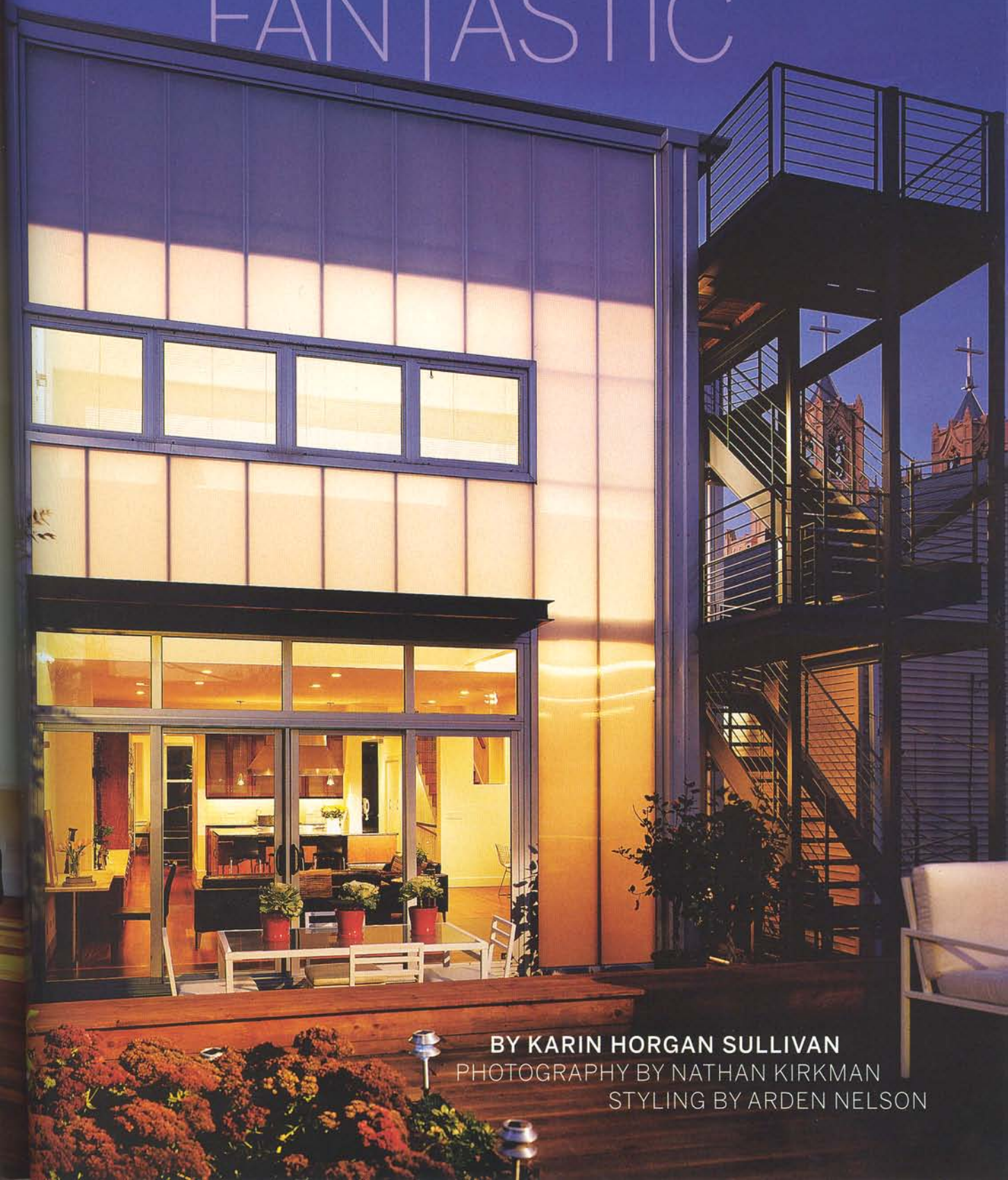


The ceiling at the back of Michael Frommer and Susan Shure's new family room stretches two stories high, creating a light-filled atrium. "In the winter, Benit and I lie down here and take a sun bath," Shure says of the couple's toy poodle.



LIGHT FANTASTIC

A Bucktown three-flat morphs
into a sleek modern house with
dramatic outdoor spaces



BY KARIN HORGAN SULLIVAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHAN KIRKMAN
STYLING BY ARDEN NELSON



The cozy but crisply designed living room provides a natural transition from the original Victorian front of the house to the airy, loft-like space in the back. The couple's eclectic art collection includes an original Wiggle Chair by Frank Gehry and works by Lee Godie and works by Lee Godie (behind couch) and Tony Fitzpatrick.



WHEN IT COMES TO PULLING OFF THE DESIGN FOR A GUT REHAB, mind-numbing discussions of details like building-code requirements have a way of deflating even the most enthusiastic client. But no matter how tedious the issue at hand, homeowner Michael Frommer's motto never changed. "Michael would end the day by shaking our hands and saying, 'Have fun,'" recalls Richard Blender, principal of Wilkinson Blender Architecture, the firm Frommer and his wife, Susan Shure, hired to overhaul their brick Victorian in Bucktown. "That was something you don't forget."

For Blender, the exhortation exemplified the adventurous and open-minded attitude brought to the project by Frommer, an artist and former ad agency owner, and Shure, a real estate agent and experienced do-it-yourselfer who had rehabbed and sold five previous homes. Certainly, it took a lot of creativity to see the potential in what was, as Frommer describes it, a "should-have-been-condemned three-flat" when the couple bought the property in 2005. Newspapers were stacked to the ceiling on the third floor, inhabited for 50 years by two brothers who suffered from hoarding syndrome, while another flat reeked

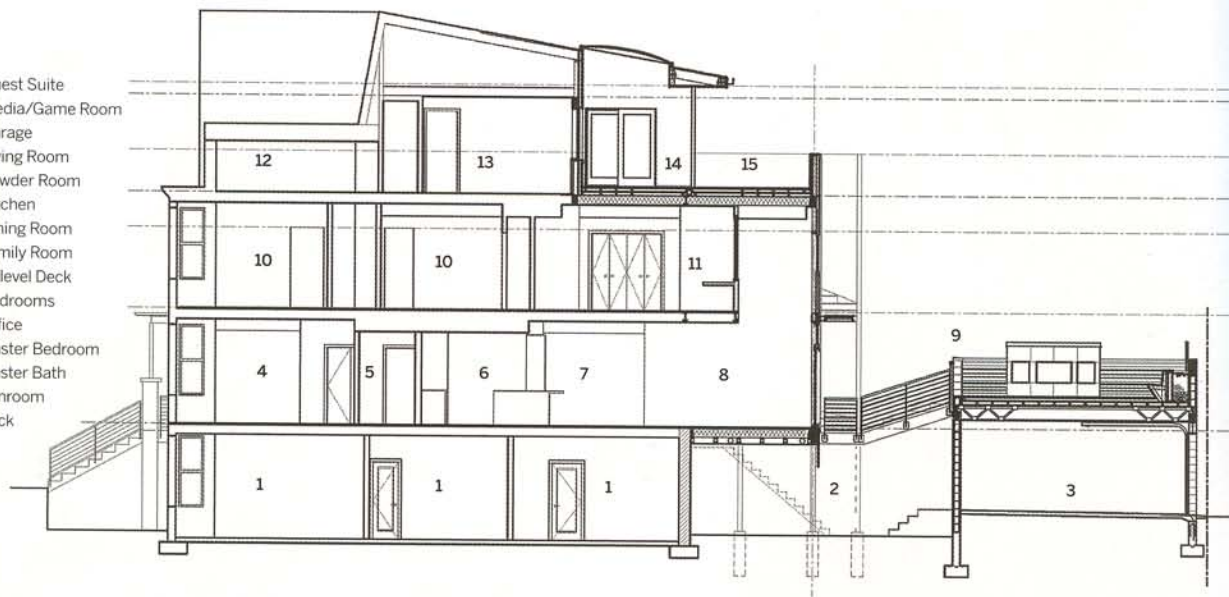


The home's original façade was maintained to play well with the neighbors while the back and interior are pure California.

Opposite: Inspired by what he calls Frommer and Shure's "great sense of creativity and adventure," architect Richard Blender turned the hallway staircase into a sculptural element, with cables that resemble harp strings and make a sound when plucked.

"We built around a lifestyle we promote," Frommer says. "A big, open, family place."

1. Guest Suite
2. Media/Game Room
3. Garage
4. Living Room
5. Powder Room
6. Kitchen
7. Dining Room
8. Family Room
9. Bi-level Deck
10. Bedrooms
11. Office
12. Master Bedroom
13. Master Bath
14. Sunroom
15. Deck



of cat urine. But where other would-be buyers might have seen nothing but trouble, Frommer and Shure saw opportunity.

"If you want to make a little money in real estate, you start low and look for a building that's got good bones," Frommer says. "And this one really did." Most notably, the exterior walls were constructed with three courses of brick, instead of the usual one or two. In fact, those walls ended up being about the only thing left standing after the couple ripped off the roof, gutted the interior, and dug out the old slab foundation.

Pylons sunk six feet into the earth, a new concrete foundation, and an interior latticework of steel beams now provide the structure necessary to support an expansive, south-facing family room at the back of the home, one that fulfills the couple's desire for a light-sat-

urated space that seamlessly combines indoor and outdoor life. The dramatic two-story back wall is constructed mainly from translucent polycarbonate panels, made on an Israeli kibbutz, that allow light to stream into the second and third floor but possess a much greater insulation value than thermopane glass.

"It creates a beautiful glow," Frommer says of the industrial-looking wall, a cool contrast to the building's Victorian façade, which was preserved to blend into the neighborhood streetscape. "During the daytime the light glows in and at nighttime it glows out."

Sliding glass doors open from the second-story family room onto a large bi-level cedar deck that extends to the back of the property. There, up three steps, planters of serviceberry bushes and perennials function as a green roof on top of the garage, which was built to





replace what was originally a four-stall goat shed.

"You see many, many roof decks on top of garages," Blender says. "The problem is, they're not on the same level as the living space. That creates a disconnect, where you have to go down [a staircase] and then back up" to reach the deck. In contrast, Frommer and Shure's deck is a natural extension of their home; built-in seating and an outdoor fireplace have made it an enticing space to entertain 50 or more people without feeling cramped. "We built around a lifestyle we promote," Frommer says. "A big, open, family place." "This is as close to a suburban life as you're going to get in the city," Shure adds.

The airy atmosphere continues on the third floor, where clever pocket doors in the hallway allow guests to close off two of the three bedrooms to create private suites, complete with full baths. The couple currently use the south-facing bedroom, which overlooks

the family room, as an office; a wall constructed partially of glass ensures the room meets code requirements as a bedroom while allowing the room to be filled with light.

Though Frommer and Shure agree they ended up with their dream home, they have no plans to stay put. The house is on the market, and when it sells, they intend to build a family compound in a little Mexican fishing village they've fallen in love with, a place that will accommodate visits from their brood of five grown children from previous marriages. "It's a little bit of a wrench," acknowledges Shure, "but this is the sixth house I've bought. It's just like you raise your children to become independent and fly away—every house I do, I do knowing someday I'm going to sell it." Any takers for a dream home in Mexico? ■

For resource information, see page 172.

Shure and Benit relax by the fire-place on the garage-roof deck. A light-saturated office (opposite) overlooks the family-room atrium. Remote-controlled blinds manage the level of sunlight streaming in.

