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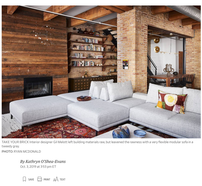
Industrial Design Gets Family-Friendly in a Chicago Loft

A designer turned a rail cathedral—the warehouse ancestor of a young family's hundred-year-old loft



TAKE YOUR BENCH: Interior designer Ed Melert left building materials raw, but fashioned the exterior with a very flexible modular sofa in leaving grey.

PHOTO: RYAN MCDONALD

By Kathryn O'Shea-Evans
Oct. 5, 2016 at 11:12 am ET

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ALL THE FUSS Wall Street activities who bought lofts in the 1990s wouldn't want you to know this dirty secret: Exposed brick walls and cavernous spaces can feel as cold as a spelunking trip. That lack of a snuggle factor was something Sara and Jan Zaszewski soon acknowledged after buying a loft in Chicago's River North neighborhood for themselves and their now-2-year-old son—a real problem in a city that clocked three continuous days of sub-zero temps. To make the apartment comfortable and timeless, often invite friends for game nights. "We like minimalist design, but it needs to be comfortable because we're always hosting people," said Ms. Zaszewski.

Besides, haven't exposed bricks and ducts lost their allure nearly two decades into the 21st century? Not for Ed Melert, the Chicago-based interior designer who founded Studio EL to whom the couple turned for help. "Not covering the exposed building materials would have been a disservice to the history of the loft aesthetic," Critical, however, was "incorporating the original elements in a mindful and modern way." This meant no bar stools made from cast-iron pipes, leather Tuxedo sofas or other left-living clichés.

To mellow the 2,200-square-foot space without diminishing its industrial appeal the designer selected many furnishings that combine both weight and a gentle, feminine warmth. He worked with a light palette that was neutral—but not devoid of color. "We wanted to create a cheerey for a very young and vibrant family."

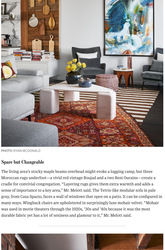
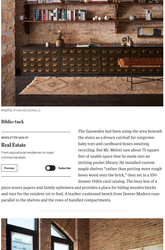


PHOTO: RYAN MCDONALD

Space but Changeable

The living area's sticky maple beams overhead might evoke a logging camp, but three Moroccan rugs underfoot—a vivid red octagon flanked and a neat Bert Deacter—create a cradle for contextual congregation. "Layering rugs gives them extra warmth and adds a sense of importance to a key area," Mr. Melert said. The Tortira tile modular sofa in pale gray, from Casa Spazio, here a wall of windows that open on a patio. It can be configured in many ways. Wingback chairs are upholstered in surprisingly luxe mohair velvet. "Mohair was used in movie theaters through the 1950s, '30s and '40s because it was the most durable fabric yet has a lot of sexiness and glamour to it," Mr. Melert said.



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The Zaszewskis had been using the area beneath their bed as a storage unit for children's toys and cardboard boxes awaiting recycling. But Mr. Melert now above 75 square feet of usable space that he made into an inviting pocket library. He installed custom maple shelves "rather than putting more rough hewn wood onto the brick," then set in a 100-drawer 1940s card catalog. The busy box of a piece stores papers and family ephemera and provides a place for holding wooden blocks and toys for the resident tot to find. Another craftsmanlike bench from Denver Modern runs parallel to the shelves and the rows of handled compartments.

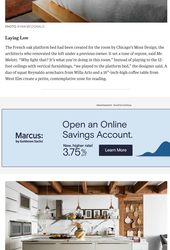

PHOTO: RYAN MCDONALD

Laying Low

The French oak platform bed had been created for the room by Chicago's Mosa Design, the architects who renovated the left under a previous owner. It set a true of repose, said Mr. Melert. "Why fight that? It's what you're doing in this room." Instead of placing the 12-foot-long 40 foot ceilings with vertical furnishings, "we placed to the platform bed," the designer said. A duo of square Bernardo armchairs from Hilla Arts and a 19th-inch high coffee table from West Elm create a prim, contemplative zone for reading.

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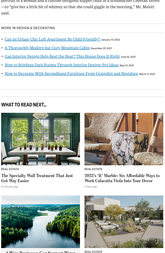
The Cultivated Kitchen

In the architects' designed kitchen, our next what Mr. Melert referred to as the island's "old-school public-school lighting," and to came sophisticated mesh blender pendants from Danish company Ebb & Flow. The couple's collection of sharply chaste beach ornaments a wall. "Why not put them on display, especially if she's going to use them frequently?" A *mural of woven black materials repeats to the drawings by Chicago artist Michael McGuire,* the Ghanian basket atop the island and the wire chair backs.



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A Lightly Feminine Touch

Entering this master bath swathed in French oak by the architects could easily feel like walking into a cigar box, a decidedly manly environment. Mr. Melert retained the sensually curvaceous Kohler Bathtub and Sink from Ann Sacks, but softened the overall effect with geometric rug. Then he made a couple of nods to the gal's female partner: a seminude portrait of a woman and a custom-designed slipper chair in a Schumacher Cherish Velvet —in "give her a little bit of whimsy so that she could giggle in the morning," Mr. Melert said.

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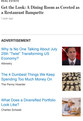

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