



The family room opens directly onto a backyard built atop the garage.

ARCHITECTURE SMART DESIGN

Screening in the light

■ Project: Frommer/Shure residence ■ Location: Chicago ■ Architects: Wilkinson Blender ■ Problem: A couple wanted to experiment with a highly modern addition to a traditional Victorian home. ■ Solution: A dramatic addition in back connects indoors and out.

When Michael Frommer, 58, and Susan Shure, 56, bought a Victorian three-flat in Bucktown, they were already serial renovators, having lived in and rehabbed numerous residences across the city. But their latest home is by far their most expansive project—as well as part of a new career direction for them as developers. They plan to build, live in and then sell a series of innovative living spaces. “They will all be high-end, custom, cool places to live,” says Mr. Frommer, who has also worked in advertising.



An open kitchen flows right into the family room.

With the Victorian, their agenda was simple: “We wanted the front to maintain its historic appearance, but the back was ours to play with,” Mr. Frommer says. They hired architect Richard Blender, whose work they found “clean and simple, with not a lot of frills.”

On the first floor, Mr. Blender replaced walls at the rear of the house with a steel frame that created space and allowed for more windows. The open kitchen and family room face a new backyard, most of which is on the roof of the garage.

The wall that separates indoors from outdoors is a dramatic, two-story plane sheathed in a translucent polycarbonate material that floods the interior with softened natural light but is a better insulator than glass. “It’s sort of like a (Japanese) shoji screen,” Mr. Blender says. “It gives you a sense of privacy.”

Outside, the garage’s green roof will eventually include five trees and prairie grass. Mr. Blender aimed to make this outdoor area an active part of the house, and it certainly worked that way during its first summer. “There’s a flow,” Mr. Frommer says. “You can go inside and outside; it’s almost like living in the country.”

At the rear, an outdoor stair reaches the upper-floor master suite, where there’s another deck. While the lower deck is part of the more public space of the house, Mr. Frommer and Ms. Shure can enjoy spectacular skyline views from their much more private lair upstairs: It’s so secluded that their shower and bathtub open to it.



Translucent panels across the rear of the house don’t even hint at what the front facade looks like. The house is actually a Victorian three-flat.

PHOTOS COURTESY WILKINSON BLENDER