



THE ITALIAN JOB

An Italian visionary brings an aging Chicago Victorian back from the brink with clean lines, mod materials and a new lease on light

BY MEGHAN MCEWEN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY SOLURI

It's hard to imagine that just three years ago this storybook Victorian house on a historic block in Lincoln Park was dingy and dark, old and moody.

That it had tiny, fractured rooms, peeling plaster and caving-in floors requires another leap of the imagination. But that's the business of designer Patrizio Fradiani, who wields a stringently modern aesthetic while respecting the storied history of original architecture. Formally trained in architecture and landscape design in his native Italy, Fradiani is quickly becoming Chicago's go-to guy when it comes to channeling the old and pioneering the new.

"In Italy, you're actually trained to think about things that way," says Fradiani, owner of design firm Studio F. "You're trained to think in a progressive, modern and forward-thinking way. The beauty of history and the passion for modern architecture—it's a beautiful challenge, and I love to bring them together."

His philosophy was a boon for the bemused homeowners, initially seeking expert counsel for a particularly daunting set of challenges. They wanted a spacious four-bedroom home with lots of natural light (the existing quarters were tight, even by modest standards, at 1,400 square feet), and it had to be kid-friendly. And here's the kicker: They wanted the kind of modern living space that could easily house their Le Corbusier chaise and Bertoia chairs, but because it's a landmark property from the late 1870s, they could not touch the façade.

Stumbling block? Hardly. Three years and a near gut-job later, the two-story building's Victorian façade gives little indication of the modern haven that exists within. A Dennis Pearson dog sculpture hints from the front yard. Playing what he calls "musical space within the house," Fradiani and his team went down and back, carving out a bigger basement that extends all the way to the garage via a breezeway, conjuring notions of secret passageways. Fradiani opened up rooms, knocking down walls, reconfiguring the entire layout of the house to

The kitchen by Poliform is a Modernist's dream, featuring a Saarinen Tulip table and Bertoia chairs. A "Random" light pendant by Moooi hangs above, and the look is finished off perfectly with an Eames recliner and ottoman by Herman Miller, making a seamless transition to the living area.

satisfy his clients. "We saved the façade inside and out, honoring historic details, like trim, in a modern way," he says. But when it came to everything behind the façade and under the rooflines, it was almost as if they built a brand-new house. "Respecting the old isn't always about renovating it," he says.

The end result: 4,500 glorious square feet, outfitted in a Modernist aesthetic that's cheerful, cheeky and highly cerebral. Just shy of installing a glass roof, Fradiani added 12 gigantic skylights, which bathe the first and second floors in natural light, throwing angular shadows across the black-stained oak floors. "I decided it was important to create the illusion of light," he says. "I wanted a house that was classic—hard-edged but with a sharp, graphic quality to it."

The flow is harmonious and the space perfectly proportioned. Essentially one giant room, the main level is split in half by a floating wall, creating the feeling of distinct living areas without interrupting the natural current. "I have very strong ideas and visions, but I know how to listen and watch," Fradiani says. "I visit the home, look at their art collection, and talk to their kids." Out of that, the design comes naturally. "The homeowners love '60s furniture; he blended a pair of original Pierre Paulin chairs reupholstered in hot pink with

Below: In the master bedroom, an orange blanket from Ikea is slung over a Le Corbusier chaise. *Right:* A Poliform sofa divides the front room (pillows are custom-made with Maharem fabric), framing the Athos dining table by B&B Italia and Lia chairs by Zanotta. Triptych by local artist Nick Haas, and lights are Flos re-editions of Achille Castiglioni's Taraxacum lamp.





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sleek, Modernist pieces from the US and Italy. Old Bertoia chairs sit around a new Saarinen table in a modern Poliform kitchen. Still, it’s hard not to notice the touches that have become Fradiani’s design trademarks.

Pops of color, like the accent wall painted a tangy Lichen Green, co-exist with organic elements like stacks of raw firewood and a knotty wooden sculpture. Designed by Fradiani, the clean-lined, custom wall units are made with teak, grey lacquer and “beteige blue” limestone. A painter and lover of Renaissance art, Fradiani has a passion for color—as well as a very specific philosophy about how to apply it: “Color is never everywhere in my projects. It’s always a surprise element.”

Above: Designed by Fradiani, the custom wall unit feels massive and light at the same time, housing a TV, chimney flue, storage, fire wood and a minibar. In the living room, vintage “Mushroom” chairs in fuschia by Pierre Paulin for Artifort, T-Phoenix coffee table by Patricia Urquiola for Moroso, and side table by Antonio Citterio for Maxalto. *Opposite page:* Patrizio Fradiani.

All the other walls are decidedly nondescript. “I conceived this space as a neutral and graphic canvas where any object and sculpture could be featured,” he says. And of that, there’s no shortage: Artwork by local artists (a triptych by photographer Nick Haas) and matching bulbous light fixtures (re-editions by Flos of the Taraxacum lamp by Achille Castiglioni from the ‘60s) are mixed in with pieces from the owner’s personal stash, often playing up Fradiani’s mischievous sense of humor. One of his favorite scores, which he helped the owner select from her parents’ home, is a set of gold roosters that reign over the clean, colorful living room. “Talk about completely unrelated and surprising. They have this very mysterious quality. Are they French? Are they antiques? What are they? I love that aspect of it.”

For Fradiani, the art of decorating is an interpretive collaboration. A designer, he says, should not be inclined to merely please clients but to give them something worth investing in. “Not just financially,” he insists. “But in terms of enjoying life’s pleasures.” Words spoken like a true Italian. ■