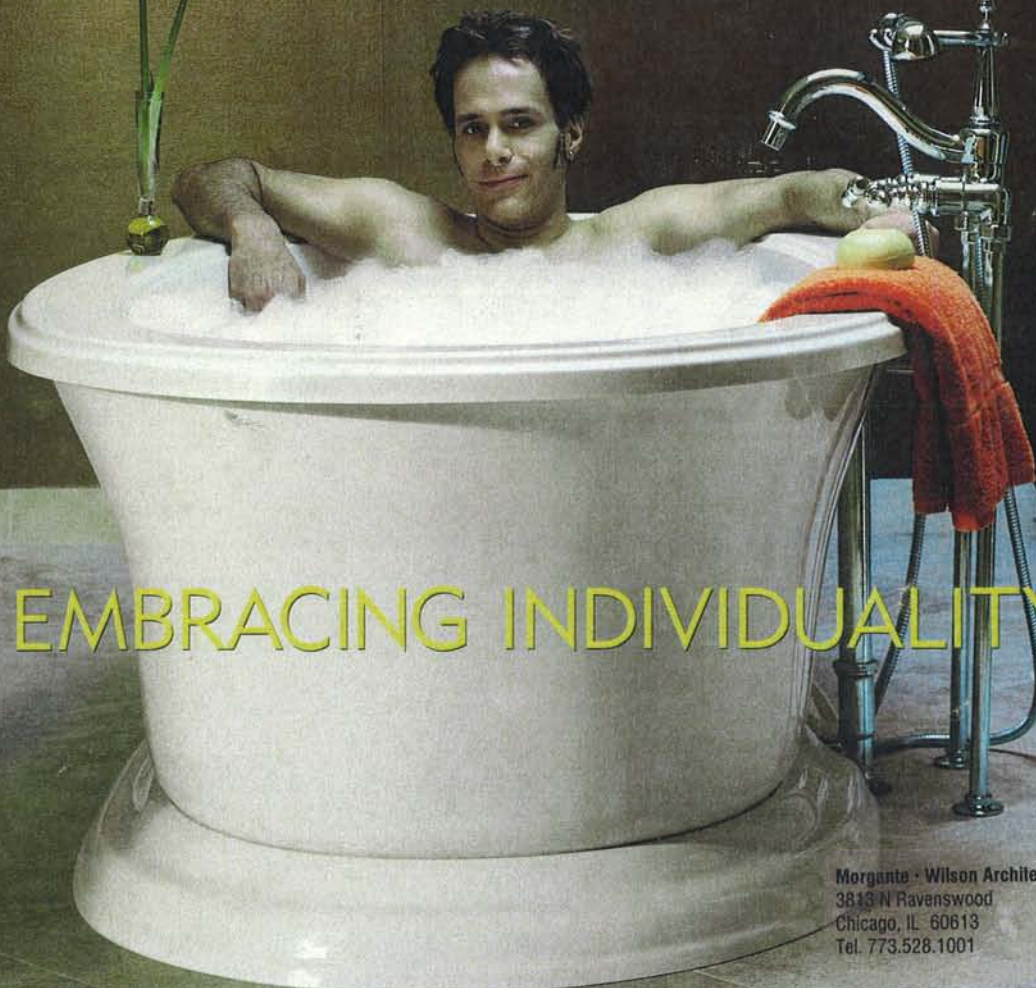


SPRING HOME DESIGN

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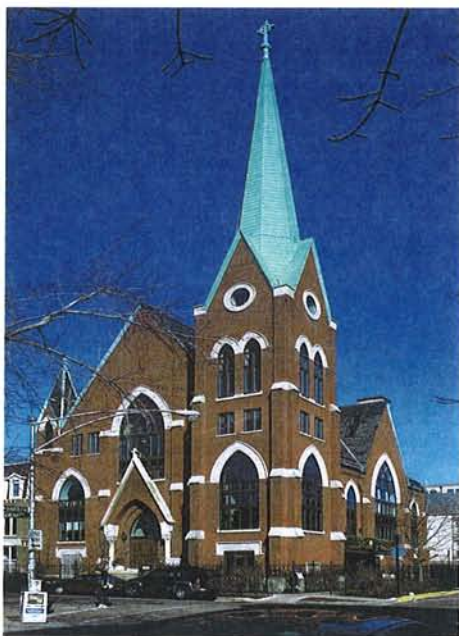
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SACRED GROUND

A CHURCH-FOR-SALE SIGN IN LAKEVIEW CONVERTS A YOUNG COUPLE INTO BELIEVERS



WHEN SARAH ESLER MARRIED ALEX PEARSALL,

she moved into the Lakeview apartment he and his brother had built for themselves. The duplex, with its two-bedroom apartments, had suited the bachelors well, but once Sarah moved her things in, it was clearly too small for the newlyweds. The search for a new home began, and they found one only four blocks away. ■ “We were looking for a unique place to live,” says Alex, a real estate developer. “We saw the ‘For Sale’ sign in front of this church and knew it was our chance to create something extraordinary.” ■ Church of the Valley was 120 years old, but the congregation had diminished over the years, and they wanted to relocate where parking would not be a problem. ■ During negotiations, Alex learned that neighborhood residents were concerned about the number of units he was going to be put in the building, BY KATHY KAPLAN | TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY BILL HOGAN

One of the church's original iron chandeliers was refinished and hangs in front of a soaring epistolary window in the 24-foot-high living room. The fireplace was designed to make a strong statement but not overpower the space. Tabler, a Bernese mountain dog, rests nearby. Opposite: First a Lutheran church and most recently an Assembly of God congregation, the church is 120 years old.



"THE PLACE IS SO GRAND
AND COMMANDS SUCH RESPECT
THAT YOU CAN'T WIMP OUT.
YOU HAVE TO BE BOLD."

—INTERIOR DESIGNER EMILY SLAVIN

and about parking and preservation of the building's exterior. His proposal of five condominiums, 2-to-1 parking and a promise not to change the exterior was acceptable, and six months after their wedding, the 20,000-square-foot church was theirs.

The couple decided to take the front corner of the five-story church, a space that included the 110-foot-high bell tower. They hired Chicago's Morgante-Wilson Architects Ltd. to design a three-bedroom apartment for themselves as well as the four other units. Alex knew the work of Morgante-Wilson through his previous projects.

"We wanted to take our cues from the church and incorporate all the wonderful architectural elements that were part of the church," says Frederick Wilson, who worked on the project with his partner, Elissa Morgante.

Demolition was done by hand and took about three months. "Every piece—all the pews, the light fixtures, every piece of woodwork, the staircases, all the stained-glass, was saved at a warehouse," Alex says. "We didn't know what we were going to do with it, but we knew it was too valuable to throw out."

Integrating those elements into a home was a challenge, says Sarah, who works in business/operations for a nanotechnology company. "From a matter of design, honoring the sense of history here was an automatic starting point."



The guest bedroom is located in the roof of the church.

Alex Pearsall works at his laptop in the dining room, located in the base of the original bell tower. Pews were cut down and used as dining chairs.





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Interior designer Emily Slavin knew it called for a look of Old World elegance, but felt a contemporary interpretation would better suit her 30-year-old clients, who now had a 4,300-square-foot apartment.

Slavin chose rich colors and sumptuous fabrics and introduced "enough newness so that the spaces flow well but aren't predictable in any way," she says. "The place is so grand and commands such respect that you can't wimp out. You have to be bold."

Slavin's aggressive approach begins in the entry. Vivid cinnamon walls and ceiling trimmed in black set the tone for what's to come.

The living room boasts 24-foot-high ceilings with soaring epistolary windows. Two of the church's massive iron chandeliers hang here.

"The fireplace makes a strong statement, grounding the space without overpowering it," says Slavin. Oak cabinets that blend with the original church wood are installed on either side of the fireplace. Two highback European-style chairs covered in cinnamon cotton fabric with chenille stripes flank the fireplace.

Facing that is a green velvet couch reminiscent of a rolled-arm sofa with squared arms. "Its wood base gives a more traditional look to what is otherwise a very clean, elegant line," she notes.

The dining room occupies what was once

the bell tower. Dining chairs were cut from the original 15-foot long pews. Slavin chose round, walnut table with pedestal base match. Burnt-orange velvet drapes complement the towering windows. A monument reproduction fixture of iron and mica light the 22-foot-high area.

Slavin avoided big, bulky furniture with lots of pattern because of Alex and Sarah's love of photographs, art, memorabilia and accessories, she explains. "I think you have to have beautiful pieces but not take away from all the personal elements that people bring into a home."

Sarah calls their apartment a haven a jokes that if there are any spirits in the church, they are giving off good energy.

"Transforming a church into a home is an unusual endeavor," she says. "There may be the perception that the congregation was displaced, but in this case they wanted to sell." Alex leased the church back to the congregation for \$1 until they could relocate (which they did, to the Cicero/Fuller area).

"When construction was completed, minister came here and blessed us in our new home," Sarah says. "This certainly helped any misgivings we had about leaving the church." □

For buying information, see Resources, page

Kathy Kaplan writes about interiors.

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