

URBAN PIONEER

ONLY THE ADVENTUROUS ESTHER FISHMAN
COULD SEE THE MERITS OF TURNING
A FACTORY INTO A HOME

Esther Fishman, a diminutive woman with an infectious laugh, strikes you as the consummate nice girl when you meet her—friendly, a touch kitschy and fun. But underneath the dulcet facade lies the shrewd vision and steely determination of an urban pioneer.

Twenty-one years ago, she thought a rundown storefront across the street from an “iffy” high school on Armitage Avenue was the perfect spot for a business selling artist-made clothing, and Art Effect was born. Not only was it one of the first chic boutiques in Lincoln Park, it became an area anchor that has since shifted gears, moved to much larger quarters on the street and grown into a lifestyle emporium.

Fourteen years ago, she bought a rundown modest frame house on a humble block in West Lake View—far outside the boundaries most urban types would live in at the time—against the advice of friends, and turned it into a remarkable home that was covered in these pages in 1996.

Seven years ago, she was ready to take another chance—this time on a dilapidated factory with a “For Sale” sign. She was transfixed.

“I’d pass it every time I went to the grocery store and start thinking about what I could do to it. I always wanted to take a really unusual space



BY LISA SKOLNIK

TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY BILL HOGAN

A Rumford fireplace fabricated from limestone anchors the living room. It is surrounded by built-in cabinets that show off Fishman's various collections.



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—ESTHER FISHMAN



Fishman's daughter is perched on a rustic bench underneath a folksy painting of a rooster done by local artist Diann DeWeese Smith.

and make it into someplace special to live."

The low-slung, rectangular, one-story brick building had been built in the 1930s for a lamp manufacturer. Fishman loved its lean lines, gorgeous old brick exterior and double lot, but it had been empty for at least five years and had deteriorated significantly.

"There was water damage; everything inside was mildewed or wet," she recalls. "It was a huge project. So big that I contemplated it for two years because it made me nervous."

Eventually she bought it. "I'd already designed it in my head and knew exactly what I wanted to do with it," she says. And whom to use to make it happen? Peter Landon, a Chicago architect whose work she admired.

Only the foundation, brick walls and structural beams were of use. "We took it down to its bare bones, laid a cement floor in the basement, put a wood floor on the main level, opened windows that had been bricked up, put in new commercial aluminum windows . . . and that was just the start," sighs Fishman.

She also put on an addition in front of the factory building that spanned a third of its width and extended almost to the lot line, turning the rectangle into an L-shaped structure. The addition housed a garage on the side that faced the street, a kitchen behind that, and it featured a whole wall of windows facing the new "yard"—which was edged with an intriguing brick and corrugated aluminum fence to become an interior courtyard so Fishman's daughter could play outside.

The kitchen addition was sited at ground level, opening onto the new courtyard and stepping up to the original 2,500-square-foot factory structure, which was above-grade, due to its high-ceilinged basement. The basement was also redone with windows facing the new courtyard and a door and stairway with direct access to the space outside.

The interior on the first level was divided into an entry hall, living room, dining area and three bedrooms, while rooms for recreation, exercise, laundry and a live-in baby-sitter were chiseled out of the basement—with plenty of dead space left over to finish off later.

Once the structural work was done, Fishman, an avowed homebody who says she "would rather be in my place than anywhere else in the world" and enjoys having people over, set about making the upstairs rooms match her hospitable persona. As a devotee of flea markets and antique fairs who has been accumulating interesting furnishings and accessories her whole life, she already had everything she needed to outfit the place. To the large, high-ceiling rooms she introduced warmth and intimacy with scale, color and design elements.

Now years later, she's thinking: "My daughter is growing up; this is a big place." And she is hankering for a new project. "Maybe a three-flat I can do with a friend," she says. After all, "It has been seven years." □

Lisa Skolnik is a city editor for Metropolitan Home.

RESOURCES **Architecture:** Peter Landon, Landon Bone Baker Architects All paint colors: Benjamin Moore. **Living room:** Limestone Rumford fireplace—Materials Marketing Corp., Chicago; velvet sofa—Crate & Barrel; patterned sofa—Marshall Field's; Isamu Noguchi coffee table—Luminaire, Chicago; vintage club chairs—Marché aux Puces, Paris, upholstered in burgundy mohair—The Furniture Shop, Chicago. **Kitchen details:** Cabinets—fabricated through Landon Bone Baker Architects; pendant fixtures—Architectural Artifacts, Chicago; bench—collection of owner; painting by Diann DeWeese Smith. **Dining room:** Globes, paintings and armchair—collection of owner; B&B Italia dining table—Luminaire; chairs—Thonet Industries, Merchandise Mart, Chicago; chandelier—Marché aux Puces, Paris, France.



An eclectic pairing of streamlined dining pieces and fanciful floral paintings used to furnish the dining room is mirrored by the frothy lighting fixture and rough-hewn beams overhead.