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Taking an active role in the restoration of a midcentury house she and her husband bought near Chicago in 2013, Eva Kowalow honored the vision of the home's architect and previous owner, Jack Viks, while updating the structure to fit her

style and the needs of her family. On the exterior (opposite), Eva chose to cover the existing yellow brick with Prodema wood paneling installed by GFS Architectural Systems, Inc. The entrance gate, designed by Viks, is original.

AN ARTIST RECASTS
A NEGLECTED MIDCENTURY GEM,
TURNED GREEN WITH MOLD,
AS A MINIMALIST HAVEN.

DOUBLE VISION

TEXT BY WINIFRED BIRD PHOTOS BY PIPPA DRUMMOND



For convenience, Eva and restoration architect Victor Drapszo moved the kitchen from the second floor to the first floor (bottom), which originally housed a garage, laundry, and guest room. The cabinetry is Gamma by Arclinea,

the countertops are Lagoon quartz by Silestone, and the floor is polished concrete. The helix staircase (below) is original, but it was adjusted to accommodate a larger landing. The Link suspension light is from Lzf Lamps. Outside

(opposite), Eva and landscape designers Rosborough Partners thinned the trees directly surrounding the home. The paint on the steel beams is Extra White by Sherwin-Williams, coated in Duration Exterior Acrylic Latex.



Eva Kowalow leans over a table in her Lake Forest, Illinois, painting studio, paging through a sheaf of architectural plans. The plans, each drawn in pencil on yellowing tracing paper and dated 1959 to 1964, depict the 2,960-square-foot house that stands on the same five-acre wooded lot as the studio. On paper, it looks like two neatly stacked rectangles, the top one exactly twice as large as the bottom. In real life, it is a sleek glass-and-steel box floating amid the trees on a wood-paneled pedestal.

Eva, an artist, pauses over one of the sheets and points out a never-constructed skylight atop the steel spiral staircase that pierces the building's core. "We should think about that," she says as she traces the lines with her finger. "That would be really beautiful."

The plans were drawn by Jack Viks, the architect and engineer who designed both the studio and the house and lived in the latter from the early 1960s until some years before his death in 2011. By then, the

property was severely dilapidated. Eva and her husband, Paul, a senior systems analyst, purchased it from Viks's family in 2013, but they knew little about the architect. They never spoke with his wife or son, and the Internet revealed only tantalizing traces of his life (the 1963 theft of a thousand-dollar mink coat from the home, for instance). Yet through the meticulous architectural records Viks left behind, Eva was able to forge a creative connection with her home's original designer. Working with Chicago-based architect and family friend Victor Drapszo, of Red Architects, she masterminded a gut renovation that has brought new life to the residence while respecting its open interior spaces, clear geometric lines, and complete integration with surrounding nature.

Eva discovered the house in an online real estate listing. She and Paul were looking to move from their Chicago apartment to a larger home, and they had zeroed in on the wealthy North Shore suburb of >



**“THE GLASS BOX WAS LIFTED OFF
THE GROUND AND YOU COULD SEE
NATURE ALL AROUND YOU.
THAT STRUCK ME VERY DEEPLY.”**

VICTOR DRAPSO, ARCHITECT



In keeping with Viks's design, the living room remains on the second floor. A bright yellow artwork by Ken'ichiro Taniguchi complements the Bend Sofa by Patricia Urquiola for B&B Italia. The Random

pendant lights are by Bertjan Pot for Moooi, the Yo-Yo coffee table is by Emanuele Zenere, and the Maltino Rug is by Linie Design. The hardwood flooring is from the Admiration line by Mirage.



**“THE FIRST TIME WE SAW THE HOUSE,
IT WAS DARK AND EVERYTHING WAS
COVERED WITH ALGAE AND MOLD.
BUT I KNEW WHAT I COULD DO WITH IT.”**

EVA KOWALOW, RESIDENT

Lake Forest because they wanted good schools for their son, Nikko, and daughter, Giselle. The listing caught her eye immediately. “I was like, God, it looks like the Farnsworth House,” she says. As it happens, she had toured Mies van der Rohe’s Illinois masterpiece just two weeks before and had loved the floor-to-ceiling windows and feeling of being “in a treehouse,” as she puts it. Here were the same 360-degree glass walls—albeit in a two-story black building rather than a single-story white one—and the same striking steel frame. She dug a little further and discovered that Viks had studied under Mies at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where the former Bauhaus director had headed the architecture department from 1938 to 1958.

Her first visit to the house was part shock, part inspiration. “It was dark,” she recalls, with forest growing right up to the walls, and “everything was green with algae and mold.” The living room was littered with buckets to catch rain dripping through the age-battered roof, and the whole house smelled of wet wood. The parquet floors were damaged, the wood paneling was warped, and the other

finishes were too vintage for the family’s minimalist tastes. “We knew that we’d like to have everything new, not just hide what was wrong,” says Eva, who studied art and design in her native Poland.

Eva and Drapszo decided to remove everything except the external yellow brick walls on the first floor, which they suspected played a structural role, and the steel frame, which includes floors and ceilings made up of double-layered steel decking running lengthwise through the house. They tore out the pool, replaced the septic tank with a sewer connection, and took down many of the trees growing dangerously close to the home and the studio. The next step was to restore the exterior by adding a new roof, Prodema wood paneling over the brick, windows from the same local company Viks had used 50 years earlier, and a Farnsworth-inspired white paint job.

Inside, Eva wanted to retain the expansive second-floor living room but create more individual rooms for her family and eliminate the hassle of carrying groceries up those spiral stairs to the small existing kitchen on the second floor. So she and Drapszo turned the first-floor garage into

a large kitchen with radiant floor heating and transformed the former kitchen into a master suite, creating a total of three bedrooms upstairs.

Drapszo says the unusual steel decking and wraparound windows posed a number of design challenges. All the electrical wiring and plumbing had to be hidden in newly constructed interior walls, and there’s little privacy or room to display artwork. He never considered modifying the windows, however. “We did not want any walls against the glass because that would obscure the beautiful view,” Drapszo says. “I believe Viks wanted to have this feeling of voyeurism, because you’re in there all exposed, yet your drapes are nature.”

Eva handled the interior design work herself and also served as general contractor to save money. While she traded Viks’s warm black-and-brown scheme for a very different and minimalist white one, the change only serves to highlight his most important design element: the natural world outside. Among the documents Viks left behind, Eva has found several folders labeled “Big Trees.” She believes this was his nickname for the home. That, at least, is how she has interpreted his vision. ■

“IT WAS GREAT TO WORK FROM THE PLANS OF SOMEONE WHO WAS A PART OF THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE.”

VICTOR DRAPSZO

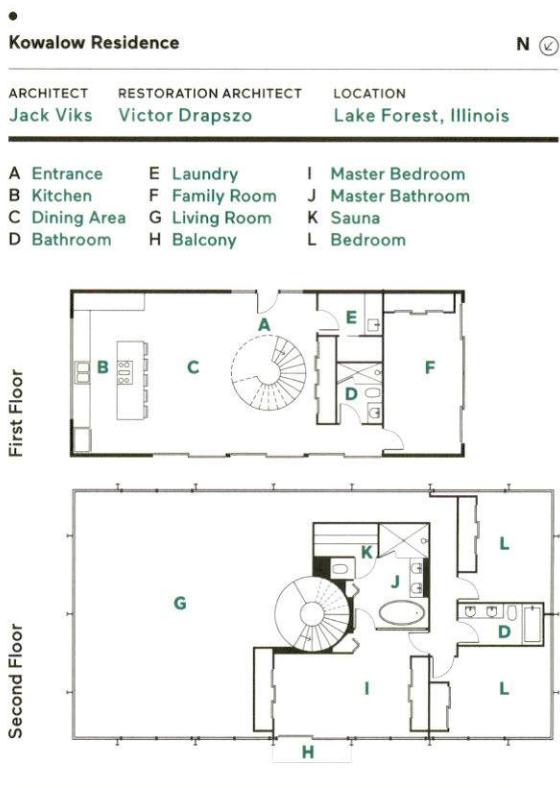


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