

Expression in contemporary

Text: R.J. Weick

Realized by the interior design firm of Brianne Bishop Design of Chicago, Illinois and the design-build firm of Orren Pickell Building Group of Wilmette, Illinois, this Lincoln Park loft interprets contemporary renovation as a rich, emotive expression of their client. Bold, high-contrasts take on textural life by artisan hand and are tempered by subtle moments of the feminine, softened by warm hues of gray in its palette. Industrial architectural vernacular speaks to

a history and permanence in the neighborhood, while vibrant artwork, soulful vintage elements, and iconic rock and roll photographs give voice and note to a distinctive composition where form and function come together in an inviting, sensory experience.

“[The client] was ready for a fresh start, something completely different than what she had, but we didn’t want to go too austere, too edgy, which is why some of the finishes are very soft even though the architecture is a little more

industrial. There are a couple pieces that we reupholstered that have that little softer, more transitional style, but things like the backsplash having a little more feminine scallop—it’s kind of her bachelorette pad,” said Brianne Bishop, ASID, NCIDQ, founding principal and interior designer at Brianne Bishop Design.

“We had so much fun designing it. I loved all the collaboration with [the client] and Orren Pickell and I love that it turned out not being the quintessential modern loft. Very





easily someone could have walked in and been like, ‘this is what we are going to do: black and white.’ It has that, but there are so many more layers to it,” Bishop added.

Founded in 2009, Brianne Bishop Design is an interior design studio specializing in high-end residential and commercial projects backed by a team of experienced designers. Since its establishment, the studio—led by Bishop—has developed a portfolio of work ranging in scope and style, and a process of collaboration and communication as the team strives to deliver inspired environments for their clients that not only meet their vision and needs, but also reflect a timeless style and modern aesthetic with the right amount of the unexpected. From initial conceptual design and design development to furniture selections and budgeting, the studio team works alongside their clients to clearly articulate the design language for a project, leveraging mood boards and other visuals as a communication tool.

“I always tell my clients ‘modern’ could mean very different things between us. Warmth was a big word here and also modern, but I know my modern and [the client’s] modern are very different,” Bishop said.

“We have our distinct style, which is focusing on contrast, texture, and scale, but at the end of the day, it is not my home. I am not designing for my brand; I want it to be reflective of them and I feel like this is so reflective of [the client]. Some designers focus more on designing for their portfolio and their brand strength, but all my clients are repeat clients of many years and it is because it is reflective of who they are,” Bishop added.

For the client of this particular renovation, an experienced real estate agent well-acquainted with the design-and-build process as a repeat client of Orren Pickell Building Group, the Lincoln Park loft lent itself well for entertaining and featured a number of amenities, spacious high-ceilings, southwestern sunlight exposure, and a rooftop deck in a rare, quiet location in the neighborhood. Initially built in the 1920s as a factory for Gaertner Scientific Corporation to develop scientific instruments such as microscopes, precision slides, and polarizing spectrometers, the building was converted into residential condominiums around the turn of the 21st century. The client of the loft noted though it was in need of renovation, the building itself was quite unusual in the marketplace with units of its scale, ceiling heights, and amenities like an elevator and two parking spots on a quiet corner in the city.

“If this was to be converted today, they would make it 50 units at 800 square-feet. I showed this as a realtor one time to someone and I was thinking, why aren’t they buying this? This building is so cool. There is honestly





nothing like it here,” the client said. “It needed to be redone and I could do it and I found [Bishop], which was just so lucky. I really wanted this to be more modern and different.”

The client, who had tapped the expertise of Orren Pickell Building Group nearly a decade ago to realize her lakefront home in New Buffalo, Michigan, looked once more to the family-owned, family-operated, full-service custom home design-build firm. In a rather serendipitous turn of events, she was then referred to Brienne Bishop Design to help curate a space that was decidedly more modern than the East Coast-inspired Georgian retreat built on the eastern shores of Lake Michigan.

Orren Pickell Building Group, an integrated firm offering architectural design, re-

modeling, construction, carpentry, cabinetry, and home maintenance services throughout the Chicago, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan region, is backed by a team of in-house licensed architects and designers, craftspeople, specialized professionals, and maintenance staff. Initially founded as a painting company by the husband-and-wife team of Orren Pickell and Tina Pickell more than 50 years ago, Orren Pickell Building Group has become recognized in the region for its design creativity, innovation, and construction excellence.

Orren Pickell Building Group’s comprehensive design and build process is dedicated to guiding each client throughout project development to ultimately deliver homes that exceed expectations and serve as a lasting

family legacy. The firm also provides access to construction specifications and design details through its proprietary, online client project management platform. Orren Pickell Building Group is now a second-generation-led business with Eric Pickell as sales and marketing manager, and Lisa Pickell as president.

Thomas Pins, lead architect and president of Orren Pickell Design Group, said the design-build firm’s philosophy is very similar in terms of designing for their client and ensuring the end result is on the right track for how they live and what their tastes are, ultimately capturing a reflection of them in the built landscape.

“I think ultimately you have failed if they aren’t,” Pins said. “The home is where people

spend most of their time and it is an honor to be able to create those spaces that they are going to love to be in and they are going to interact with each day.”

To transform the loft into a space tailored to their client, the design-build team completely gutted and reimagined the unit. Though the layout remained largely the same, the cabinets that had previously suspended over a kitchen island were removed to open up a large space that incorporated the dining and living areas as well. Much of the cabinetry—an Orren Pickell Signature Series of white-painted maple with maple veneer interiors designed by Brianne Bishop Design—and storage was then placed on a single wall and intentionally meant to feel as a volume in the space and its thin, recessed element leveraged to soften the impression of the tall height.

The custom-designed, black walnut dining table—long and narrow to support ease of flow and open up the space—also features a handcrafted and hand-wrapped chandelier by Brianne Bishop Design, banquette seating, and flanking cabinetry painted gray to imbue a sense of warmth to the space, complementing the walls and creating a sense of continuity in terms of its height with the large windows.

“I would say one of my favorite brainchild design elements is the kitchen. We obviously had to keep the cabinets down from the ceiling and the duct work, and yet the ceiling being so high, it was how do we make the cabinets feel like they go to the ceiling without doing that and also without it looking like it was before, which was just wall cabinets hung on the wall?” Bishop said.

“I know she fell in love with the windows and all the nice sunlight exposure, which did create a design challenge, because we wanted to honor the windows, highlight them, introduce that contrast, but with this much southwestern exposure it gets blasted with sunlight, so what we ended up doing was introducing shades at that horizontal mullion where you can’t really see them. It is a much cleaner way to give that protection, but when they are up, you can’t even see that it is there,” Bishop added.

The kitchen also features an oversized island of the same white-painted maple and maple veneer interiors, and a Brazilian Calacata Dolomite in Super White countertop that presented its own unique challenge: installing it without having a seam in the large slab of stone. The resulting solution was to use a crane to bring it through the window while the street was shut down as six workers carried it across an adjacent rooftop.

Krista Benton, CKBD, CAPS, lead kitchen and bath designer at Orren Pickell Building Group at the time of the project, noted the overall result to the layered design approach of transforming the loft into a more modern



space is comfortable, livable, and functional.

“I always feel like design should help better peoples’ lives and I primarily do kitchens and baths, focusing a little more on the technical side with kitchens and what we can do to make your life easier, because kitchens are such a hub of the household in most cases, even in smaller spaces,” Benton said.

“How do we make this part of your daily life and make life easier in some way, whether it is accessories and cabinets, whether it is the way we lay it out, or whether it is the way you do a custom table to make that feel like a bigger space than it is? In some way, make their life easier and better at the end of the day,” Benton added.

The living room, which repurposed the existing mantle and fireplace with a linear design, a hand-painted wallcovering by Maya Romanoff, and custom glass-and-metal doors, adds a bold contrast and layer to the entertaining space, where vibrant artwork, rich fabrics, vintage marble-cubed tables,

and lighting add soulful resonance. Beyond the custom doors flanking the fireplace—intentionally designed thin and minimal to not only mimic the windows, but also give it a feminine touch—an additional bedroom was transformed into a private den area where the client’s affinity for rock and roll is paired with a more traditional rug from her previous home and a balance of industrial elements and soft hues.

The artisanal palette of grays, whites, and muted hues contrasted with rich, bold color continue throughout the loft with custom hand-painted wallcoverings by Studio BK Inc. in the powder room and master bedroom suite—the latter of which offers a subtle hint of floral and lace in a certain light set against a deep contrasting backdrop. Bishop noted for this particular project they were able to incorporate a barn door for the master bedroom and bathroom suite to bring in that more industrial feel from the architecture with a softer finish in knotty pine.



While the bedroom features elements that are a little more of an homage to her previous house with more traditional nightstands, furniture, and the contemporary chandelier

finished in champagne, the design team also worked to balance it with edgier, feminine motifs such as through the oversized scale of the lighting fixture, the floral lace motif in the wallcovering, and reupholstering the furniture and the bed.

For the master bathroom, it is the Motor City Circles glass mosaic on the floor that set the stage for transforming the original corner shower into a longer, rectangular form featuring a bench and overhead rain shower heads complete with glazed ceramic wall tile and glass mosaic tile backsplash. The primary bathroom also features a recessed, built-in medicine cabinet and full-length mirror, two circular mirrors flanked by three wall sconces, and undermount sinks.

“[The client] fell in love with the mosaic. It was the starting point for the design in this bathroom, since she fell in love with it and it is called Motor City, which is just fun with the rock and roll theme. So, we built off of that. We didn’t want the wall tile to compete, we wanted [the floor] to be the star, so we kept the wall tile just a really organic, glazed ceramic and we did this little niche moment,” said Bishop in reference to the shower.

“The sconces in particular are one of our favorites, because they are narrower than most, so you have to plan on the appropriate

box behind them, but having three lights at face-level, especially for a woman—we really tried to squeeze it in with narrow mirrors, narrow sconces—it’s flattering lighting,” Bishop added.

Though the nature of the loft layout didn’t present a traditional residential foyer moment such as an opportunity to wallpaper a vestibule for dramatic impression, the space is one designed to entertain and host, and one of nuance, balance, and rich expression—reflective of both the design and build team’s dynamic client. For Bishop, design is a creative, technical outlet that is always evolving and working with a client who knows what she likes and also trusts the team when they push for something vintage or out of their comfort zone, was a dream.

“I got a lifelong friend out of it,” Bishop said. “Design is a part of me. It is who I am. I’ve never known how not to design; how not to plan. I feel so fortunate to do what I love and have a purpose for it. I always tell my team, we are not saving lives, we are just making them more beautiful, but that is really powerful too. Especially in the last two years, I did feel like what we do is important, having a place that your clients feel safe and healthy in and are reflective of who they are, and tell that story.”