

What Makes a Home ‘Sexy’?

For one Chicago entrepreneur, it was a design that felt as if it had been pulled straight from her unconscious. (And there are lots of chains.)



By Tim McKeough

April 20, 2021, 5:00 a.m. ET

When Jolita Leonas-Arzbaecher was planning her new penthouse apartment in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago, she gave her design team some very specific instructions.

“My home has to be as unique, dramatic and one of a kind as I am,” she told them. “Dramatic in the sense of being fascinating, unexpected and powerful.”

The grandiosity wasn’t lost on her. “How’s that for me boasting?” she joked recently.



Jolita Leonas-Arzbaecher bought a condo in a new development in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago, and hired dSPACE Studio and Project Interiors to customize it. Michelle Litvin for The New York Times

All kidding aside, Ms. Leonas-Arzbaecher, 65, an agricultural landowner and philanthropist interested in integrative and preventive medicine, views her home as an extension of herself, and she wanted the 4,320-square-foot apartment to be something truly uncommon.

“My home is a part of me,” she said. “My art is a part of me.”

Although the apartment was being built as part of a development project converting and expanding a 1930s Art Deco parking garage into luxury condos, she signed a contract to buy the unit as raw space, for \$3.3 million in 2017, she said, knowing that contractor-grade finishes would never satisfy her.

Then she commissioned Kevin Toukoudidis, an architect and the founding principal of the Chicago-based firm [dSpace Studio](#), to turn it into the modernist home of her dreams.

“When you get in early, there’s opportunity,” Mr. Toukoudidis said. “We were brought in before the

steel was erected and before the concrete floors were poured. So the opportunity was that we were able to redesign and reinvent this floor plan.”

For two years, he worked with the developer to customize the design of the unit before bringing in his own builder, Fraser Construction, to finish the job. And he spent hours talking with Ms. Leonas-Arzbaecher, teasing out the design details that would make her happy.

“For me, designing a home for our clients is all about this intimate process,” Mr. Toukoudidis said. “You have to understand the client’s lifestyle today, but even more important, help them think about how they’re going to live in the future.”

In this case, he heard, loud and clear, his client’s desire for a showstopping interior full of artful touches, metallic accents and pristine, white surfaces. And he designed a four-bedroom home that, to Ms. Leonas-Arzbaecher, almost seemed pulled from her unconscious.

“Kevin has this incredible ability to wear the hat of a psychologist,” she said. “At times, I felt he knew me better than even I know myself.”



One seating area has a custom 26-foot sofa and an installation of bronze-hued ball chains made by Beth Kamhi, an artist. The chair with leather fringe is from Ngala Trading Co. (from \$6,125). Tony Soluri

Mr. Toukoumidis installed a floor of oversized white-porcelain tiles and, at the center of the space, added a gas fireplace open on all sides and wrapped by steel rods, with blackened-oak panels above. “It’s viewable from the family room, the dining room, even the kitchen,” he said.

He used the same materials to create a pantry with a hatch that allows it to serve as a bar for entertaining. For the kitchen, he worked with Poliform to build counters and cabinet doors in white Corian, then added a wall of cabinetry finished in metallic lacquer and a backsplash of satin mirror to deliver on Ms. Leonas-Arzbaeher’s request for a little shimmer.

The primary suite has a large dressing room with glass-and-metal-mesh doors, a bedroom with asymmetrical light boxes set into the headboard wall and a minimalist spalike bathroom finished in white porcelain, white Corian and clear glass.

For help with sourcing fashion-forward furniture, sumptuous materials and custom art pieces to further personalize the space, Ms. Leonas-Arzbaeher hired [Project Interiors](#) on Mr. Toukoumidis’s recommendation. Aimee Wertepny, the owner of Project, and Jennifer Kranitz, the lead designer on the project, were immediately taken with Ms. Leonas-Arzbaeher’s enthusiasm for daring design.

“‘Show us what you got’ was sort of her M.O.,” Ms. Wertepny said. “She really wanted to see how we could push the boundaries.”

“The word ‘sexy’ was used a lot,” Ms. Kranitz added.



The primary bedroom has recessed light boxes above a custom headboard. The walls are finished in a smoky lacquer by Studio BK. Tony Soluri

They designed a 26-foot sofa that snakes across two walls of a sitting area, with an undulating seat to accommodate Ms. Leonas-Arzbaecher and her guests, whether they feel like sitting or sprawling. Above the sofa, the walls are swagged with bronze-hued ball chains made by Beth Kamhi, an artist, that drape down to the cushions and spill onto the floor at one end.

In the primary bedroom, they asked Studio BK to give the walls a thick finish of smoky plaster. “We wanted something textural and almost reptilian,” Ms. Kranitz said. “It feels very sultry. It’s a super moody room.”

To filter light in the main living space, they installed mesh curtains over the floor-to-ceiling windows. For the walls and ceilings in more intimate spaces, they added wallcoverings that resemble metals, painterly lines and animal skins.

By the time Ms. Leonas-Arzbaecher moved into her new apartment in November 2019, she had spent about \$1.6 million. The daily dividend on that investment? Getting to live in a space that is precisely tailored to her personality.

“I walk in and I just say, ‘I’m home,’” she said. “I absolutely love it, because the home is such a reflection of me.”