# Section One

September 16, 2005



ON THE COVER: BRAD MILLER (SOLOWAY)



# Our Town

[snip] **Fine art goes the way of politics.** "The arts market has become increasingly like other asset markets," according to a recent RAND Corporation news release summarizing its report "A Portrait of the Visual Arts: Meeting the Challenges of a New Era." "The value of an artist's work is determined not, as was traditionally the case, by the consensus of experts, but increasingly by a small number of affluent buyers who are drawn to purchase works for their potential investment value." **—Harold Henderson | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com**

Architecture

## The Neighborly Modernist

*Up-and-coming architect Zoka Zola shows us around her own award-winning house and her latest project, the Zero Energy home*

**By Dennis Rodkin**

On a corner of Ohio Street in Ukrainian Village, there's a classic Chicago building, three stories of red brick with a stiff white turret jutting skyward. You see versions of it on countless streets in the city, but nowhere does it look quite as much like a building with a boner.

That's because directly across the street is a decidedly softer shape, a formal opposite as inwardly directed as its neighbor's turret is upward thrusting. The two make a cute couple—though he is about a hundred years older than she is. (Typical.)

The newcomer is a beautiful, eccentric house with a minimalist style that serves as a corrective to all those big, showy, pretend-classical buildings being built all over the place—some on this very block. It has mostly sheer exterior walls punctuated with several supersize windows and bands of smaller ones; a second-floor terrace is the feature that gives it its fetching female quality. The front of the building, on Ohio, has just one frill: a line running up the middle, where the whole western part of the facade is set back one brick's width from the eastern part. "That bit of ornamentation isn't absolutely necessary, but without it the whole wall would have been flimsy and flat," says architect Zoka Zola, who designed the house and lives in it with her husband and son. "It's like a seam in the fabric that does not strengthen the garment but makes it feel stronger. I did not want the house to have any theater, to be fussy, but it needed this seam."

PAUL L. MERIDITH

Zoka Zola's home and office, 1737 W. Ohio

Ornamentation is rare anywhere in the house. The kitchen has simple oak cabinets, with stainless steel appliances and steel countertops, chosen by Zola to keep the variety of surfaces to a minimum; only in the library are there any signs of clutter. The bathrooms are serene white-and gray-tiled retreats. The master bath's sole flourish is a clever visual ruse: you know that the Sears Tower is many blocks to the southeast, but when you walk in, there it is framed in what appears to be a window facing west. It turns out to be a mirror. "I gave people something to think about when they are sitting there," Zola says, indicating the toilet.

On the upper level of the house is a little bump-out, a projection from the brick structure that allows room for the stairs without stealing floor space from the bedrooms. It's no more than four feet by eight feet, and it's about eight feet tall—just the right size for a tree house. And that's exactly how this little spot feels, with a bench where you can sit and look out over the treetops and the neighboring houses at an enormous section of the near west side.

The house was completed in 2002, five years after Zola and her husband, Peter Pfanner, came to Chicago so he could run Motorola's cell-phone design studio. It won *Architecture* magazine's Home of the Year award in 2003. With its five levels and the many stairs that connect them, the house fits in among the vertical styles that let the builders of new city homes stock a slim structure with media rooms, family rooms, and rooftop decks. But for Zola the topography of the house evokes her childhood home, the city of Rijeka, on Croatia's Adriatic coast.

"The whole country there is hilly," she says. "You find yourself continuously on a slope. That is my spatial training, unlike somebody who grew up in Chicago, which is flat as a mirror. Chicago's flatness may be why it was here that modern architecture began with the ingenious simplification of how to do an office building as a stack of pancakes. But when I design, I think more in 3-D because it is how we lived in Croatia."

The name Zoka Zola is something of an invention—Zola's given name is Zoranna Zola Skorup. In childhood her sister called her Zoka, which she adopted as her first name after she moved to London as a grad student and found that everyone mispro-

**continued on page 16**

# Our Town

[snip] **From the New Deal to the Screw You Deal.** Edward Alden, Washington bureau chief of London's *Financial Times*, offers a polite summary of recent history: "With the New Deal in the 1930s, helping those who could not help themselves became a mission that spawned a vast expansion of government's role. After a generation of determined effort the conservative movement has succeeded in squelching that mission. In the aftermath of Katrina, its success appears to have come at high cost." —HH

**continued from page 14**

nounced Zoranna. "They said *Zo-RAAA-na*, which gives me the shivers," she says. "It should be *ZO-ra-na*, accent on the first syllable and then a very even tone."

As a girl Zola first wanted to be a mathematician, then a physicist. "I thought physics is the closest to finding answers to the question 'What is this all about?'" she says. "Then I came across architecture and art, and I realized in a powerful way that these same things one can ask through art." She studied architecture at university in Zagreb, and in her third year fired up her audacity and "wrote to three or four stars of architecture to say I wanted to work for them." One of two who bothered to write back was Paolo Portoghesi, the Italian postmodernist. "This man wrote this letter vaguely inviting me to Rome, so I took a train there and he offered me a job for 70,000 lira a month," Zola says. "Do you know how much that was in 1983? About $35 a month! But I took it."

After finishing college back in Zagreb, she enrolled at the Architectural Association in London. In the next decade she worked for several leading European architects and professors before opening a firm of her own in 1990 in London, where she met her husband, who's originally from Australia. After they moved to Chicago she worked for DeStefano & Partners, then opened her own office a few years ago.

Zola has been walking me through our second tour of her house, the only building of hers completed in this country so far. I've seen how the gigantic single-pane windows in her office make the trees outside seem like part of the furniture; how both family bedrooms (there's a third for guests) have skylights directly above the beds, "so we can look at the stars as we lie in bed," Zola says; and how the living room and that sexy void of a terrace open onto one another as one great open-air space. But what I really want to ask is whether the house's relationship to its neighbor across the street is just in my imagination.

"It's like a male-female couple, yes," Zola says. "That is Chicago and this is a new Chicago. This is a response."

PAUL L. MEYOCKEH

**The office from above, the living area, the kitchen**

Detractors of the severe exterior of Zola's house might not see it this way, but it's actually a very neighborly structure. It's just 18 feet wide, and as Pfanner points out, it sits a few feet from the outer edge of the property on its north side, allowing for an extrawide sidewalk. "From Croatia, Zoka is used to the tradition of shared public space and plazas," he says. The couple has refrained from fencing the small yard on the east and south sides of the house, and neighbors often use it as a shortcut. And a big window over the front door swings open at a landing off the library, letting people inside chat with people on the sidewalk eight feet below.

As the house was going up three years ago, another couple in Ukrainian Village was working on a short list of architects who might design their dream home: an urban house that would be super energy efficient, as near to off the grid as it's possible to be in the city. J.W. Glass, a programming consultant, and his partner, Laura Bedolla, who works in the offices of a trading firm, had combed the city for an inexpensive lot on the south side of an east-west street, a siting meant to maximize sun exposure. They found one for under $100,000 in Westhaven Park, the west-side development where the CHA's Henry Horner Homes and Rockwell Gardens were coming down.

Glass and Bedolla really liked the house on Ohio. When they met with her they found they liked her approach as well. "We said we wanted a small, urban, efficient, perhaps even modern house, and all those words are to an architect like nectar to a hummingbird," Glass says. But they didn't want to spend much more than $500,000, a midrange figure in today's market, Glass says. Zola was game for that challenge too. The couple wanted passive solar design, a way of shaping and positioning a structure to give it as much sun as possible in winter and as much shade in summer. They also wanted geothermal wells, which run water 100 to 150 feet below the ground to cool it for air-conditioning in summer and preheat it in winter to reduce the furnace's workload. Zola hipped them to something else: insulated concrete

**continued on page 19**

# Our Town

COURTESY ZOLA ZOLA

A rendering of the Glass & Bedolla House, aka the Zero Energy home, to be built at 2305 W. Adams

continued from page 16

walls—essentially sandwiches with concrete for the bread and thick insulation for the filling—hold heat well. These walls became an integral part of Zola's design, which she dubbed Zero Energy house. She also made it mostly one room deep in order to allow for full penetration of the sun's heat and light.

Glass and Bedolla's house will be Zola's second completed building in this country, but it's been delayed a few times as the couple prices all the green-friendly features. In the meantime Zola's waiting for a new client, landscaper Christy Webber, to move forward on another project she designed, a mixed-use building in West Town with a striking asymmetrical facade and lots of glass and

continued on page 20

continued from page 19

open interior walkways.

While she waits, Zola and her staff of three work in her office, the largest space in the house. It's an idiosyncratic room, set at the half-basement level with 22-foot-high ceilings, a catwalk across one side to the house's back door, and an enormous street-side window pretty much daring passersby to peer in. I asked her about the catwalk. "I am used to that; as a child I walked along edges and ridges and stones like that," she says. "When we were building here I paced back and forth there and I worried, What is this I am building?"

She says, "It turned out better than I was fearing." ■