DPD

City of Chicago
Brandon Johnson, Mayor

DESIGN GUIDELINES:

Ground Floor Residential on Commercial Corridors

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Chicago, IL 60602

DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION & REVIEW ONLY

Contents

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Introduction

Purpose:

These design guidelines were created to provide best practices and design inspiration for ground floor housing along Chicago's neighborhood commercial corridors. The intent is to support livable ground floor housing units, complement existing commercial corridors, and promote renewed vibrancy in the hearts of Chicago's neighborhoods.

Application:

This guidelines document does not modify any land uses, policies, project review processes, or ordinances. Projects must comply with current regulations, which include the Chicago Zoning Ordinance, Construction Codes, and applicable review processes.

These guidelines are a resource for any ground floor housing, including the renovation of existing buildings and new construction on commercial corridors. They build upon Chicago's adopted Neighborhood Design Guidelines, which provide high level urban design guidance that is flexible enough to apply in any Chicago neighborhood or context. This document contains best practices and design inspiration specific to ground floor housing which has unique challenges in an urban context.

Guidelines Structure

This document includes three chapters of guidelines and a series of case studies. Most guidelines apply to both new construction and renovations, exceptions are noted where applicable.

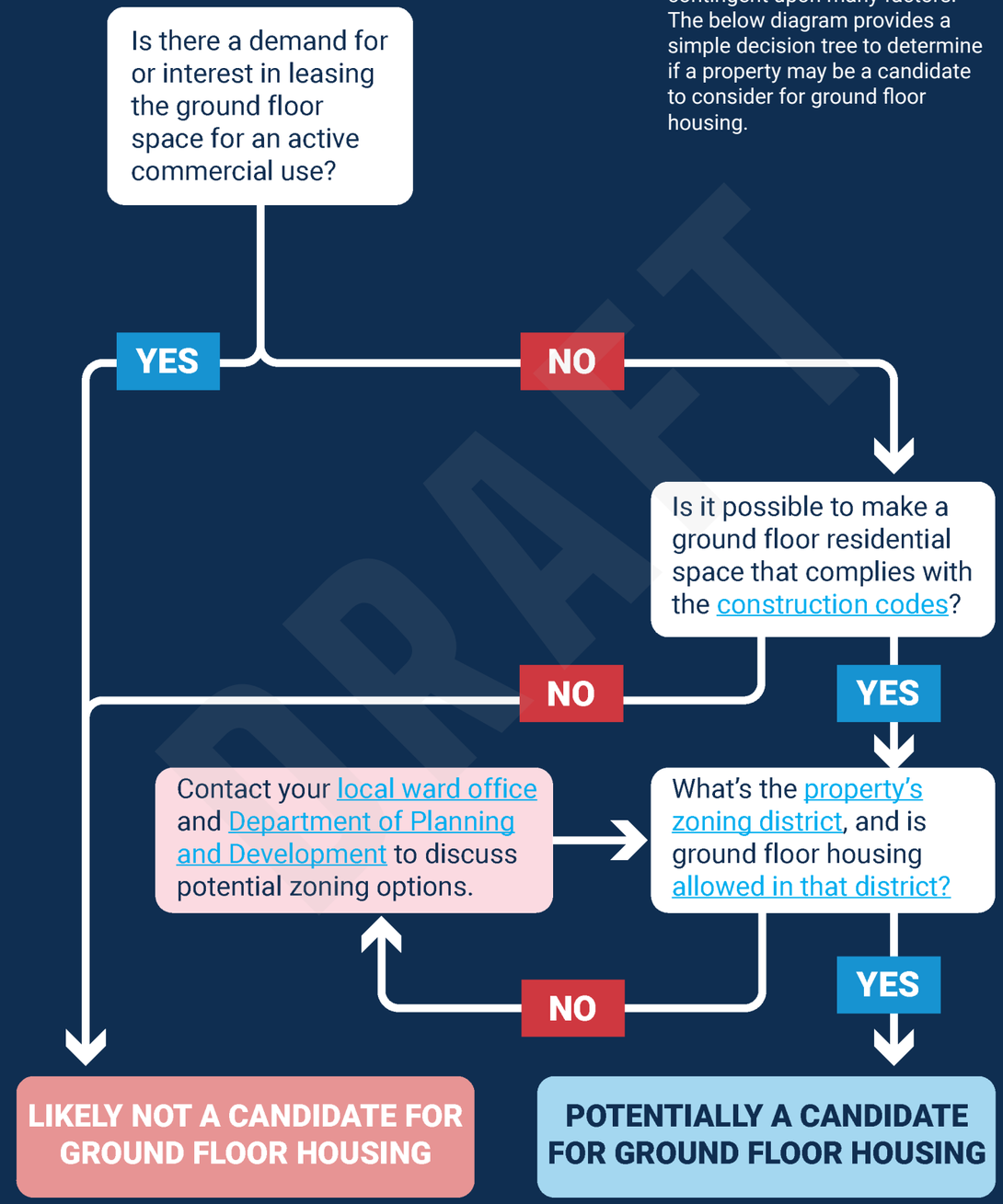
1 **Site Design**
Addresses setback zones, landscape design, and building entry orientation.

2 **Façade Design**
Includes recommended approaches for selecting materials, windows, doors, and lighting that is visible from the street.

3 **Case Studies**
Built projects that illustrate best practices described in the guidelines.

Feasibility

Successful ground floor housing on commercial corridors is contingent upon many factors. The below diagram provides a simple decision tree to determine if a property may be a candidate to consider for ground floor housing.



01

Site Design

The interface between private and public space is key to creating livable ground floor residences that also contribute to a pleasant street and vibrant neighborhood. The following site design strategies should be employed to achieve these goals.

Exterior Landscape:

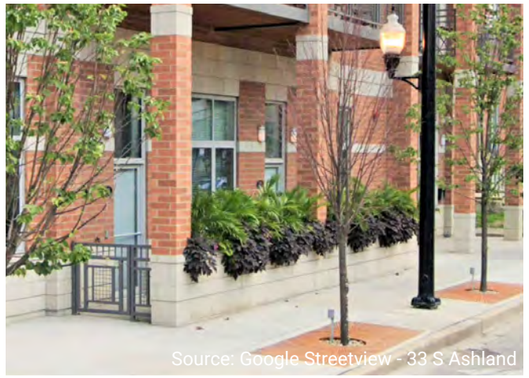
1.1

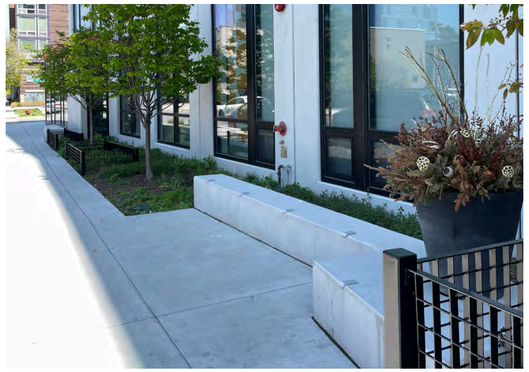
Landscape in Building Setback

In new construction, a modest building setback (typically no more than five feet) from the sidewalk or property line can create a transition area between the public sidewalk and private housing unit. This space should be filled with things that provide some privacy screening for residents and increase the comfort and visual interest for pedestrians on the sidewalks. This could include multi-level plantings, vertical gardens, planters, art, and/or patios.

These landscape elements can also help maintain the illusion of a block's continuous street wall when neighboring buildings do not include a setback.

Ongoing maintenance is necessary for any landscape elements and should be carefully considered when making design decisions.


Source: Google Streetview - 33 S Ashland



1.2

Landscape in Public Parkway

Chicago's 'Public Parkway' refers to the row of trees or plantings between the street and the contiguous sidewalk. Planting trees in the parkway creates a sense of separation between residents and pedestrians from vehicular traffic and it can improve energy efficiency in the building. Trees should be planted in the parkway when the distance between the building façade or property boundary and the street curb is at least ten feet. When there is sufficient width to accommodate both pedestrian traffic (typically at least six feet) on the sidewalk as well as a dedicated planting zone (typically at least four feet), providing a dedicated planting zone is generally preferred over tree pits. Dedicated planting zones can support street tree health over the long term and provides significant aesthetic and sustainability benefits.

When there is not enough width to allow for a dedicated planting zone or adequate soil for planting in the ground, planters can provide another option. Planters provide many of the same benefits of planting in the parkway, especially by increasing the sense of enclosure and protection from street traffic.

Ongoing maintenance is necessary for any landscape elements and should be carefully considered when making design decisions.

For recommended plant types and specific guidance on frontage planting, see the City of Chicago landscape requirements in the Chicago Zoning Ordinance (Section 17-11) and the Guide to the Chicago Landscape Ordinance.

Any installation or placement of elements in the public parkway may require a Public Way Permit. Expansion of publicly accessible space within a property setback to allow wider sidewalks or dedicated planting zones along the curb may require an access easement with the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT). CDOT reserves the right to review any site plan.

Source: Amli Residential

Building Entries:

1.3

Accessible Entries

Ground floor housing provides a unique opportunity for creating accessible access to units without the need for stairs, ramps, or elevators. Wide, at-grade building entries should be considered for new construction ground floor units. Existing, at-grade building entries should be maintained when converting a ground floor space from a different use. Accessible entries can accommodate a greater variety of residents and can assist in complying with applicable disability accessibility standards.

1.4

Recessed Entries

Recessed entries can provide a useful transition between the activity of the sidewalk and the entry to a residential unit. Existing recessed entries from converted storefronts can be retained or new ones created in new construction or major renovations. This type of indentation into the ground floor can visually highlight the main entry and nicely break down the scale of the building façade.

1.5

Existing Storefront Entries

In storefront conversions to housing, preserving the original storefront entry door location and size can help maintain the unique character of the former storefront. This can also maintain views and access to the outside while allowing adequate natural light into the ground floor unit.

1.6

Existing Corner Entries

Corner storefront entries are a unique storefront type seen throughout Chicago that can present unique challenges when converting the space to a residential use. If a corner storefront entry door cannot be retained due to interior unit needs, the corner should be thoughtfully reconfigured with compatible materials and design features. This could include installing a new storefront window system, panel systems, and/or planters.

Source: Endicott Photography

Examples for Modifying Existing Corner Storefront Entries:

Maintain existing corner entry

Replace corner entry with a window to match the rest of the storefront

Fill in corner with integrated planter

Replace corner entry by extending the storefront window system to the corner

02

Façade Design

Buildings located on commercial corridors need to encourage activity and vibrancy in the area. They also need to complement the corridor's unique architectural legacy. The following façade design guidelines attempt to reconcile residents' living needs with the needs of Chicago's commercial corridors.


Source: VHT Studios

Source: Theodore Ellison

Façade Elements:

2.1

General Character

Ground floor façade design should align with typical storefront qualities, character, materials, and proportions within the commercial corridor's context.

When renovating an existing storefront, changes to the façade should be restrained and complement the building and neighborhood's architectural character while also signaling a residential use. For example, modifying an existing storefront may include maintaining the structure and proportions of the existing pilasters, bulkhead panels, and transom windows, even if specific elements are replaced with new, more residentially appropriate materials.

2.2

Building Materials

Façade materials should be considered according to the building location, orientation, and surrounding context. Residential spaces are also typically more sensitive to energy costs, thermal comfort, privacy, and sense of safety than commercial spaces.

Providing residents with a durable and energy efficient façade system that allows precise control over interior living conditions can significantly improve energy performance and resident comfort.

When existing building walls must be modified, durable and compatible materials should be chosen to thoughtfully integrate into the existing façade. Examples may include bricks of similar or complementary size and appearance, similar or complementary stone, weather treated wood, or durable metal cladding.


Source: Maxime Desbiens


Source: Google Streetview - 1258 W 18th St.

Source: Redfin

2.3

Reuse of Existing Materials

Reusing materials when renovating an existing building can improve the project cost, sustainability, and compatibility with the existing façade and surrounding context. Original architectural materials and features should be maintained or replaced in kind, whenever feasible.

Using reclaimed materials, even if they come from a different site, can also improve project sustainability and alignment with the neighborhood's architectural character.

See the Chicago Zoning Ordinance for specific requirements when choosing to maintain an existing historically or culturally significant sign (Section 17-15-0600).

2.4

Color

Introducing color can significantly enhance a façade and provide visual interest and a sense of care for the surrounding commercial corridor. Color can also be used in strategic or unexpected ways to create playful contrast.

Examples of relatively quick and easy opportunities to introduce color include stained or painted elements (*e.g.,* window and door frames), awnings, and interior shading devices.

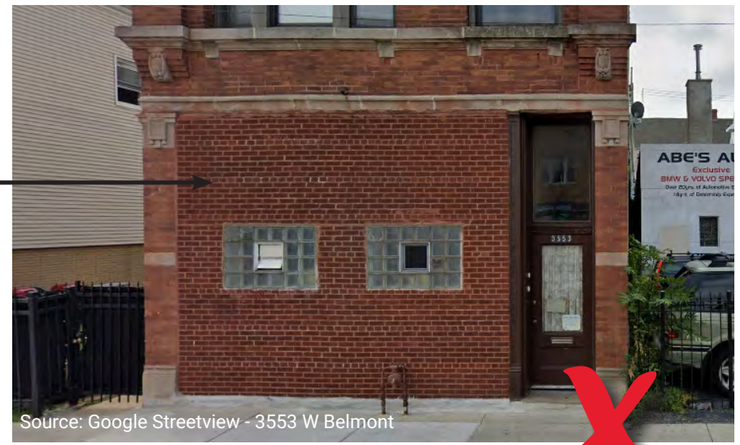
There are sometimes opportunities to commission public art for an area of blank façade, especially on the secondary side of a corner building.

EXAMPLES OF INAPPROPRIATE STOREFRONT CONVERSIONS:


Source: Google Streetview - 2031 S Halsted

Incompatible materials and lack of transparency creates a blank wall that discourages pedestrian activation

Removal of existing architectural character and blank wall


Source: Google Streetview - 3553 W Belmont

Inappropriate materials and small windows reduce natural light and ventilation


Source: Martina Gemmola


Source: Alex Lukey

Doors:

2.5

Front Door

For ground floor resident privacy and security, a solid front door with minimal glass may be preferred to typical framed glass storefront doors. When glass panels are used in unit doors, safety glass may be used where appropriate.

Windows:

2.6

Amount of Glass

Providing a significant amount of transparent window glass on a ground floor façade is generally encouraged. Glassy façades can complement a commercial corridor's architectural character, improve the experience along the sidewalk, and provide natural light and ventilation for residents.

When converting an existing storefront requires modifying or replacing the glass, care should be taken to maintain the overall quality of the storefront while balancing the needs of residents.

For projects on designated Pedestrian Streets, the Chicago Zoning Ordinance requires certain design standards, which include a minimum proportion of clear, non-reflective windows on ground floor façades (Section 17-3-0500).

2.7

Privacy Screening

While a significant amount of transparent window glass is encouraged (2.6) to align with the context of commercial corridors, residents also need options to protect their privacy inside their homes.

Highly reflective, dark tinted, and large areas of glass block are typically discouraged because they create an unpleasant blank wall effect for pedestrians. These glass types can also limit light, views, and ventilation opportunities for residents.

2.7.1

Textured or Translucent Glass

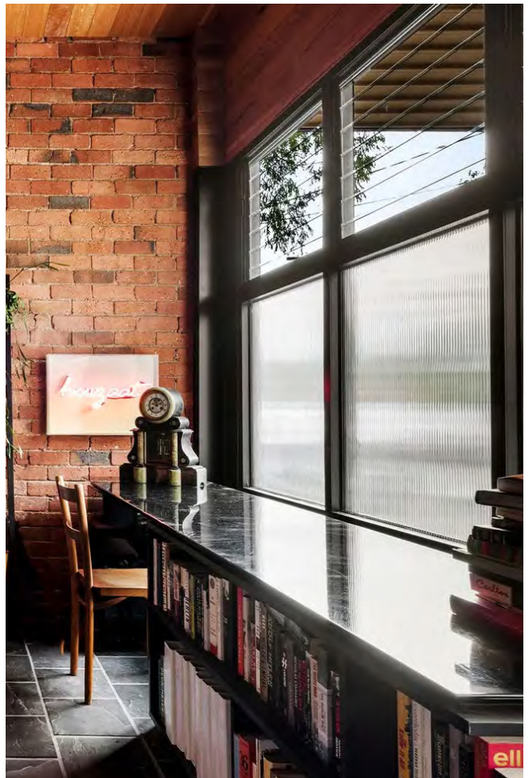
Textured and translucent glass can provide visual privacy while also allowing light infiltration and maintaining visual interest. Textured and translucent glass are best used sparingly to obscure primarily the eye level view from the sidewalk into private spaces. It is common to provide textured or translucent glass in a horizontal band with clear glass above and below. This obscures most of the view from the sidewalk while also allowing more natural light above and a clear space for plants or pets on the windowsill.

Examples for types of textured or translucent glass are:

1. Molded textured glass
2. Fritted glass
3. Etched or sandblasted translucent glass
4. Interior application of high quality translucent film

When choosing any type of translucent glass option, the material should align with the overall design of the façade, be installed correctly, and be durable over time.

For projects on designated Pedestrian Streets, the Chicago Zoning Ordinance requires certain design standards, which include a minimum proportion of clear, non-reflective windows on ground floor façades (Section 17-3-0500).


Source: Joel Noon

★★★★

2.7.2

Window Treatments

Blinds, light filtering shades, interior shutters, and curtains are window treatment options to allow residents flexibility to control views while also maintaining options to modify light and ventilation to their preferences.

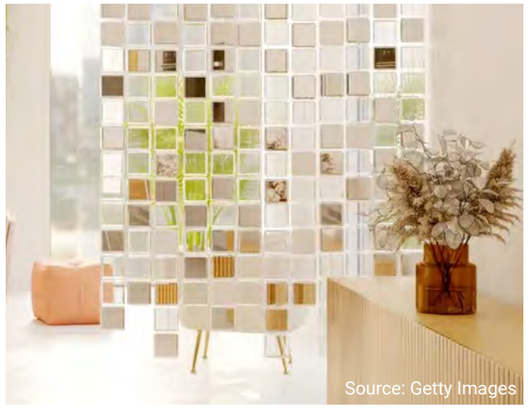

Source: Don Debat


Source: Zillow Group


Source: Litfad


Source: Reddit, Inc.


Source: IKEA


Source: Getty Images

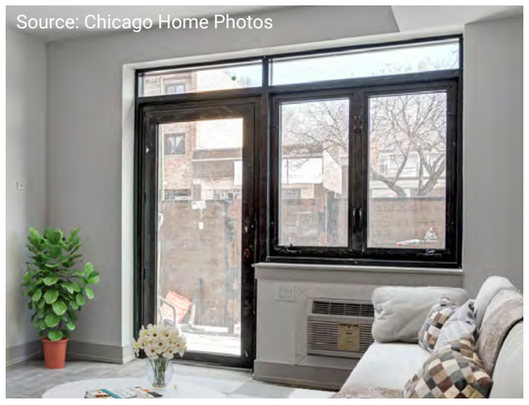
2.7.3

Window Display Area

When a resident needs more permanent visual privacy, a window display provides an opportunity to screen the view into the unit while also creating a more friendly face for pedestrians on the sidewalk. Displays often include plants, art, and/or sunny spots for pets to watch the street. A screen, curtain, or divider can be placed between the window display and private area within the home.


Source: ohmeohmyblog.com


Source: Barbulianno Design


Source: Chicago Home Photos


Source: VHT Studios

2.8

Window Proportions

Large expanses of glass are typical for ground floor commercial spaces but can be less desirable for residential units. Instead, the glass can be partitioned into smaller divisions, which can also allow operable portions that are more typical for residential windows.

Knee walls or bulkhead panels (typically less than three feet tall) below window assemblies can also respect typical storefront proportions while reducing the total amount of glass for a ground floor residential unit.

2.9

Natural Light and Ventilation

Strategically locating, selecting, and modifying windows should provide natural light and ventilation for resident comfort as well as increased energy efficiency.

Maximizing clear glass and operable windows, especially on the upper half of the wall, provides natural light and ventilation deeper into residential units while also protecting privacy and security for residents.

New windows should include some operable components in the window assembly. Transom windows are good options since they are located along the top of the wall. Depending on the style and functional needs of the building, transom windows can open from the bottom outward (awning), from the top inward (hopper), or by sliding horizontally within the window frame.

2.10

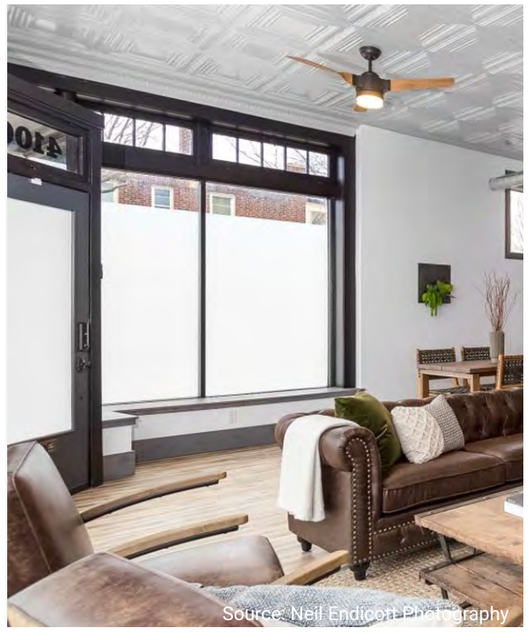
Types of Glass

When selecting glass, it is important to consider the following factors:

- Appropriate sizes and proportions (2.6 and 2.8)
- Light and ventilation needs (2.9)
- Bird friendliness (2.11)
- Privacy needs (2.7)
- Security needs
- Noise control
- Energy efficiency

Insulated glass is most common because it reduces sound transmission, ultraviolet light exposure, and energy costs while promoting improved indoor resident comfort. Renovations of existing storefronts often include removing large sheets of single pane glass to replace it with insulated glass window systems to gain these benefits.

Laminated glass can provide similar resident comfort and sustainability benefits to insulated glass while also being difficult to break through when there are security concerns. However, energy performance for laminated glass is typically less efficient than insulated glass options.


Source: Neil Endicott Photography

2.11

Bird Friendly Windows

Window selection and treatment should include elements to reduce or prevent bird collisions. Untreated clear or reflective glass can confuse birds and cause them to strike windows, which they often do not survive.

Decals, screens, and other proven strategies can help reduce the estimated one billion annual bird deaths from striking windows in the United States. See the American Bird Conservancy website for a wide variety of ways to prevent bird collisions with residential windows.


Source: abcbirds.org


Source: abcbirds.org

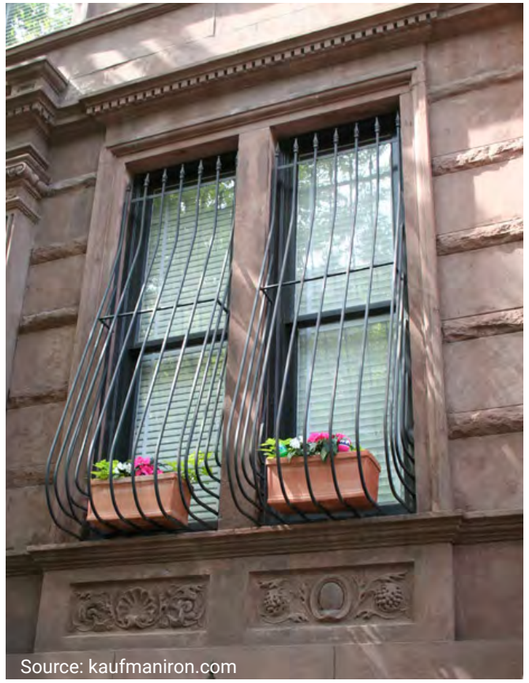

Source: AJ Wrought Iron

2.12

Security Bars

While bars over windows are generally discouraged, they may be necessary in some circumstances with particular security concerns. When deemed necessary, window bars should be made of decorative metalwork that aligns with the overall design of the façade.


Source: Getty Images


Source: kaufmaniron.com

Source: Tyler Engle Architects

Exterior Lighting:

2.13

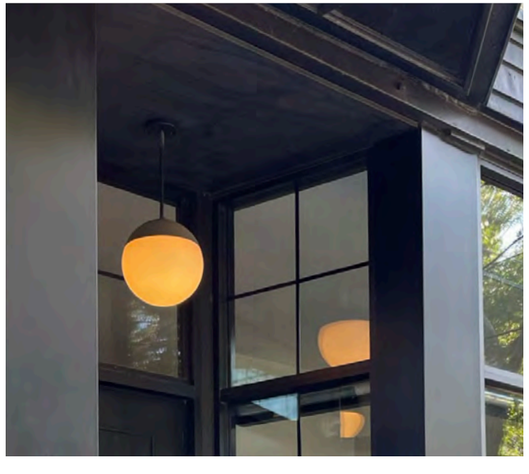
Lighting Location

Lighting should be placed to illuminate entries and potentially other elements like architectural details, planters, or house numbers. Focusing lighting near the front door signals a residential use on the ground floor, contrasted with more broad lighting along most commercial façades. Uplighting a residential façade is generally discouraged on commercial corridors.

2.14

Fixture Types

Light fixture design, materials, and scale should complement the overall façade design and be appropriate for residential uses and character. The temperature and color of the residential lighting is typically softer and warmer tones. Selected fixtures should be designed for exterior use only.



2.15

Security Lighting

Strategically placed lighting can be useful in increasing the perception of safety and security along commercial corridors. However, harsh, overly bright and motion activated fixtures should be avoided along the façade because they significantly degrade the pedestrian experience along the corridor and can disturb residents in their units.

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03

Case Studies

Source: VHT Studios

Source: VHT Studios

Introduction to Real World Examples of Ground Floor Housing Design

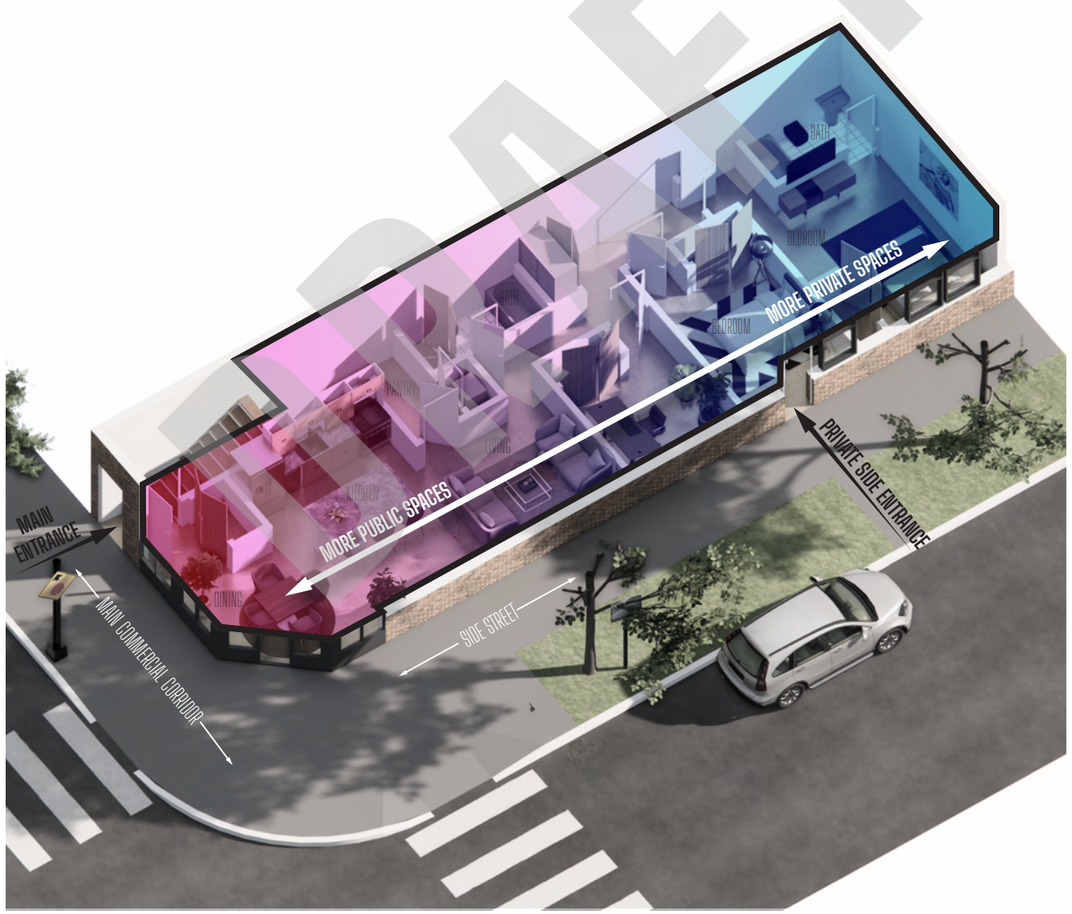
The following case studies demonstrate a range of ground floor project types, including new construction, renovation of former storefronts, and live/work units. There examples illustrate how livable residential units can positively contribute to the activity and vibrancy of commercial corridors.

Typical Unit Layouts

Typical Ground Floor Unit Layout

Ground floor residential units on commercial corridors are often designed as “open plan” to maximize the amount of natural light and ventilation for the unit. When units floor plans are deep or have limited windows, partial walls can be used to provide room division and privacy while still allowing light from above.

Less private areas are typically located closer to the street while more private areas are typically located further from the street activity and more out of view.



Typical Ground Floor Live/Work Layout

Live/work units use many of the same general layout strategies as typical ground floor units. However, live/work units also include work and display space for a business along the street frontage with more private residential spaces located behind.

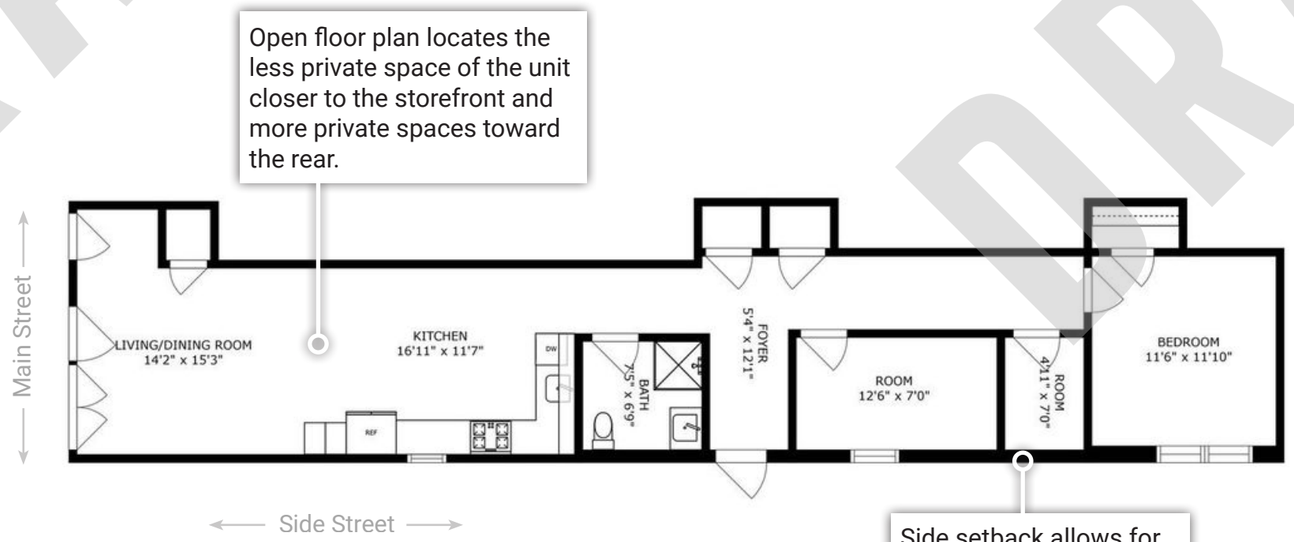
Below is a diagram of a typical Ground Floor Live/Work Unit layout. See Chicago Zoning Code Section 17-9-0103.1 for live/work unit requirements.

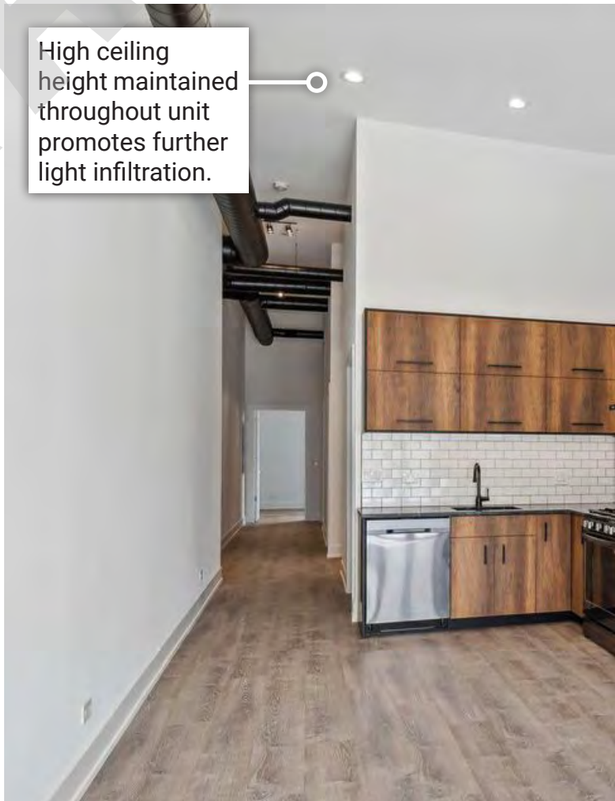
New Single Lot Multi-family with Ground Floor Unit

Chicago, IL

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This four-story, multi-family residence was constructed in 2022 on a single lot in Chicago's Albany Park neighborhood. The building is built along south property line but features a small ground level setback, allowing for an enclosed patio at the front of the ground floor unit. In the 1,300 square-foot unit, operable windows and a second egress door are provided along the east wall where there is a five-foot setback. This allows for increased natural light and ventilation along the length of the unit.





Upper Left - South façade; Lower Left - Ground floor unit plan; Upper Right - Ground floor unit kitchen and living area; Lower Right - Hallway leading to bathroom and bedroom.

IMAGE CREDIT

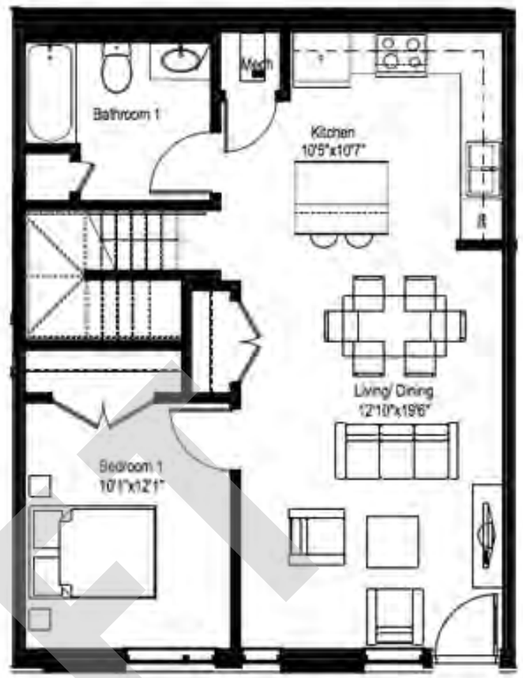
VHT Studios (All)

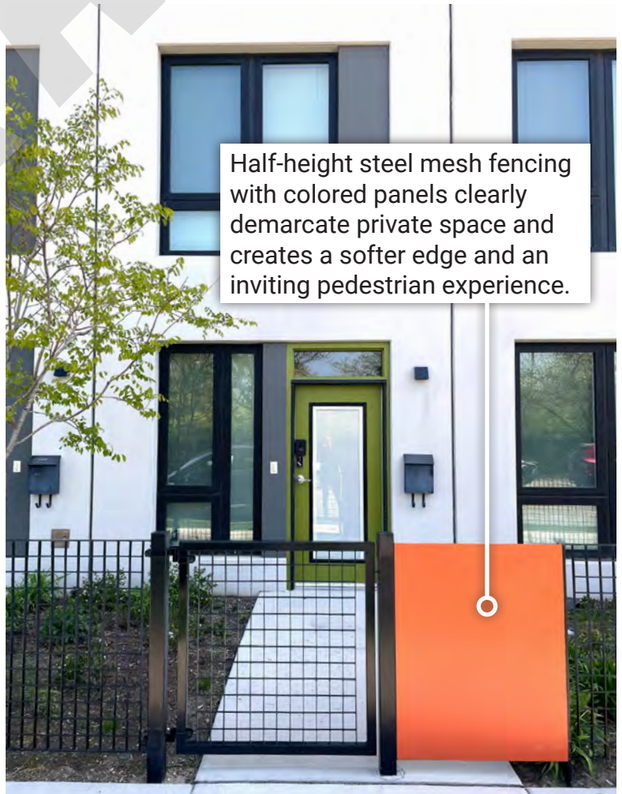
Multi-family with Varied Unit Types & Frontages

Chicago, IL

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Occupying a full block of the former Cabrini Green housing development in Chicago's Near North neighborhood, Elm 551 at Parkside was completed in 2021 and designed with robust community input. The transit-oriented development includes three-story walk-up apartments and a seven-story mid-rise residence located at one corner of the block. The mid-rise building has its residential lobby for upper floor units located at the corner and at the ground level along its eastern face features two-story townhouses set back from the street.





Upper Left - Mid-rise residential lobby; Lower Left - Mid-rise townhouse frontage; Upper Right - Mid-rise townhouse ground floor plan; Lower Right - Mid-rise townhouse frontage with front yard buffer zone

IMAGE CREDIT

Landon Bone Baker Architects (Upper Left)
Holsten Real Estate Development Corp. (Upper Right)

Vintage Corner Full Ground Floor Conversion

Chicago, IL

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This early 20th Century corner mixed-use building in Chicago's Brainerd neighborhood sits adjacent to the Dan Ryan Woods and the 91st Street station of Metra's Rock Island line. The ground floor of vacant or underutilized commercial spaces was converted to accessible residential units. Storefront entry locations and much of the glass area are preserved in all units, with new residential doors and window assemblies added, complementing the language of the original façade design at the upper floors.

Upper Left - North façade after conversion; Lower Left - Inner wall of renovated storefront wall in studio unit; Upper Right - Exterior northwest corner before conversion; Lower Right - Accessible one-bedroom unit

IMAGE CREDIT

VHT Studios (Upper Left, Lower Left, Lower Right)
Google Streetview (Upper Right)

Conversion with Central Screening Mass

Brooklyn, NY

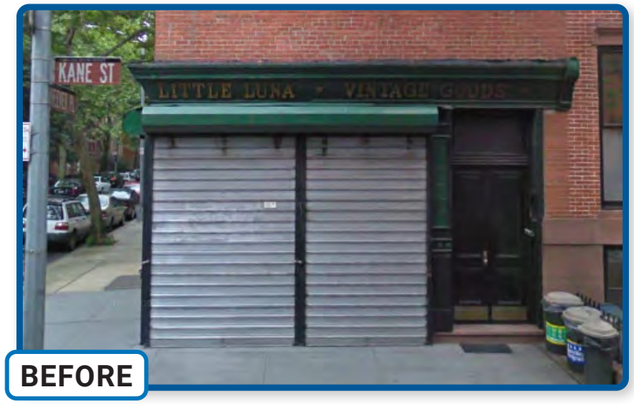
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Formerly a butcher shop opened in the early 20th century, this storefront in the Cobble Hill Historic District of Brooklyn, New York was converted into a residence. The storefront display window and entry were retained and restored. A concrete fireplace was poured in-place to serve as a focal point in the new living spaces, but also to screen views from the street into more private residential spaces behind.

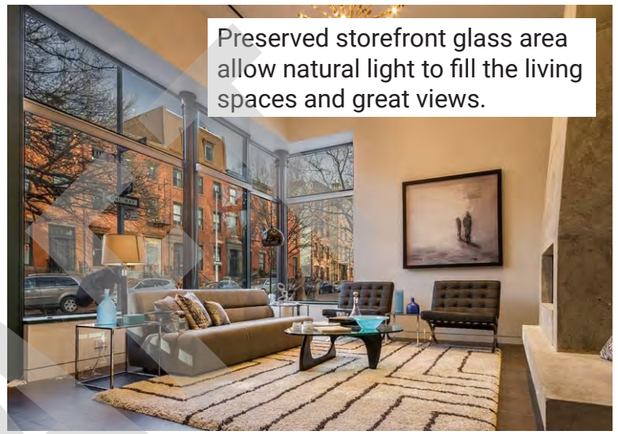
Upper Left - Façade after conversion; Middle Left - Façade before conversion with roll down security shutters; Lower Left - Dining area and kitchen looking toward front windows; Upper Right - Living space with new concrete fireplace; Lower Right - New fireplace

IMAGE CREDIT

Dixon Leasing (Middle Left, Lower Left, Upper Right, Lower Right)
Google Streetview (Upper Left)



BEFORE



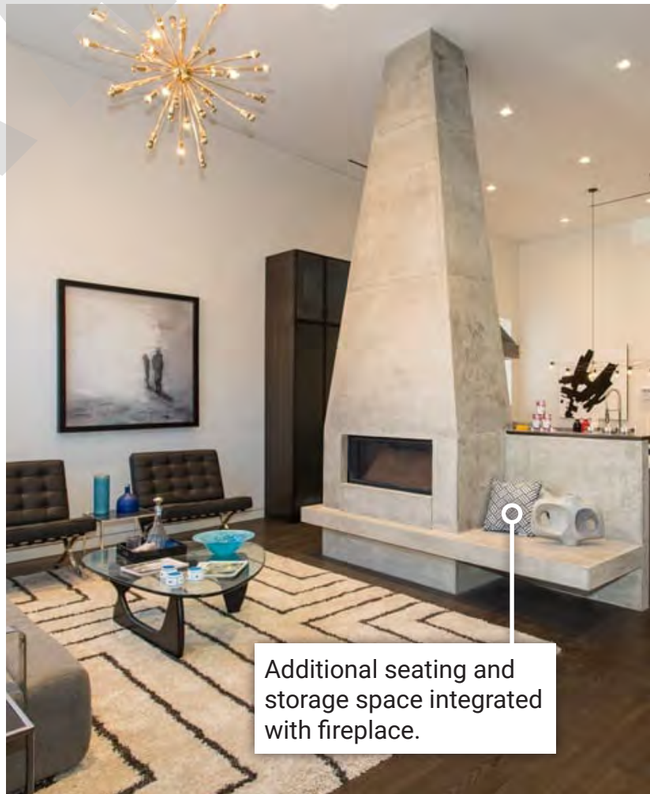
Preserved storefront glass area allow natural light to fill the living spaces and great views.

AFTER

Source: Dixon Leasing

Poured-in-place fireplace acts to screen views from the street into the more private kitchen and dining area;

Shades below transom allow more privacy when desired.



Additional seating and storage space integrated with fireplace.

Ground Floor Loft Conversion

Chicago, IL

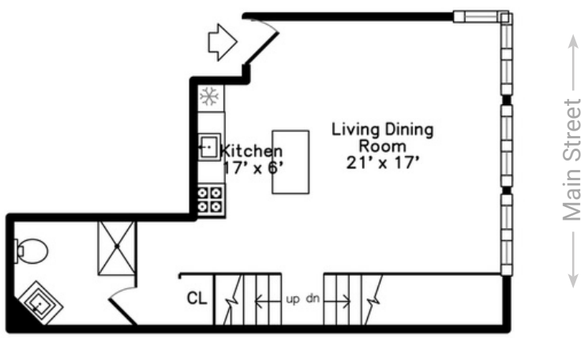
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

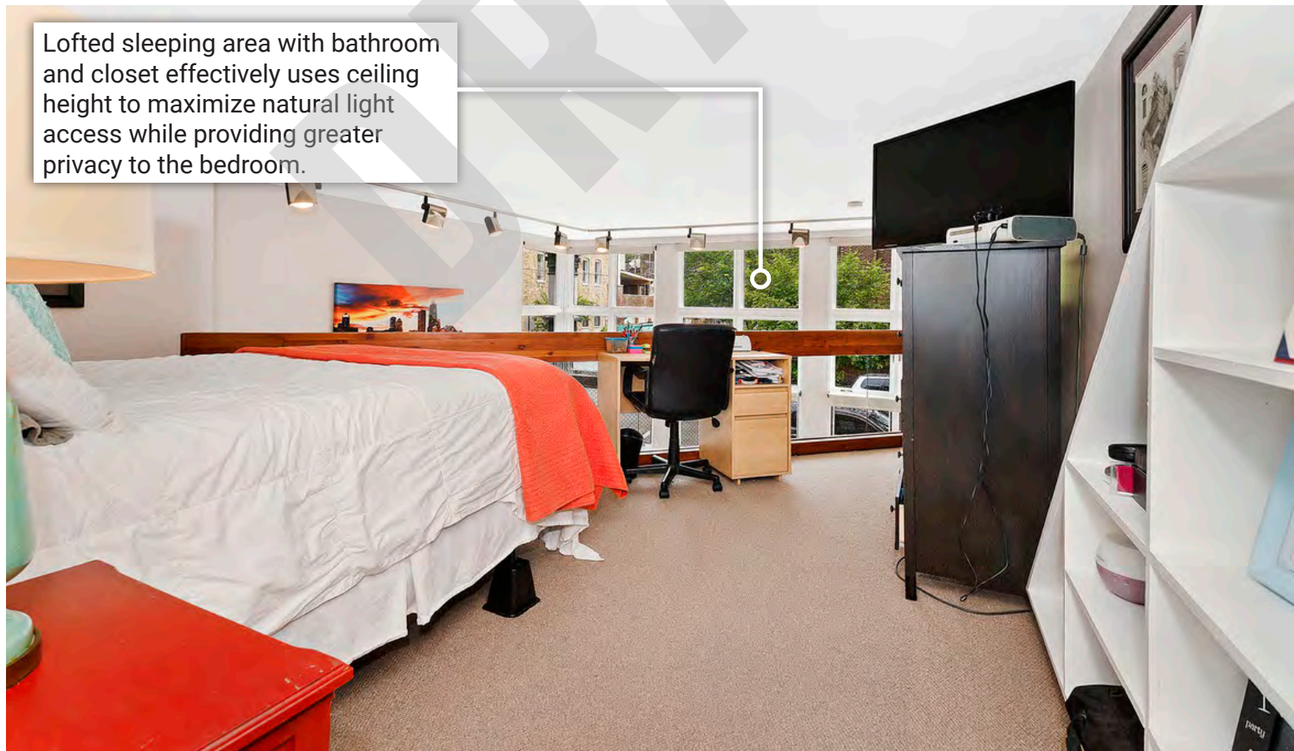
This late 19th Century multi-family residence features a converted ground floor unit that capitalizes on the storefront ceiling height to create a delightful, lofted bedroom. The kitchen and bathroom are tucked below the loft, while the living space sits adjacent to the floor-to-ceiling storefront window wall. The new window assembly contains operable windows and shading devices, allowing for natural ventilation and more privacy when desired.

Upper Left - Full building façade; Center Left - Ground floor unit living space and lofted sleeping area; Lower Left - Unit floor plan; Upper Right - Ground floor unit living space; Lower Right - Lofted sleeping area

IMAGE CREDIT

Redfin Corporation (All)





Converted Vintage Corner Renovation

Chicago, IL

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

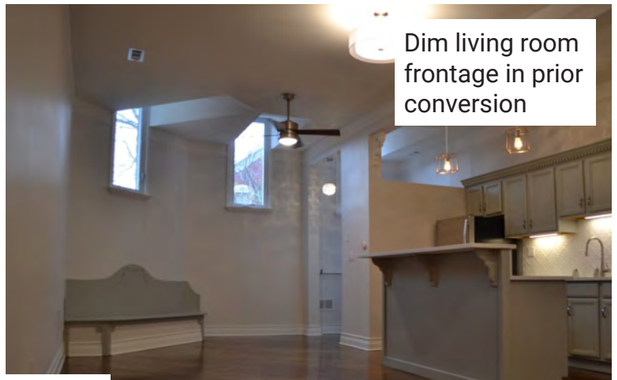
This three-story, mixed-use building in Chicago's West Town neighborhood previously had its ground floor commercial space converted to a dwelling unit in a way that significantly compromised its access to natural daylight. Much of the storefront was filled in with brick, creating a living experience similar to that of a garden unit. However, this unit was recently renovated, including a substantial façade reconstruction that restored an expansive glass frontage at the ground level. The unit is accessed via the building's main entrance instead of its own dedicated entry. This allows the living space to be used more efficiently.

Upper Left - Front façade after façade reconstruction; Center Left - Building façade before ground floor reconstruction ; Lower Left - Living space and kitchen in prior unit conversion; Upper Middle - Unit conversion floor plan; Upper Right - Open living area after second renovation; Lower Right - Living space and kitchen after unit renovation and façade reconstruction

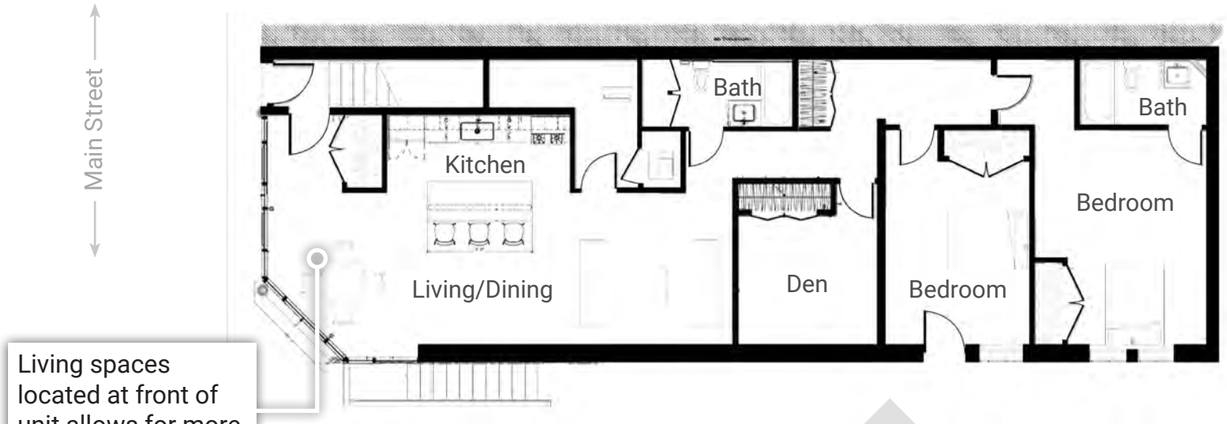
IMAGE CREDIT

Zillow, Inc. (Upper Left; Upper Middle; Upper Right; Lower Right)
CoStar Group (Middle Left)
Open Path Realty (Lower Left)

BEFORE



BEFORE



Living spaces located at front of unit allows for more private bedrooms

Vintage Corner Studio Conversion

Chicago, IL

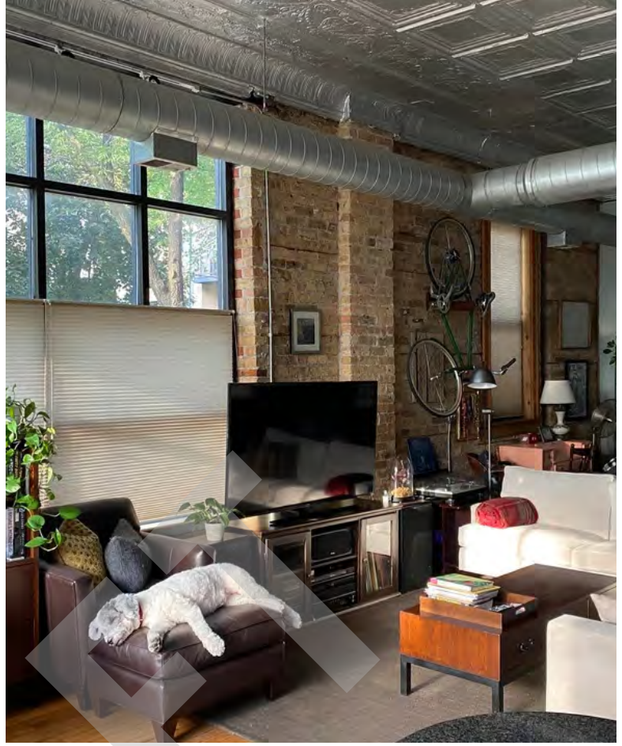
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This vintage corner mixed-use building in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood is located across from a school. The ground level storefront space was converted to a modest studio apartment while preserving several of the existing storefront conditions or finishes on the interior and exterior. Top-down, bottom-up shades line the lower half of the unit's front windows, allowing for flexible levels of privacy, while still natural light.

Upper Left - Front façade after conversion; Upper Right - Unit entry with kitchen to the left; Bottom - View from entry area toward rear of converted unit

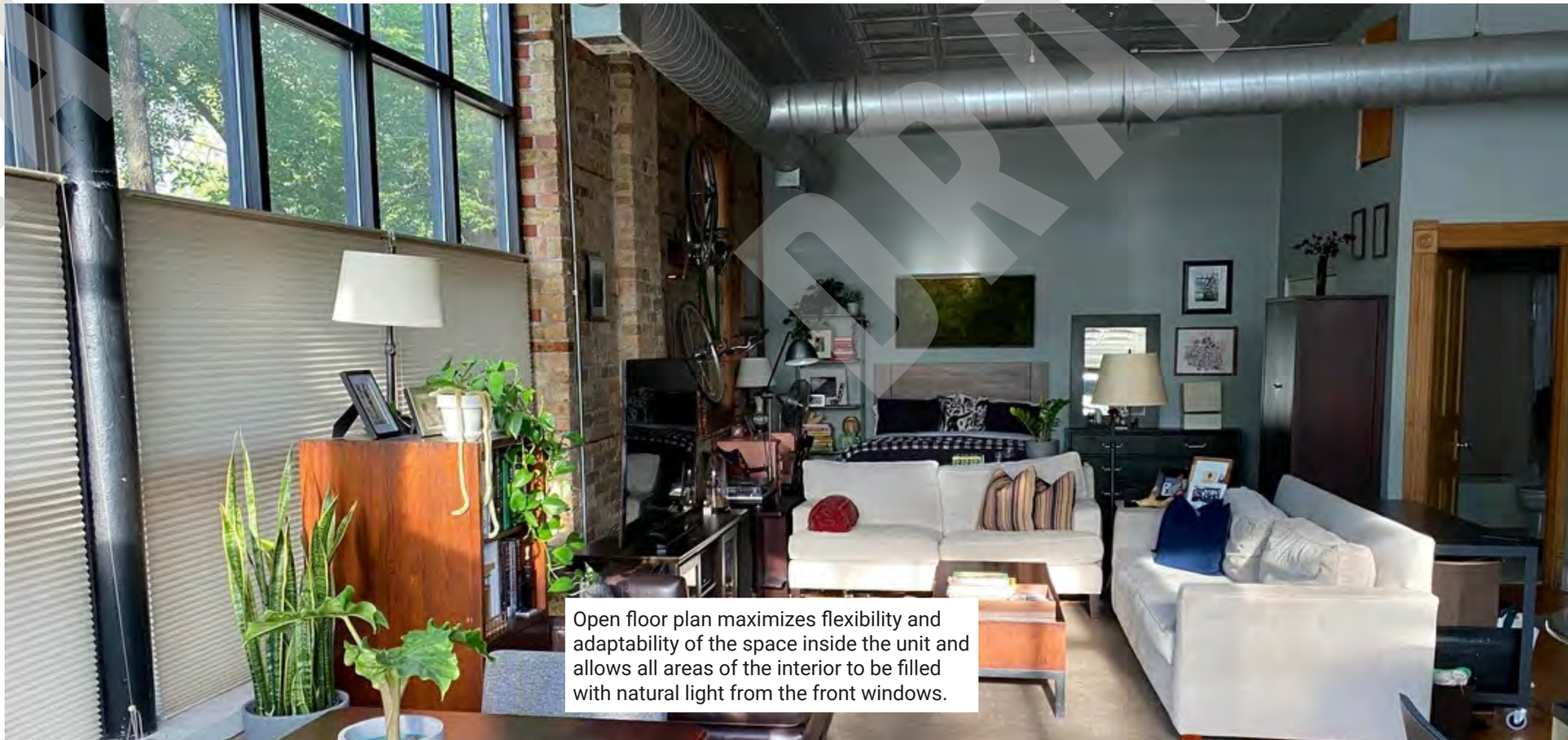
IMAGE CREDIT

Reddit, Inc. - User: Erreur_de_Parallax (All)

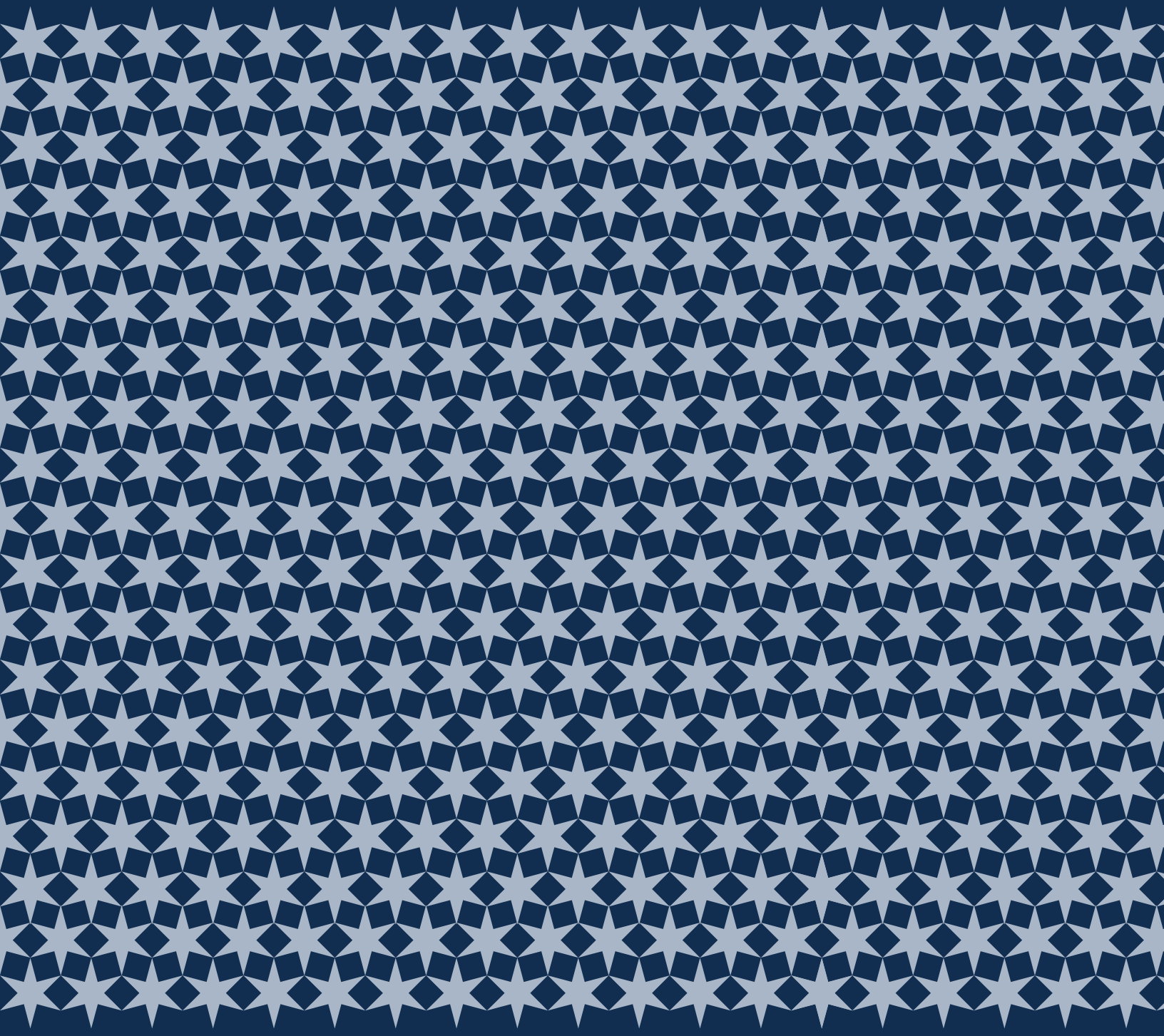


Corner entry, exposed heating and cooling system, and original tin ceiling are all retained, for reduced conversion cost;

Bottom up shades screen views into the unit



Open floor plan maximizes flexibility and adaptability of the space inside the unit and allows all areas of the interior to be filled with natural light from the front windows.



City of Chicago
Department of Planning and Development

DPD

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