

Behind the scenes of the new HGTV series 'Windy City Rehab'

Tracy Swartz

The newest Chicago drama isn't on NBC — it's on HGTV. Alison Victoria Gramenos and her team renovate and flip North Side homes amid weather woes, budget concerns and neighbor complaints on "Windy City Rehab," which is scheduled to premiere at 8 p.m. Tuesday.

Gramenos — who goes by Alison Victoria on the show — said filming is still underway as she tries to finish some of the homes that will be featured on this season's 10 episodes. The Chicago native said her crew was able to work around bad weather, but winning over upset neighbors took time.

"Ultimately, all that my goal is and all my goal has ever been is to be able to really do what I want and do what I love and make a difference in the city because these homes that are going up by other developers — I'm not saying all of them — but some developers are putting up homes just to make money," Gramenos told the Tribune by phone.

"There's no architectural appeal to it, and so I can see why neighbors would be scared of developers, of course, but what we're doing is delivering a different product, and what we're doing is being true to the neighborhood and bringing the history back. So until they actually grasp that, all they think is that we're in there, we're trying to turn it, make a buck and get out. But my business partner and I, we care so much about everyone in the neighborhood, everyone on that block. We want to make sure our job sites are clean. We want to make sure that we are not hurting the neighborhood, but people don't like change."

Longtime Ukrainian Village resident Miriam Rodriguez-Ruiz said she doesn't have a problem with change, but she has a problem with Gramenos' lack of community outreach about her renovation of a 19th century cottage in the 2100 block of West Thomas Street. Rodriguez-Ruiz, who lives next door to the home, recently called the project a "nightmare."

"We were not notified when they worked on the roof. This created hazardous conditions for not just us and our dog, but anyone in our yard. They routinely threw debris from the roof without letting us know or out of the front of the house. The debris included nails, old beam straps made of iron, wood and metal shrapnel," Rodriguez-Ruiz told the Tribune.

How much of this will make it onto the show is unclear. Rodriguez-Ruiz's husband, Tony Ruiz, circulated a petition against a rear addition they said would affect their and their neighbors' views and reduce property values. More than two dozen signatures were gathered for the petition against the addition, which was approved

by the city's landmark commission.

The Ruiz family said they had to endure concrete dust amid renovation to the neighboring property on West Thomas Street in the Ukrainian Village neighborhood for the "Windy City Rehab" show. (Tony Ruiz / Handout)

Rodriguez-Ruiz, a Chicago native, said more importantly, her concerns about preserving the intent of the original builder were dismissed when she and her husband met with Gramenos' business partner, Donovan Eckhardt, at the office of Ald. Brian Hopkins (2nd) months ago.

Rodriguez-Ruiz said she hasn't heard from Gramenos herself, but she said Eckhardt, who is featured on the series, reached out to her husband and said a show producer wanted to speak to them. Rodriguez-Ruiz said her husband told Eckhardt they would not meet with a producer who could "twist our words... and in the end, make it seem like we're a bunch of crazies."

For her part, Gramenos said Thomas Street neighbors are "so sweet to us now." She expressed confidence that neighbors will be pleased with the work done to all the homes on her show.

"I think if everybody — not if — *when* everybody sees what our finished project is, like, for instance this (renovation) on Thomas, we're getting people coming up saying how beautiful it is and 'wow,' instead of eight, nine months ago where they were signing a petition," Gramenos said.

Gramenos, who grew up in the former John Hancock building and in west suburban Geneva, also fixed up homes in Bucktown, Lincoln Park, Lincoln Square, Logan Square and Wicker Park for the series, which was in the works for years. While hosting "[Kitchen Crashers](#)," a DIY Network show that wrapped in 2016 after nine seasons, Gramenos pitched a series to HGTV that would follow her as she restored historic firehouses, schools and funeral homes. She ended up focusing on renovating vintage homes.

The pilot episode of "Windy City Flip" initially aired in July 2017 and will serve as the 10th episode of "Windy City Rehab." HGTV representatives announced in October 2017 that the series was a go. Tuesday's premiere focuses on a problematic rehab of an "[oddball](#)" home on Wabansia Avenue in Bucktown.

Gramenos has fondness for the Bucktown area. She splits her time between living in Bucktown and in Las Vegas, where she went to college and began her interior design business. She said she purchased a run-down single-family home on Wicker Park Avenue in Wicker Park about seven years ago and renovated it in about nine months.

Custom planters, lounge seating and deck turf are featured on the rooftop deck renovated by Alison Victoria Gramenos on "Windy City Rehab." (HGTV)

“(People stop) to take pictures of the house because I was able to bring the beauty back, and I knew I wanted to do that forever. I wanted to be able to put my stamp on the city because so many other developers were just building things that weren’t being true to what the city’s known for, and every single home that we’re doing is achieving just that,” Gramenos said.

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