

# Reality Realty: 'Windy City Rehab' host revives Chicago's past - Los Angeles Times

*R. Daniel Foster*

The term “boutique developer” might seem discordant, given that many builders churn out humdrum homes, but Alison Victoria makes the moniker sing as host of HGTV’s “Windy City Rehab,” premiering Jan. 1.

Victoria teams with contractor Donovan Eckhardt to transform historic Chicago properties via gut rehabs that can take a year — sometimes stalled by brutal winters, not to mention requisite neighbor drama.

The high-stakes renovations with distinctive, tailored stylings are a step up for native Chicagoan Victoria, former host of DIY Network’s “Kitchen Crashers.” Known for her intrepid demeanor, Victoria also runs the design firm Alison Victoria Interiors, based in Chicago and Las Vegas.

Victoria, 38, spoke to us cozied next to her fireplace (“because it’s freezing,” she said) in her new-build Chicago home that she recently executed with Eckhardt, who also teamed with her on “Kitchen Crashers.”

What kind of buildings do you seek out in Chicago?

They date from 1880 to 1980. People have converted them to two-bedroom flats, multi-unit buildings or condos, so I de-convert them back to single-family homes. I find artifacts from the original time and bring them into the build, make them look like they’ve been there for over 100 years. Whether it’s new construction or a gut rehab, people think these homes have been here forever.

You favor Chicago common brick, which was first popularized after the city’s devastating 1871 fire. Why has it become such a prized reclaimed material?

If you want to bring back a historic look in a building, then you’re going to use it. It’s inexpensive, which is funny because of all the work that goes into salvaging it. It’s beat up, there are holes in it, divots, and lots of texture. It’s like wabi-sabi [a Japanese aesthetic] — finding perfection in imperfection.

You renovate a lot in Bucktown, where you live, a trendy neighborhood just west of Lincoln Park.

Bucktown has a lot of brownstones and cottages, and some homes with an Italianate style. It’s very family-oriented. I’ve done three homes on Wabansia Avenue there.

You renovated one Wabansia Avenue home, selling it for \$1.325 million — a 1980s boxy rebuild with cinder-block walls. Neighbors called it the “ugliest house on the

block.”

We created a sophisticated city cottage — a new A-frame roofline and two porches to the front of the home. It’s black and white: classic, clean and timeless. The front door is one of two that were used as pocket doors in an 1890 Chicago home — 9½ feet tall. We cut it down, filled the holes and painted it black. You can feel the history the moment you open the door, so heavy and substantial.

What kind of working style do you have with your contractor, Donovan?

He’s very calm and level-headed, whereas I am like the Tasmanian Devil — “We gotta get this done!” I have my vision, and it’s all about staying on schedule. He really balances me out. Donovan’s just like this teddy bear.

A great contractor can be hard to find. Do you have tips?

Do your homework. Call all their references and find out how the jobs went. Contractors are a dime a dozen and the good ones are like a needle in a haystack. When you find a great one, hold on to them real tight.

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