




## Almost custom

**How to elevate a brand-new condo? It's all about choices.**

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Buying a home  pre-construction is not for the faint of heart. But for real estate broker Doug Smith, getting in on the ground floor seemed like the best way for him and advertising executive Neil Ford to customize the three-bedroom condo they now call home.

"We were able to sit down with the our developer before it was even built to make modifications to the floor plan," Smith says, of the 1,950-square-foot unit, which included a large rooftop balcony as well as an enclosed balcony off the living area. "It was on a nice wide lot, so we went for it."


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Although the building was just a hole in the ground when the couple first saw the Chicago property, Smith and Ford were attracted to its lot, which, at 40 by 108 feet, is both wider and shorter than a more typical 25-by-125-foot Chicago lot.

"It's more of a big square than a linear unit, so you get wider hallways and more [storage](#) ,

 Smith says, pointing out that its top-floor location allowed them to move the mechanicals to the roof.

They used the space they gained on the main level to expand closets and reposition the bathrooms. They added extra windows, one over the kitchen sink and another in a dark area by the staircase — a suggestion from [interior](#)  designer Michael Abrams, whom they engaged early in the project.

"We knew how we wanted it to look, but we needed help pulling it all together," Smith says. "Our style isn't contemporary or traditional, and Michael understood that. His style is very warm and welcoming."

By the time they hired Abrams, Smith and Ford had already made changes to the proposed design of the kitchen, swapping out the stock cabinetry for a [custom](#)  installation that uses every inch of the unit's 10-foot ceiling heights and designing a larger island with white Calacatta Gold marble countertops.


"Doug is a high-end Realtor who has seen a million kitchens, so he really knows what he wants," Abrams says, noting that he suggested that they have the island painted dark gray to make it stand out.

The designer used the same gray on the fireplace in the living room as well as the double vanity in the master bathroom, which has also been topped with a white marble surface. In lieu of a tub, Smith and Ford went with a large walk-in shower, which Abrams outfitted with an accent wall covered in black tiles.

"Paint, fabric and finishes play an important role in this home," Abrams says.

Indeed, to create the clubby look Ford envisioned for the office, Abrams designed a custom desk and shelving unit, which he had painted in the same shade as the dark blue walls. Illuminating the shelves is a trio of library lights in a polished nickel finish. Abrams repeated that finish on a trio of sconces in the master bathroom and pendants that make the kitchen island the focal point of the main living area.


"The right lighting makes a home come alive," Ford explains. Abrams also redesigned the placement of the in-ceiling lights to take furniture layout and art into consideration.

The way Abrams sees it, smart planning not only increases the chances of an aesthetically pleasing outcome but often reduces the budget  as well. In the living room, for example, Abrams designed a recessed drapery track concealed behind a piece of crown molding, which eliminates the need for expensive hardware.

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"Extending the crown molding to create a drapery pocket is an easy, cost-effective way to hide the track, and it has that luxury hotel look," Abrams explains. "The custom window treatments  and rugs really tie the whole space together."

The living room's tone-on-tone window treatments have a masculine, geometric pattern that adds interest to its neutral taupe and gray color scheme.

To further reduce costs, Abrams reused Smith and Ford's original furnishings, which they had custom made 10 years ago. He recovered the sofa in a taupe textured blend and the lounge chair in a masculine plaid linen blend with an orange  pinstripe that was inspired by his client's Chinese altar table, which he positioned behind the sectional as a sofa table.

"This palette allows them to change the whole room by simply substituting the orange for a different accent color," Abrams says.

Despite starting from scratch, Ford says the project was relatively stress-free — thanks in large part to Abrams.

"Nine out of 10 times, Michael would present three choices, and we would both point to the one that we wanted," Ford explains. "We had complete confidence in Michael, and we're very happy with the result."