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Cristóbal Palma

Seeing Double

An architect makes a steel-and-glass courtyard home for his family in Santiago with two airy volumes topped by arched roofs.



Max Núñez designed a double-vaulted home in the heart of Santiago, Chile (opposite), for him; his wife, Emilia

Müller; and their two young daughters. The architect prioritized free-flowing air, native plants, and natural light

to create a translucent hideaway, using walls of glass brick (above) to achieve both privacy and transparency.



Thanks to the vaulted ceilings, Emilia can still watch the girls in the upstairs playroom (left) while she's in the kitchen on the far side of the courtyard (opposite). Both the size of the spaces and clarity of their

structure made it an easy home to fill. "You can do pretty much anything inside and it will work," Max says. He filled out the dining space (above) with a round glass Edison table by Vico Magistretti, yellow

aluminum Pipe chairs by Jasper Morrison, and a Moon suspension lamp by Davide Groppi. The living area, which faces the courtyard, features a Za:Za Max sofa from Zanotta and a Chariot side table from Horm.

A striking greenhouse on the outskirts of Santiago, Chile, with a double-vaulted ceiling of glass bricks earned architect Max Núñez a 2022 nomination for the Mies Crown Hall Americas Prize. It also sparked an architectural inquiry: Could the concept be adapted for domestic life? "That was a house for plants, but the spatial quality was so interesting that I thought it would be nice to test it as a house for people," he says. Those people, it turned out, would be himself and his wife, Emilia Müller, a textile and clothing curator at Santiago's National History Museum, as well as their daughters, ages 9 and 12.

They had been living in an apartment building on a busy block in the Providencia area, not far from downtown Santiago, when Max started thinking more about his next experiment. He and Emilia had always dreamed of a quieter life in a stand-alone home, so, in 2022, they purchased an old house on a roughly

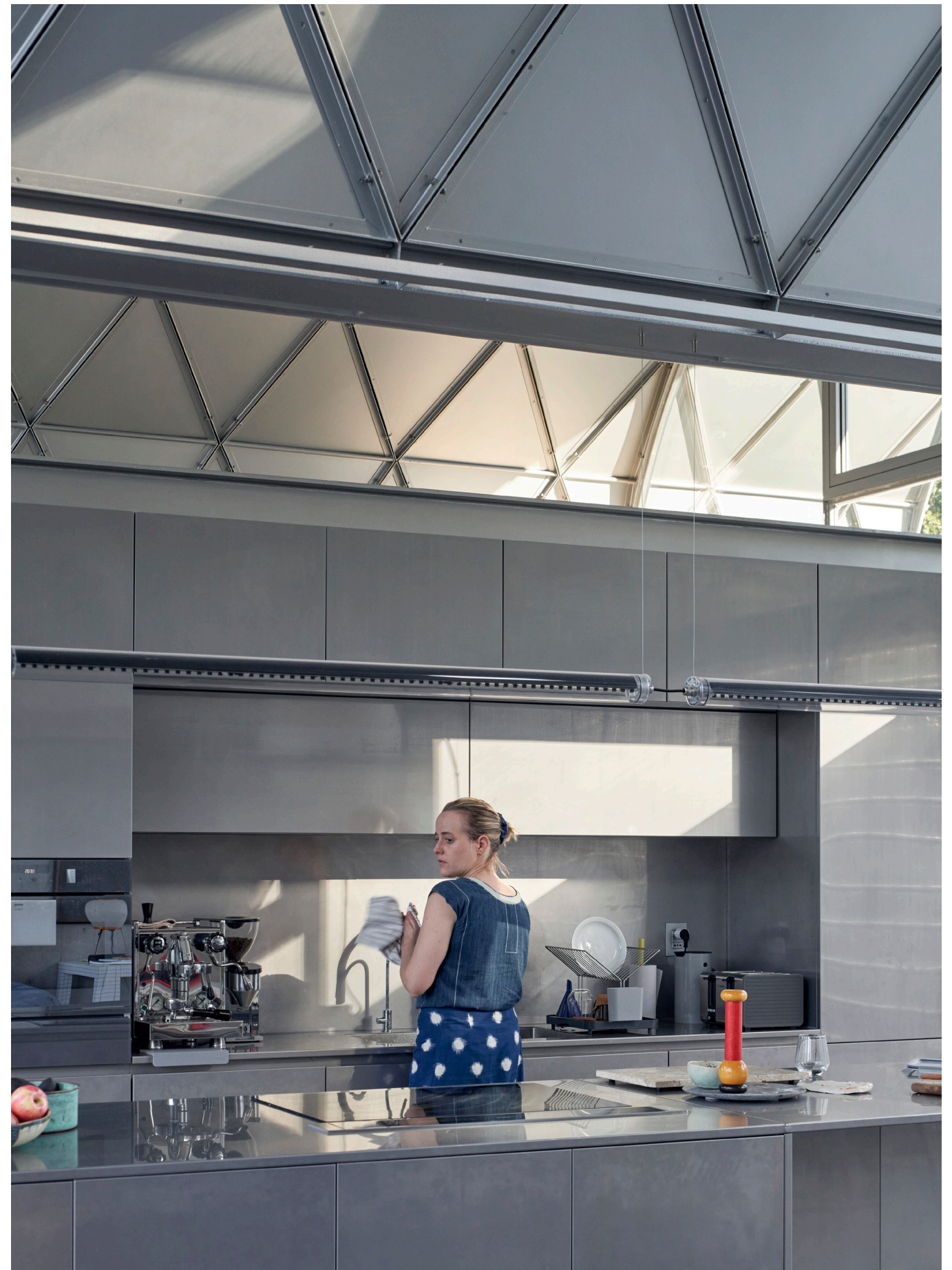
6,500-square-foot plot in Barrio Pedro de Valdivia Norte, a low-rise sector of Providencia with a mishmash of homes, including Spanish colonial revivals, mock Tudors, and modernist styles. The barrio was ideal because Max could walk to his office, as well as the architecture school at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, where he teaches; meanwhile, Emilia could take the metro to the museum. They would also be at the foot of San Cristóbal Hill, near Santiago's biggest park, where Max bikes and the girls play.

In 2023, Max tore down the existing home (a poor-quality structure from the 1970s) and embarked on a two-year project to build what is essentially a human greenhouse. This time, he'd use glass blocks not as roofing but as walls.

Max created a 3,000-square-foot plan with two parallel volumes connected by a courtyard and an adjacent passageway. With neighbors close by, he had to

preserve privacy without sacrificing natural light. That's why the volume closer to the street—which holds the kitchen, living area, and laundry room—has a glass-block facade. "The glass blocks allow for a certain amount of transparency between the street and living area," Max explains. "So, the house doesn't turn its back to the street but is related to it in a subtle way." Another glass-block wall separates the courtyard from the more secluded back volume, which has a study, two bathrooms, two bedrooms, and a lofted play area with views of cable cars ascending San Cristóbal Hill. It, too, offers an effect of connection and privacy—while also glowing in direct sunlight.

The courtyard nods both to Chile's traditional Spanish-colonial patio homes and the midcentury modern homes of the 1960s by architects Jaime Sanfuentes and Christian de Groote, who reveled in the interplay between interior and exterior >



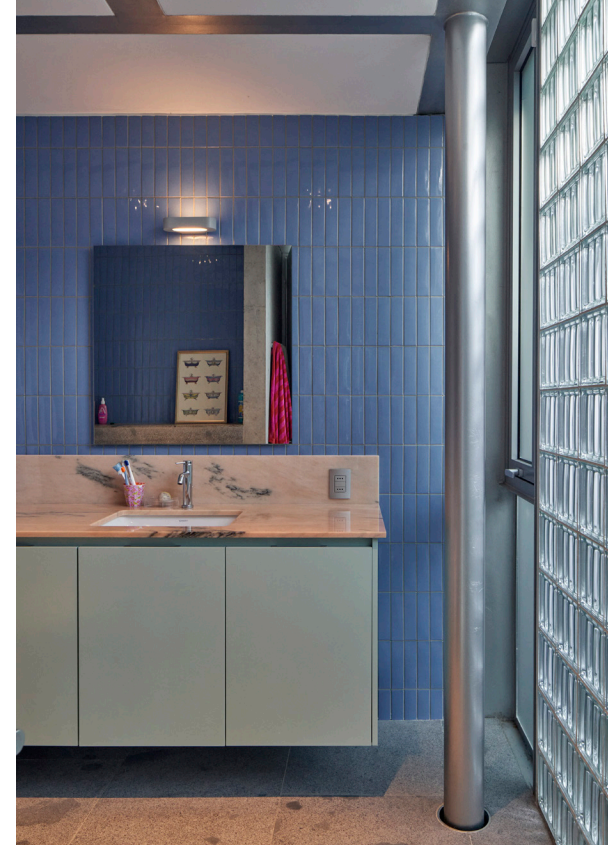
"Even though it's a glass house, it has a unique weight. It's kind of

heavy, but also translucent." MAX NÚÑEZ, ARCHITECT AND RESIDENT



Max and Emilia initially worried about having a pool at the center of their home. "You know how you see pools at houses in winter and they look so depressing?"

Emilia explains. So, Max incorporated it into the courtyard almost like a pond, keeping it narrow and using materials found in the flooring of the surrounding volumes.



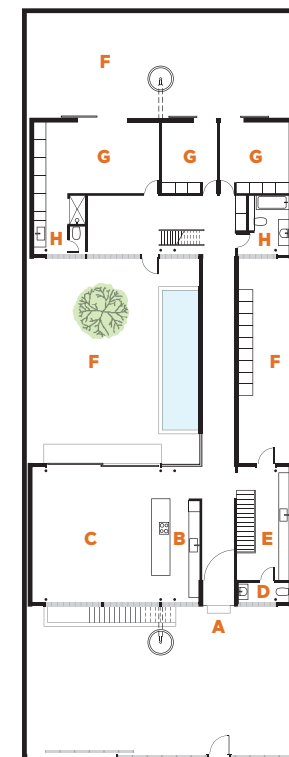
An enclosed passage-way lined in books and curios (below right) links the communal areas with the primary bedroom (opposite), children's room, and bathrooms (left), where playful wall tiles add soft color.

worlds. Max says life revolves around the courtyard, which has a rectangular pool the girls use in warmer months. He also added an access courtyard between the sidewalk and house and a more private back courtyard for the bedrooms.

While the layout is a relatively straightforward series of boxes, the two volumes have identical, vaulted m-shaped roofs formed by bolted-together steel triangles with wood panels painted the color of aluminum. (The exterior is finished with metal.) The structure creates a sense of openness where you can sit in the living room at one end of the house and watch the girls playing in the loft at the other. The exposed construction system draws inspiration from Silver Hut, the former home of Japanese architect Toyo Ito, but it's also a continuation of an element of Max's work. "I always try to express how things are built in my projects," he >

● Double Vault House N

ARCHITECT Max Núñez Architects
LOCATION Santiago, Chile



- A Entrance
- B Kitchen
- C Living/Dining Area
- D Powder Room
- E Laundry/Storage
- F Patio
- G Bedroom
- H Bathroom

ILLUSTRATION: LOHNES+WRIGHT



explains. “You can understand how one thing is placed upon the other—so it’s a kind of mechanical approach to architecture.”

Ventilation was also an important consideration for the roof system. Santiago has a sunny Mediterranean climate, but the city lies in a basin beneath the Andes, giving it cool evenings throughout the year. Max wanted to maintain airflow without air-conditioning, so he added large, remote-controlled windows to the vaults. He also conceived of the courtyard as a space where doors stay open, another tactic that helps keep the interiors cool. (During my summer visit, at the hottest time of day, it was a tad warm inside.)

Gray dominates the house—in the stones, concrete, and stainless steel. “We’ve heard guests say they thought it was going to be this cold refrigerator,” Max says with a chuckle, adding: “Their opinion once inside is that it’s not.” He thinks that the vaults, glass blocks, and shiny aluminum paint on the columns all have the effect of making the house warm and luminous. “You go from inside to outside with the same quality of light,” he says.

When the family finally moved here in May 2025, it was the first time Emilia had ever lived in a single-family home. “I was so scared that the house was going to separate us,” she recalls. “We were all happy living on top of each other in the apartment, because the girls were still small. But it seems to me like we still have that connection here, despite the size of the house.” Emilia credits the transparency and openness of the layout.

Of course, the greenhouse Max designed earlier was a key inspiration. Yet the foliage in this house is largely outdoors, made up of drought-resistant native species, including chanar and algaroba trees typical of the Atacama Desert. As they grow alongside Max, Emilia, and their daughters, the trees will bring shade to the home and continue to shape its porous, translucent, and perfectly private boundaries. ■



The kids’ room (above) has two doorways so it could be split. Emilia had concerns about the coolness of her husband’s design. “I’m the kind of person who likes Victorian cottages,” she admits. “But if you look at the details of the steel and how the structure is

exposed, that shows a level of craft. Even though it’s modern, it’s not that minimal,” Max says. Emilia initially asked Max to make her studio (opposite) a closed space; he convinced her to keep it open so it didn’t become an unused, locked-away room.

