

# the RightStep

WRITTEN BY JODY GARLOCK  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AIMÉE MAZZENGA  
STYLED BY CATE RAGAN

A HISTORIC CHICAGO HOME  
RECAPTURES ITS CLASSIC  
CHARM WHILE ALSO TAKING A  
BIG STRIDE INTO PRESENT TIMES



**F**ate may have been at play for Lisa Cotton and her husband to end up in their 1800s Chicago home. Lisa had spent a day looking at homes as the couple contemplated a move from Michigan. The historic house that sat on a large lot on a quiet street was the final one on the list. Uninspired by photos, Lisa was ready to call it a day until her real estate agent persuaded her to at least take a quick look. That was all Lisa needed. “We walked in, and immediately I knew,” she says. “It just felt right.”

It wasn’t what she saw that gave her that feeling, but rather what she could envision. The grand home had lost some of its luster with millwork that had been stripped and additions that didn’t suit the era. Yet the home’s classic bones were there, its old soul waiting to emerge. “My husband and I have a passion for old homes and the craftsmanship that goes into them,” Lisa says. “I knew in the back of my mind it had potential.”

A second fateful move brought the Cottons together with the Chicago firms of En Masse Architecture and Design and Michael Abrams Interiors. In a collaboration that spanned more than two years, architects Mike Shively and Lucas Goldbach restored character and better integrated the additions. The design team of Michael Abrams and Gina Valenti brought

in what Abrams describes as “layers of luxury” through surfaces, textures, and furnishings.

The goal was a home that respected the past but had livable ease for the couple and their two kids. “We didn’t want anything to be too precious,” Lisa says. “We wanted it to feel comfortable and be functional.”

And then a fateful find: The architects uncovered the home’s original front doors tucked away upstairs. Those doors and an original set of living room pocket doors held “the DNA” for details replicated throughout the house, Goldbach says. “It was a real piece of history we could build from and stitch the house together with,” he says. Paneled entry walls, arched windows in the family room, arched kitchen cabinetry, and new custom-built doors all nod to those original gems.

Toward the front of the house, the entry, living room, and dining room have parlor formality. At the back, spaces take on

**Living room** An elbow-shape sofa shifted the axis of the narrow living room, improving conversation and flow. **Entry** New front doors were built to period perfection. **Portrait** “This home feels like us,” says homeowner Lisa Cotton (with pup Carl). **Previous pages** In the landing between the second and third floors, accent tables create a casual composition against the strong lines of the architecture. During the renovation, the second floor was designated for the primary suite.



PORTRAIT: WERNER STRAUBE



WE MADE THE HOUSE  
WORK FOR THE CLIENT  
AND ALSO BROUGHT BACK  
ITS LOST HISTORY.”

—architect Lucas Goldbach

**Kitchen** A burlwood island in a photo inspired Lisa and the furniture look of the kitchen's focal point. The island discreetly provides seating for two. The La Cornue range was another of Lisa's musts. When it went in, the team celebrated that win with champagne. Cabinets flanking the range take their arch shape from windows in the front door; one cabinet conceals a steam oven. The renovation also enhanced connectivity by leveling what had been a stepped-up breakfast area.



the character of today. The kitchen opens to the breakfast area and family room. In the additions, the architects squared off angled corners to match the style of the house. In the family room, they added a series of arched French doors that give the illusion of the room having been an exterior space.

Although the layout of the main level remained relatively unchanged, that wasn't the case for the second floor. The team reconfigured the entire level into a primary suite consisting of the bedroom, a cozy window-lined office with a pitched wood-clad ceiling, a spacious bathroom with the tub in a bay at the front of the house, separate closets for each spouse, and a laundry room. Additional bedrooms and the kids' lounge shifted to the third floor, which had been renovated previously.

While the architects took the home back to its 1800s roots, the designers pushed it forward to reflect the couple's spirit. "They are comfortable in the classics and truly understand

**Breakfast area** A supple leather banquette tucks into the breakfast area. Random-width white oak clads the ceiling for continuity with the adjacent family room. **Family room** A marble fireplace and arched French doors with brass cremona bolts bring a sense of history into the family room. **Office** The couple steals away to relax or work at the partners' desk in the space with treetop views off the primary bedroom. The dramatic tongue-and-groove ceiling extends the airy feeling.



Dining room A high-contrast black-and-white scheme—with a big punch of russet—heightens the drama in the dining room. The botanical wallcovering (Gracie Studio's "Ivory Silhouette") is both whimsical and classical. The room's design pivots around the black turned-wood chairs the couple owned, which the designers updated with cushions. A modern pendant detailed with semiprecious stones and tan leather eases the formality.



some of the finer details in life, but they're not stuck in the past," Valenti says. "They're full of life."

Contemporary pendants that double as artsy sculptures, rather than the traditional chandeliers dripping with crystals, suspend from ceilings. The ceilings themselves are design statements with some dressed in wallpaper or lacquered so strategic lighting accentuates the architecture.

Furniture, including a custom sofa with an angled shape and wood slats detailing the back and sides, is meant to be used, including by Carl, the family's English golden retriever. "The beauty of this home with the furnishings is that they have these wonderful details that draw you in," Valenti says. "The closer you get, the more compelling they become."

Early in the collaboration, the designers realized the eclectic bent to the couple's style. So to offset the modern touches and provide warmth, they introduced patinaed

**Primary bedroom** Placed behind the bed, an antique hand-painted screen, one of the few pieces the couple brought with them, gives the bedroom a stunning focal point. In Lisa's closet, metal-mesh door insets add sparkle. Acrylic forms flowy petals on Juniper's "Love Me Not" pendant. **Guest bedroom** Fringe detailing on the striped wallcovering brings a playful touch to the tailored bedroom. **Kids' lounge** Fun shapes and bright colors inject a youthful vibe into the treetop hangout.

leather and vintage elements. As soon as a dusty antique rug with faded pink and blue hues was rolled out, everyone knew it would be the perfect way to relax the formality of the living room. "We were just starstruck," Abrams says. "That was the catalyst for everything we did in that room."

In the dining room, a bold botanical wallcovering provided another starstruck moment. "We were flipping through samples and I saw this black-and-white wallpaper, and my eyes popped," Lisa says. "I remember thinking, *That's it.*"

And so it went throughout the renovation. The couple and the entire team always seemed to be on the same page, including with pushing the boundaries on tradition. "They always chose the most adventurous thing," Valenti says of the couple's decision-making. "The great choices, the great design is 100 percent their contribution."

For Lisa, much of it was gut instinct. "I know what I like, for sure," she says. "I can be indecisive, but when I see something and I love it, I know it. For me, it's that aha moment." Just as it was on that fateful day when she stepped into the house and her mind swirled with possibilities. **🏡**

**Interior design:** Michael Abrams Interiors

**Architecture:** En Masse Architecture and Design

