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Chez Adler

Armed with reams of research,
restoring this great house took a grand effort

IF THE U.S. IS A MELTING POT OF CULTURES, THEN ARCHITECT DAVID ADLER'S GREAT COUNTRY HOUSES embody the fusion that is true American style. Unique to our shores, great house architecture is an inspired blend of English Tudor, French Classicism and Italian Renaissance design. And although this eclectic potpourri may be serendipitously found anywhere in the country, it is most apparent in Adler-designed homes dotting Chicago's North Shore, Lake Forest and nearby bucolic environs.

Striking examples of the wealth amassed by American industrialists and entrepreneurs in the first half of the 20th century, great houses of the period bear witness to a return to classicism and a conscious attempt by New World architects to recapture the opulence and grandeur their nouveau-riche clients coveted in castles abroad.

Sub-divided, yet still for the most part intact, is one such architectural tribute: Adler's innovative Albert Lasker estate, built in 1924 on 500 acres southwest of Lake Forest. Adler devotees have divvied up the buildings on the grounds, and those of homes throughout the surrounding countryside as well, each wanting to preserve a share of Adler's ever-more precious historic works. Among them is designer Frank Ponterio, owner of Lasker's former gate lodge, in its time a luxuriously ample and wonderfully sited guest house on the estate.

The 2,500-square-foot gem is now the full-time home to Ponterio, his wife Becky and their four-year-old daughter, Isabella. "I've always loved this little house," says the founder of Frank Ponterio Interior Design and a graduate of Chicago's Harrington Institute of Interior Design. And Ponterio took this acquisition seriously, knowing that what he and his family owned was a shard of a disappearing architectural saga to be protected.

A member of the board of the Lake Forest Preservation Foundation, and past vice president of the Lake Forest Historical Society, Ponterio enlisted the help of curator Martha Thorn from the Art Institute of Chicago, who uncovered the original plans for the Lasker Estate's gate lodge as well as a nearby Dutch-style garage in the museum's extensive Lasker archives. The job-book's drawings would become Ponterio's handbook for an intensive three-year restoration.

"It's almost done, but the important thing in any renovation is to take your time and do it the right way—you should never rush it through just to be finished," he says. What's more, while the home is now distinctively Ponterio's own, he felt its historical significance kept him on the straight and narrow, helping him to always remember the importance of maintaining the integrity of Adler's design.

"Not that you can't put your own stamp on it," he says, "but tread lightly."

Explaining that much of the beauty of these grand old homes is in their fantastic detailing, such as the lodge's wainscoting, original built-ins and elaborate moldings, Ponterio says today's designers can't afford to invest the same amount of time in their projects. "In the 1920s one commission could have taken as many as three years of an architect or designer's time. Jobs like that are far and few between in this day and age, and if you have the luxury of owning such a project today, you research it thoroughly before you rip and tear it apart."

Built in 1924 and dubbed Old Mill Farm, the working farm and lavish estate of advertising guru Lasker included 28 outbuildings, an 18-hole golf course, a main house on one end, and club house or caddy shack at the other. To keep the estate running during Lasker's time required 99 full-time employees.

"Sixty years ago, people wouldn't think of my house as historic," Ponterio says. "While Adler was a noted architect, it wasn't until 10 years ago that the renaissance of his work began. Sometimes you don't know the potential value of a house, and that's why you must be very aware of an area's history."

Today, Adler's work represents some of the best illustrations of classic design on these shores. An admirer of grand European architecture, Adler's designs drew inspiration from a number of architectural styles, yet always remained faithful to his sense of proportion, symmetry, scale and balance.

"There's a rhythm to the architecture and the symmetry of its lines—and the interiors are more related to architecture, more human in scale than we see today," Ponterio says of his home. "It has a French country feel to it with well segmented areas and simple details. If you dissect the home and look at the details, there aren't gobs of them; the dressing is how he approached symmetry, the finishes, and how it's all properly put together. It's all about creating perfection of detail and scale. Together, it works really well. It's just a really cute house with incredibly good views."

Just as Adler's estate architecture is a fusion of styles from the past, so too is Ponterio's interior design scheme for the home. Ponterio's eclectic tastes led to an impressive collection of antiques culled from travels all over the world in a mix of different styles from French to American and English to Chinese. And he has no qualms about putting them together.

One highlight of the living room is a 17th century antique French sideboard ("we need all the storage we can get") topped off with a landscape commissioned in Rome and painted from a snapshot of Ponterio's family home in southern Italy.

The entrance hall is a lovely vignette with inlaid marquetry calling-card trays positioned on either side of an 18th century Chinese mirror, an English settee wearing its original cream-toned paint and an English cherry wood table.

In the dining room, one of the largest rooms in the home, an English sideboard, with an over-scaled painting above, serves functional needs. An Italian chandelier, lugged around with the family for eight years, suspends from the deep pumpkin painted ceiling. The walls, also done in the same spicy color, warm up the room and bring it down to the same scale as the rest of the house.

"For me, the fun is in finding the right thing," Ponterio says. "Some pieces came with us, some we knew we wanted and went in search of them. Sometimes you get lucky and stumble over the right thing, like the 1930s French club chairs with original mohair cushions found in a friend's antique shop basement."

Throughout the gate lodge, as in his daughter's room, all built-ins are original to the house, and were stripped and restored. Isabelle's bed was brought back from a trip to France. Painting and reupholstering the bed made it a perfect haven for the child's favorite stuffed animal, Rusty the Dog.

The Ponterios have no fear of allowing their daughter to play on antique Bergère chairs in the master bedroom—or any of the furniture in the home, for that matter. The couple's philosophy is furniture that has lasted 100 or 200 years can take whatever Isabelle happens to dish out ■ *Frank Ponterio Interior Design, 726 N. Western Ave., Lake Forest, IL 847.234.5704 frank@frankponterio.com*