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Interior Design: Michael Abrams, Michael Abrams Interiors

Expect the Unexpected

Classic and contemporary influences meld together in a Gold Coast townhouse.

WRITTEN BY TATE GUNNERSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN MCDONALD



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he tree-lined avenues of the Gold Coast are eye candy for anyone with a passion for vintage Chicago architecture. It was on one of these historic streets that a Michigan resident seeking an in-town abode discovered a late-1800s

row house with endless charm. Because the client was already impressed with designer Michael Abrams' work on her son's nearby residence, she invited him to take on her own dwelling. "He has an incredible eye," she says. "I let myself be guided by him because of that."

Abrams, who is well known for his contemporary designs, knew he needed to take a different approach to this historical project. With its original moldings and handsome built-ins, the architecture called for interiors that nodded to a bygone era. "We embellished and enhanced those details," Abrams says, who also brought on Adam Masters of Tip Top Builders, Inc. to refinish the floors and renovate two bathrooms. "We wanted to make it an elegant city home."

Wallcoverings played a key role in that endeavor. Surrounding a gilded niche in the entry, an energetic floral print on a black background immediately conveys the sense of color and fun that Abrams carefully threaded throughout the design. "It's bright, playful and whimsical," he says. The designer then took advantage of the existing neutral grass-cloth wallcovering in the adjacent living room, a salon-style space with three distinct seating areas anchored by antique area rugs. This multizone layout was chosen due to the room size—"these turn-of-the-century homes aren't very wide," Abrams notes—but it serves the dual purpose of creating intimate spaces. Cocktails and coffee can be enjoyed in front of the fireplace on the blue velvet sofa or one of the curvaceous bouclé armchairs. And when the sun streams in through the front window, the homeowner curls up with a book in the cozy built-in banquette that's paired with two navy leather chairs. "There's a real mix of pieces, but they all complement each other," Abrams says. "We wanted it to feel collected over time."

As a counterpoint to the living room, Abrams chose a grass cloth with a traditional botanical

motif for the dining room. "It gives the space a real punch," the designer notes. A dazzling brass-and-rock-crystal chandelier that walks the line between classic and contemporary illuminates a circular dining table surrounded by channel-back chairs. In response to the room's lack of windows, Abrams once again used the home's architectural challenges to his advantage and lacquered the ceiling in a terra-cotta hue that reflects the light.

Thanks to a prominent atrium-style skylight, natural illumination was not an issue in the family room addition, where a sky-blue wallcovering fosters a serene backdrop for a pair of cozy ochre-colored velvet sofas and navy tufted-leather ottomans. Over the sofas, two abstract pieces by fine art photographer Michael T. Noonan contribute to the room's more modern milieu—"They are so perfect for the room," the owner notes. Adds Abrams, "This is the only part of the entire dwelling that sets itself apart from the traditional row house architecture, and therefore the photography feels very much at home."

On the second floor, the designer carried on the use of blue, turning to the color for both classic touches and unexpected moments. In a guest bedroom inspired by Ralph Lauren, a bed upholstered in a navy tartan plays off a subdued plaid wallcovering while the original built-in cabinetry is painted in a warm neutral. In another guest suite, a cobalt chair coexists with burgundy-and-white draperies. And in the study, azure walls, moldings and a fireplace mantel are accented by red patterned draperies and a wood-veneer paper on the ceiling. "It's a subtle visual surprise that adds a layer of interest and elevates it to another level," Abrams explains.

For the homeowner's bedroom, the designer brought the unexpected up another notch. A curvaceous, salmon-colored, velvet-upholstered bed paired with a textured striped wallcovering softens the black built-ins and fireplace mantel. Shades of gold and touches of aquamarine create an elevated, feminine setting. As Abrams notes, "We wanted her to feel special."

It is, the designer says, one of his favorite projects to date. "It has a formality, but it's very livable and approachable," he explains. "Each space is a little bit of a surprise, and there isn't one room that I wouldn't want to spend time in." ■



Installed by New Order Decorating, a dramatic Pierre Frey wallcovering from Holly Hunt complements gold-leaf detailing in the entry foyer. New Ravenna marble mosaic tiles from The Fine Line create an unexpected mix of patterns in the space.

Texture abounds in the living room, starting with the Phillip Jeffries grass-cloth wallcovering. A Barron Custom Furniture sofa upholstered in a Pollack velvet, bouclé-covered Jean de Merry chair and early-20th century screen from Chairish create a warm atmosphere.





Right: Walls coated in Farrow & Ball's Hague Blue foster a cozy vibe in the study, which includes a Hickory Chair secretary paired with a McGulre Furniture chair. Curtains in a red Schumacher print provide an unexpected contrast.

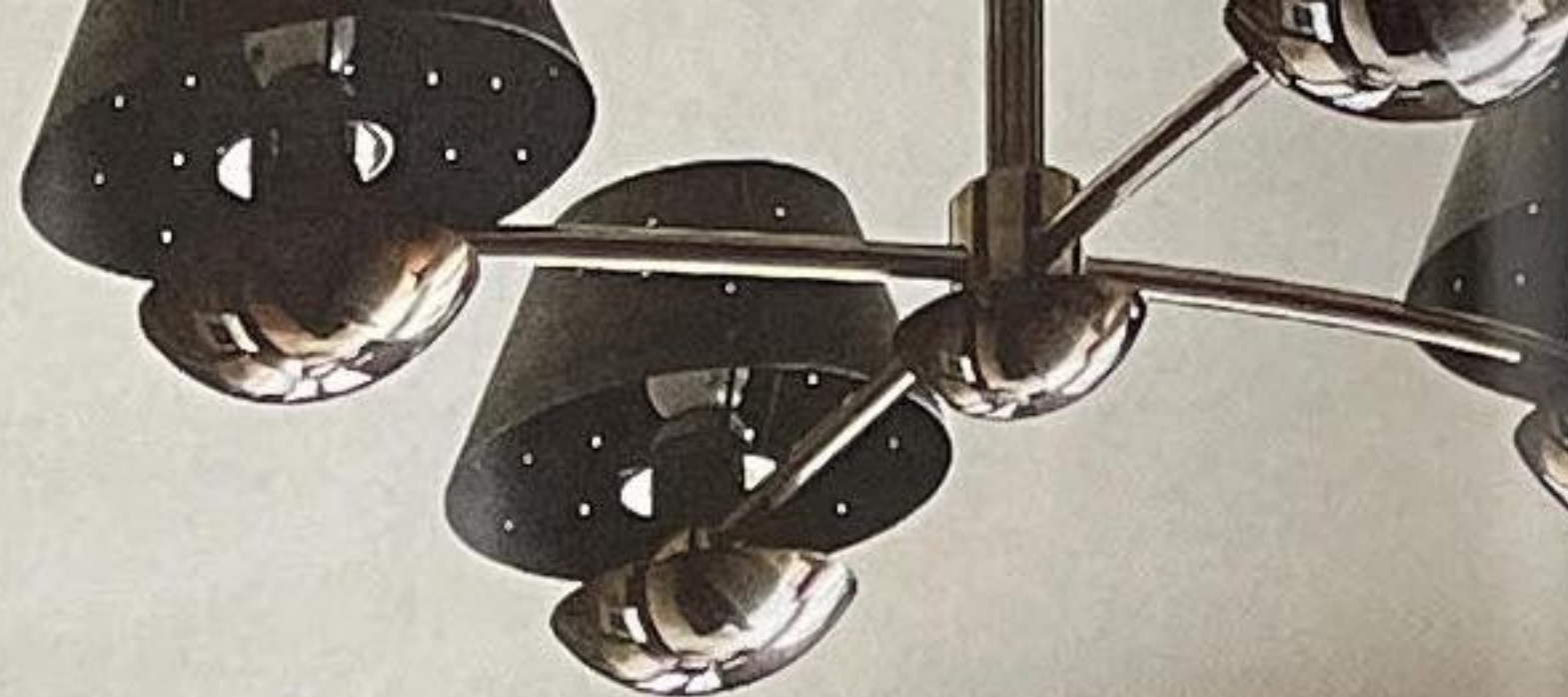
Opposite: In the dining room, a Lee Jofa wallcovering is a whimsical backdrop for an Alfonso Marina table and chairs by Barron Custom Furniture. The latest Studio chandelier is from John Rosselli & Associates.





Above: An abstract photograph by Michael T. Noonan establishes a more contemporary scene in the family room. It hangs above a custom sofa covered in camel-colored mohair by Taffard Fabrics.

Opposite: Shades of blue dominate the family room, where a broadloom Nourison rug from Rexx Rug plays to the sky-hued wallcovering. Ottomans in an azure leather by Jerry Pair are topped by a Hickory Chair waterfall coffee table.



Right: In a guest bedroom, a Ferrelli Mittman side table and a Chaddock chair upholstered in Classic Cloth velvet make for an ideal place to enjoy a spot of tea. The lamp, which sits on a Century Furniture chest, is from Circa Lighting.

Opposite: Inspired by menswear, a Holland & Sherry wallcovering and a bed upholstered in a plaid fabric by the same brand give this guest bedroom a masculine air. A Roman shade in a Loro Piana textile hangs behind the Hickory Chair seat.

