

# (re)making History

## the curator

**L**aura Luce kneels on the dark, polished oak floor of a hallway in her 1927 David Adler home in Lake Forest, Illinois. Running her hand along the smooth wood floor, she points to a spot where the color changes ever so slightly and launches into a discussion about patina.

“A patina is something that’s really hard to come by, and when it’s gone, it’s gone,” Laura says. She explains that the subtle change in color is from an old carpet runner that she and her husband pulled up when they bought the house in 2014.

She indicates a faint outline showing where the runner used to be, which is really only visible now that the sun has brightened the floor. The wood is beautiful, even more so because you know it’s always been there.

“We kept the patina because it’s part of the house,” Laura says, standing up. “We would never change it.”

It’s early in a visit to this beautiful home, but already it’s clear that Laura and her family don’t consider the house theirs as much as they think of it as theirs for a time. They’ve happily adopted the role of caretakers whose job it is to honor and preserve the home’s original beauty and design.

“All we wanted was to be stewards of this house,” Laura says, looking out to the sunken back yard, the outline of which is still visible even though the arbor vitae and hedges are covered with snow.

“We’ve definitely adapted our lifestyle to this house rather than adapting the house to ours. We consider it a privilege to live here.”

*The living room of the Clow house, designed by architect William Adler, features a 25-foot cove ceiling.*





*Details from a corner of the living room show the silver leafing of the doors, dating back to the 1930s. The photograph by Tina Barney is a favorite of the owner, who collects and displays contemporary photography throughout the home.*

Lake Forest, Illinois, sits some 30 miles north of Chicago along the shores of Lake Michigan. Founded in 1857, Lake Forest attracted some of Chicago's wealthiest families, who commissioned renowned architects to build one grand summer estate after another. The result is a mix of architectural styles that ranks Lake Forest among the nation's most historically significant towns.

It's not just age that makes these homes notable. The National Register of Historic Places includes three Lake Forest estates and two historic districts comprised of hundreds of 50-year-old-plus properties, more than 60 of which are considered architecturally or historically significant. Laura's house is in of these two districts.

Laura was raised in Lake Forest, and it's this history that drew her back to her hometown after years spent living on the East Coast.

"We joke that my husband came here kicking and screaming, but now the only way we'll go back is kicking and screaming," she says.

Owning this particular house is one reason why.

The house is one that Laura had her eye on for some time. Her father, an admirer of David Adler, introduced her to the architect's work, and her mother was active with the Lake Forest Historical Society. She conducted the town's first oral history project, interviewing owners of Lake Forest's historic homes.



*A shot of pink lends personality to the library, modernizing the look of the original floors, moldings and windows. Note the cove ceiling, a David Adler feature that's repeated throughout the home.*

Laura attended college in Boston, met her husband in business school, and lived in New York for a few years before moving back to Lake Forest for good with her husband, daughter and son in 1996. The family chose a mid-century modern house after trying to buy another David Adler house in Lake Forest, living there for 18 years. During that time, Laura had been showing this particular Clow house to her husband, and when it finally came on the market in 2014, they decided to buy it.

What drew them to the house?

“A David Adler is unique,” Laura says.

Adler worked from the late 1910s to the early 1940s, securing commissions from some of America’s most prominent families (27 in the Chicago area alone). Known for a strong sense of proportion and symmetry in design, Adler combined classical elements from a variety of architectural styles to create homes and estates that fused old world aristocratic traditions with elegant architectural details.

The William E. Clow house is an excellent example.

Driving up to the house, the first thing you notice is a balustrade enclosing the front of the home (what Adler called the Elephant Cage, which he based on a design by Austrian architect Josef Hoffman). After wiping your shoes on one of two matching original boot scrapers placed symmetrically on the front step, you enter through the front door into a square foyer with deep green lacquer walls. The original



*Amber glass, a unique detail of the original windows in the Clow house, lends a subtle filter to the light that streams into the home.*



*Just off the entry foyer the gentlemen’s and ladies’ dressing rooms gave guests a place to leave their coats and freshen up before ascending the staircase to the main floor. Both are still used today.*

marble floor features an inlaid compass rose, one of Adler’s signature design motifs.

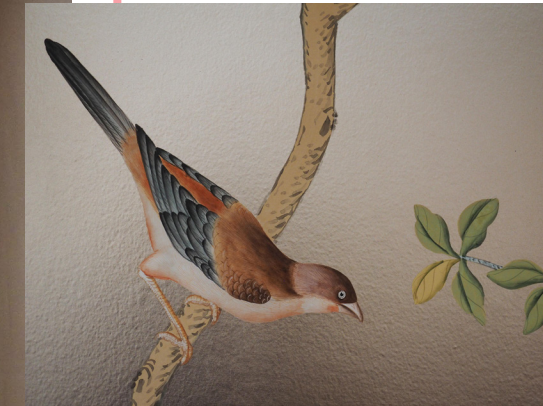
On the right, two doors open to men’s and women’s dressing rooms, where during the house’s heyday guests would leave their coats and freshen up before ascending the grand staircase to the left of the foyer. Another set of doors on the opposite side opens to another room (her son’s). The butler’s room is in the basement, with other rooms that were used by visitors’ chauffeurs.

Hints of the grandness of the house are everywhere, but with Laura’s touch they blend seamlessly into the family’s living space.

Upstairs on the main floor, a hallway fronts the living room, which is framed beautifully by arches.

“The first thing I notice when I see an Adler is the coved ceiling,” Laura says, looking up toward the 25 foot ceiling. The living room features two sets of doors at either end, both silver-leafed, Luce believes, in the 1930s. Two floor-to-ceiling mirrors face each other, hinting at the influence of Frances Adler Elkins, a renowned interior designer and David Adler’s sister, who worked with Adler on several of his commissions.





*Detail from the handpainted design by de Gournay.*

The formal dining room is adjacent to the living room. As part of her research into the home, Laura collects vintage books and magazines with articles and pictures of this house, and other Adler projects. From these articles, Laura knows that the walls of the original dining room were covered in custom straw marquetry (a technique that mimics wood veneer by using straw) by Adolphe Chanaux, an early 20th century French decorator. But when Laura bought the house, she was disappointed to find those same walls painted plain white.

Now, the room is a show-stopper.

“We wanted the dining room to be the belle of the ball, so we decided to sheath the walls in Badminton from de Gournay, the handpainted chinoiserie motif on silver background,” Laura says. Now the shimmering walls blend perfectly with the oak floors and original marble baseboards. It’s a nod to the room’s original Art Deco elements that Luce discovered in the vintage magazines.

Laura has yet to confirm a story she’s heard that the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson danced in the living room.

“I suppose it’s possible, what with its ballroom scale,” she says. “The house was certainly built for entertaining.”



*Walls sheathed in silver handpainted chinoiserie make the dining room shimmer in a nod to the room’s original Art Deco design, as seen in this image from an article on the Clow house in a vintage design magazine.*

Laura and her husband are only the fourth family to own this particular Adler house. The original owners, Mr. and Mrs. William E. Clow (and their household staff of five) lived there until 1949, when Mrs. Leola Stanton Armour bought it following her divorce from Lester Armour (of the Chicago meatpacking dynasty). She died in 1980, and two years later the house was purchased by a retired couple who in a 2003 *Chicago Tribune* article said that the first time they saw the house, “it was like falling in love. Nobody had ever done anything bad to it, and I wanted to preserve as much as I could,” the owner said.

In fact, the family left many of the original furnishings in the home for Laura’s family when they moved in.

“They knew we got it,” she says.

Laura has taken great care to keep things simple, preferring to let the original house speak for itself. For example, rather than tear down walls between smaller rooms once designated for maids to create larger living areas, Laura instead repurposed them as they are for family use. In the library, Laura’s modern updates include overstuffed furniture upholstered in hot-pink velvet and original photography she collects from auction and from friends. She is a photographer herself.

Laura even kept the more ornate but perhaps less practical design elements, such as the travertine marble that covers one entire bathroom – floors, bathtub, vanity, even the walls themselves.

“It’s all original,” Laura says. “Even the sink.”

The house boasts two kitchens: the main kitchen, which retains the original sink and drain board made from Tennessee Pink marble, and a larger one, formerly the butler’s pantry kitchen and dining room, which features the original cabinetry, wooden countertops and a 136-inch German Silver Sink. The original pencil sharpener is still screwed into the wall.



*The sink in the original butler’s pantry spans more than 11 feet. Original to the home, the German Silver Sink features its original hardware.*




*Adler's sense of scale and proportion is on display in this light-filled bedroom.*

Still, things happen — and that's where Laura's affection for her house shows. When she needed pulls for a newer island in the main kitchen, Laura searched the internet and found ones that Adler designed himself from a source in Los Angeles. She spends hours researching who the best artisans are for repairs — the person she uses for marble restoration in her home also restored the travertine floors in Chicago's Conrad Hilton hotel — and she scours auctions, ebay and other online resources for historical information and restoration details. One of her current projects is replacing an original, square-shaped glass towel bar that broke when one of the bathrooms was wallpapered.

"I'm still hunting for that one," she says.

Still, the effort is worth it.

"It's such a joy to be a steward of a place like this," Laura says. "I'm just fascinated by it. It's my pride and joy." 



*Symmetry in design is a key characteristic of architect David Adler's work, seen here in the background as Laura Luce exits the living room.*