



Victorian Secrets

A historic South Side single-family undergoes a rehab to great success, courtesy of a couple of crafty ladies.

By Rhys Hunding

Photography by SteveHall © Hedrich Blessing

BREAKING/SET

"I had a real 'break-and-set' feel that a lot of older houses have," Quinn explains of the pre-existing floor plan. She and interior designer Mia Rao worked up and exposed up the kitchen to allow for light, light and more light.

Hyde Park is one of Chicago's most storied neighborhoods, especially from an architecture standpoint; the World's Fair, Wight's Robie House, the University of Chicago... And now interior designer Mia Rao (mraoatdesign.com) and architect Kathryn Quinn (kquinnarch.com) are adding to its illustrious ranks. Their feat? Teaming up to breathe modern life into a traditional Victorian-style Hyde Park home.

The main key to bringing this space up to date was light. Not only because it is an aspect that most early 20th century homes are seriously lacking, but also because of the clients' robust art collection. "We focused a lot on the lighting and how it could highlight their artworks, because the existing lighting was insufficient," Rao explains. Both natural and architectural light played a key role in setting the stage for her clients' pieces, but Rao also used bright-colored walls and sheer window treatments to her advantage as well.

This home is actually the second project that Rao has completed for this particular family, and with that prior experience came a familiarity with their aesthetic. "I had been involved with the furniture... CONTINUUM



STORED PAST
In the library, the team made use of two of the only spaces that were remnants of the original built-in and original light. Quinn led the design of the new niches, also adding an additional window in order to brighten up the space.

...cearings—and revamping the baseboards and crown molding, Quinn had the labor-intensive task of planning and installing the massive amount of built-in cabinetry throughout. “It had a real ‘dead-end’ feel, which a lot of older homes have,” Quinn explains. “And with the way we live today—we like to circulate from room to room more—we opened up the kitchen and the dining room so there was a flow. It never ceases to amaze me, no matter how long I work in the field: the underestimation of the potential issues with the existing conditions. How many parts can be out of square or out of level... It is always daunting.”

For this project, the challenge was really to respect the history of the home and neighborhood, while also making it functional and comfortable for the present day—a balance between paying homage to the architecture and recognizing opportunities. “The bones were there, it was just a matter of peeling away the film and making it work for a 21st century family,” Quinn elaborates.

This was achieved by working the space like a puzzle to make the existing art and furniture collection fit perfectly (a game of interiors Tetris, so to speak), and using natural light and colorful decor to achieve a light and airy sensibility. In other words, from the spacious feeling of the interior and the contemporary furnishings, to the admittedly “quirky” art collection, this is definitely not your grandmother’s Victorian house.

The trust that the family—especially the matriarch—had in Rao was integral to the success of this unique space. “We had fun together,” Rao mentions as the reason for the mutually agreeable outcome. “She is a creative mind, which always helps. It was a really good collaboration between architect, homeowner and designer.” ■



SITE SPEAKS

The master bedroom features pieces from the client’s fine art holdings as well as decor and floral from Japan. Rao selected this for the fireplace that was constructed with the color scheme of the client’s belongings.

LEISURE SPACES

Right: The clients had two existing coffee bars that informed the design process—the fireplace and the breakfast table. The two existing coffee bars were part of the home, including the dining room. "I had been involved with the fireplace collection for their previous home, and I was almost convinced to not have existing furniture in the house... It was like it was meant to be," Rao admits, referring to the dining room set and the framed artwork. Below: An ornate ceiling medallion hangs over the dining table in the dark wood Galena-style hardwood. Barlow's light The original of an over size green a fresh new look with new paint and even a lot of light.



...concerns—selection for their previous home, and it was almost scary how well their existing furniture fit in the house. It was like it was meant to be," Rao admits. With the exception of the kitchen table—which Rao had custom-made for the space—all of the furnishings were reused from the clients' previous home.

Rao has roots in the high-end retail market (Ligne Roset and luminaires are past employers), but when it comes to her present-day design practice, insight into her clients' needs and wants is what really drives her schemes. "I enjoy the design aspect as much as the interpersonal relationships," she says. "It is so important to find out how you can really make it reflective of their life and their aesthetic, because at the end of the day, it's their home, not yours," Rao explains.

While Rao was strategizing around the homeowners' pre-purchased pieces, architect Quinn was hard at work giving the heavily historic interior a modern face lift. In addition to putting some serious work into the kitchen and bathrooms—to account for a more modern sensibility—

