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A Lakefront Chicago Home Nods To Maine's Classic Seaside Dwellings

BY CHRISTINE DEORIO / APRIL 15, 2021



Overlooking 170 feet of private Lake Michigan beachfront, the house was designed by architect Phillip Liederbach to maximize its rare 270-degree views. “This property juts out into the lake, so you have panoramic views to the east and the north,” Liederbach says. “My jaw dropped when I went to the property for the first time.”

HOUSE DETAILS

Photography:

Eric Piasecki

Architecture:

Phillip Liederbach, **Liederbach & Graham Architects LLP**
Interior Design:

Annette LeCompte, **Annette LeCompte Interiors**
Home Builder:

Matthew Kurtyka, **Windsor Builders, Inc.**
Landscape Architecture:

Sara Furlan and Dennis Murphy, **Mariani Landscape**

Around the office, architect Phillip Liederbach’s associates joke that he must be a watchmaker “because everything in my designs is wound so tight: taut, tailored and perfectly sized,” he says. Such precision might seem unnecessary for a family of seven’s laid-back Lake Michigan house, but Liederbach’s style turned out to be a perfect fit for client Joe Flanagan, who was hesitant to leave his formal home—an ornate brick Georgian, built in 1913 for Charles Ringling of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus fame—even after purchasing a spectacular 1.2-acre lakefront site with 270-degree views and 170 feet of private beachfront.

Flanagan’s wife, Margaret, on the other hand, felt like a caged bird within the old mansion’s brooding rooms, and, with her fifth child having left for college, was ready for a more informal lifestyle. “I needed a change,” she says. “Something open and beachy; a comfortable place for our children to come and see us.” The couple’s opposing aesthetics—buttoned-up versus undone—laid the foundation for a large but approachable home that Liederbach describes as “an asymmetrical composition made up of a series of individual symmetrical moments.” More simply put, the combination would form, he explains, “a home that is at once both formal and informal.”

The Midwest’s rich architectural history—in particular, the work of the architect David Adler—is referenced here. But perhaps most influential was the late-19th-century Shingle-style architecture found along the coast of Maine, which inspired Liederbach to incorporate a shingled exterior and wraparound porch. Inside, the influences are more far-flung: Liederbach looked across the Atlantic to the grand stone staircase of the provost’s house at Dublin’s Trinity College, creating a cantilevered, rusticated-wood version for the Flanagans’ foyer. In another nod to the Emerald Isle, a fireplace in the entry hall of Bellamont Forest—an 18th-century Palladian estate in the Irish countryside—provided the cues for the living room fireplace, framed by stately columns, in this residence.

For other details, the architect looked no further than the immediate surroundings—including gardens and lawns designed by landscape architects Sara Furlan and Dennis Murphy. On one side of the house, a glass-enclosed sitting area frames views of the water; a screened-in porch juts off the other side, evoking, Liederbach says, “a houseboat headed out to sea.” The water proved equally inspiring to Annette LeCompte—the Flanagans’ longtime friend and designer, for whom Margaret works as office manager. LeCompte incorporated the lake’s indigo, turquoise and peacock blue hues into paints, wallcoverings and fabrics, which she used to reupholster many of the family’s existing furnishings. “The palette was, ‘What do we see when we look out at Lake Michigan?’ ” she says.

Even so, the designer was determined not to do the typical blue-and-white rooms. “I wanted to mix things up in a less predictable way,” she says. This guided her toward contemporary new furnishings and light fixtures, which she and Margaret selected to balance the fine antiques from the couple’s previous home. “Mixing centuries is an interesting way to layer a room,” LeCompte says, “but to make it work, you have to have the true antiques—with the wood grains, the old wax—to mix with the newer things.”

Subtle shifts in texture and formality add more depth to LeCompte’s compositions. The sun room’s three-sided tufted sofa, for example, features a linen back and a velvet seat. “I wanted the linen to feel good in the heat of the summer, but I wanted the velvet to look warm and inviting in the winter,” she explains.

In the foyer, she had the grand staircase’s steps painted, then topped with a flatweave runner—“dressing it down a bit,” she notes. And throughout the open-plan interiors, sisal rugs and accents of alabaster, shell and rattan emphasize that this is, at its heart, a beach house.

Liederbach’s memorable detailing ensures it’s a beach house to be passed down through the generations. His additions—from the foyer’s grooved-wood wall paneling that conceals a pair of doors to the exterior’s shingled Doric columns—were often “wickedly difficult” details that required all the skill of general contractor Matthew Kurtyka and his team, Liederbach says. They provide the kind of nuance that casual observers might not consciously notice, but that everyone feels; a nuance that distinguishes the great old homes—and new homes, like this one, that are designed to endure.

“The foyer is unapologetic but instantly welcoming,” architect Phillip Liederbach says of the entryway, whose focal point is a cantilevered, rusticated-wood staircase created by Lake Shore Stair Company. Liederbach designed and craftsman Dan Mackessy built the 5.5-foot-tall light fixture, which throws a pattern of vertical stripes onto the wood-paneled walls.

