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A photograph of a library interior. The walls are a deep, custom peacock-blue lacquer. On the left, there are built-in bookshelves filled with books. In the center, a large window is framed by patterned curtains. In the foreground, a desk with a marble top holds a vase of flowers, a tray, and a lamp. A leather chair is positioned in front of the desk. In the background, a fireplace with a dark marble surround is visible. An abstract painting hangs on the wall above the fireplace.

Walls in a custom peacock-blue lacquer by Fine Paints of Europe give depth and richness to the library of a Chicago townhouse. Designer Steven Gambrel dialed up color here and throughout the home to compensate for Chicago's long winters. The abstract painting is from Showplace Antique & Design Center. The desk and coffee table are 1960s French pieces. The curtains are End Paper from Stark.

IN THE



Interior design by
STEVEN GAMBREL

Interview by
MIMI READ

Photographs by
ERIC PIASECKI

**DRAWING ON CHICAGO'S RICH
ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY, A DESIGNER INFUSES
A NEW HOUSE WITH STYLE AND SUBSTANCE**

GRAND MANNER



Vivid red carpet on the stairs and a black-and-white marble floor with boldly scaled octagons establish the entry's dynamic mood. Gambrel designed the large Viennese-inspired Suffolk chandelier, part of his lighting collection for Urban Electric. The custom banquette was made by Dune. **OPPOSITE:** In the library, the leather sofa and King George club chair were designed by Gambrel and made by Dune. The silkscreen print is by Andy Warhol. Seen through a doorway, the dining room curtains are Cowtan & Tout's Lara Stripe, with the pattern used horizontally "to make them seem more architectural," says Gambrel.







MIMI READ: I know this is new architecture, but somehow it looks like a blue-chip American home that's been around for a century and seen quite the parade of high-style decorators—with you being the latest in line.

STEVEN GAMBREL: That was really the idea. It's a new townhouse in Chicago's Lincoln Park area, but it's meant to seem like one left behind from the 1920s. Phillip Liederbach is the local architect who designed it, and he looked to David Adler's houses as inspiration. Adler was a Chicago architect who designed spectacular homes in the 1920s and '30s, and when you live in Chicago, you know them. They're iconic and sought after.

What makes them so special?

Adler was taking inspiration from grand Georgian houses, but he gave them a big lift with higher ceilings and larger doorways and windows. He took ideas from the past—paneled rooms, for example—but he made the paneling much lighter. It's intriguing, the way his houses seem fresh and modern even though they're almost a century old.

And your decorating? It's hugely confident and urbane. What inspired you?

I'm trained as an architect, and my decorating is almost always about the architecture. This house has strong proportions, strong architectural components. And of course, my clients inspired me. Jennifer and Jimmy Oppenheimer are a stylish young couple with two children. They did not just shrug their shoulders. All the bold moves here were with their collaboration.

Why did they import you from New York?

She loves fashion, and her most trusted style guru recommended me. The couple wanted me to really push the color story and the patterns, which they saw as exciting. They felt it was something you don't see a great deal of in Chicago.

That marble floor in the entry is flat-out audacious—hello and wow!

I had seen a floor like that in an early-20th-century house and liked it. It's graphic, punchy, and it complements the large room. One has to increase or decrease the scale of the pattern to make it fit with the proportions of any space. That's true of a floor or a carpet. It's a pivotal way of creating decorating that looks like architecture rather than adding a surface that's just an icing. I repeated the geometric form in the brass entry table, the parquet floor in the kitchen, and the master bedroom's light fixtures. It's important to generate patterns that are strong but meld with the rest of the house.

Tell me about the color of the library's walls—they're a feast.

It's peacock blue. Lacquered, of course. It's at the front of the house so it creates a rich, intimate, moody space right when you walk in.

And the furnishings?

A mix of custom and vintage. The bronze desk is French from the 1960s. The ceramics are 1940s American. I designed the rug and had it made in Nepal. It's a version of a Persian carpet, exaggerated in scale. The house has a collection of stylish things with no great concern about provenance.

In the pieces you make and the ones you choose, the craftsmanship always blows me away.

I'm a student of well-made things, and the pieces I like tend to have some reference to utility: early scientific equipment, restoration glass, and furniture that expresses its structure with bolts, fittings, and edges. I like military detailing. The epaulets of a uniform were placed at the junctures that took the most abuse, so you'd have to reinforce them with a thicker material, and as the centuries roll on, it becomes a decorative element. The brass edging on a piece of furniture—that was the area that took the most wear and tear, but now it's a beautiful element we add for style.

The dining room was meticulously curated, but it has an offhand quality. It doesn't clobber you with drama. How'd you do that?

By using two smaller round tables. It's a much more casual approach than one long table. The sofa helps, too. In fact, they don't even call it a dining room—they consider it a living room and they use it to play cards, hang out, dine alone or with friends. The tiny stone tables have inlaid brass with a lacquer finish—a vintage find. The pair of light fixtures is from the 1960s, probably from a public space. They just seemed unexpected and young, and they're brass. The house has a lot of amber and gold tones, and the brass works beautifully.

A black bedroom sounds glamorous but macabre, like something from a rock star's mansion. But this one's classically refined—and surprisingly radiant.

I had never done a black bedroom. There's a luxeness you would never achieve in a light-color room. The wall color is obsidian. The canopy bed is critical because it adds a pale, soft material to alleviate some of the depth of color.

Black is brave.

I know, right? It's great that she was willing to take good risks. Pays off!

PRODUCED BY DAVID M. MURPHY

LEFT: In the multifunctional dining room where the Oppenheimer family entertains and plays games, warm apricot walls come alive in candlelight; they are painted with Pratt & Lambert Accolade in Ceylon Ivory with a strié of Pratt & Lambert Dulce. The ceiling is Pratt & Lambert Skylight in Mauve Mist. To avoid the formal feeling of one long table, Gambrel used two smaller round ones, making lustrous travertine tops for a pair of Arcade dining table bases by Thomas Pheasant for Baker. Dining chairs from Canvas Home. Custom sofa in Laguna velvet from Sabina Fay Braxton.





Meant to evoke the great service kitchens of the past, this kitchen has a tiled barrel-vault ceiling and rough-coat plaster walls that Gambrel calls “decidedly back of house.” For cozy but stylish dining, Saarinen-inspired brass bases by Julian Chichester were paired with a custom concrete top from Soupcan. Bistro chairs, Serena & Lily. **OPPOSITE:** A custom club chair made by Dune and upholstered in Benington from Fabricut offers a seat by the fireplace. Curtains in a Duralee fabric.





1. In a children's study with a cheerful Moroccan theme, Parsons tables are used as desks. The window seat is upholstered in a Holland & Sherry corduroy. 2. The mod honeycomb pattern of Hicks Grand wallpaper by Lee Jofa enlivens the powder room. 3. Master bedroom curtains in Kiara from Bergamo. 4. Gambrel with Jennifer Oppenheimer in the kitchen. 5. Jimmy Oppenheimer's sitting room features a ceiling covered in Chain Link from Phillip Jeffries. Conner sofa from Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams covered in Kravet's Smart. 6. Vintage iron lanterns add to the kitchen's rugged charm. 7. The entrance hall, seen from the second floor, has a 1940s-style panache. **OPPOSITE:** In the living room, with its glowing ceiling—Pratt & Lambert Skylight in Rattan—the custom sectional sofa is covered in a Holly Hunt fabric. A 1970s Italian bronze coffee table adds to the burnished patina. The carpet is Alain Honeycomb from Patterson, Flynn & Martin. The glass pendant, by Tim Clarke and available on deringhall.com, repeats the honeycomb motif. Gambrel hung the clients' collection of photographs salon-style from brass chains over American walnut paneling.



Custom black paint by Fine Paints of Europe sets off a magnificent bed in the master bedroom. The voluminous canopy and hangings are in Corelli cotton from Fabricut with Scalamandré tape trim, and the bed frame is upholstered in Lockett from Stark. Pendant lanterns, Circa Lighting. **OPPOSITE:** Walls in Phillip Jeffries's Amalfi silk are a warm backdrop for a Jansen-style sofa covered in Traviata velvet from Clarence House. Curtains in Isabeau and Wye carpet, both from Stark. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES



