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Moving On Up

A former New Yorker makes a move to the Midwest and takes a Gold Coast duplex from dated to divine

| By Lisa Cregan | Photography by Bob Coscarelli |

Some Chicagoans are made, not born. Take, for example, the owner of this sprawling Lake Shore Drive duplex. The businesswoman had never lived anywhere but Manhattan and moved here without even a native Chicago friend to initiate her into the ways of the Windy City: She had no sub-zero wardrobe, no parallel parking skills and no tolerance for the unexpected April snowshowers. But when she saw her future apartment—a 6,000-square-foot aerie in a prewar doorman building with a view of the lake—it was goodbye, Manhattan!

Okay, so it wasn't quite that quick of a turnaround for the woman, a client of decorator and former Nate Berkus protégé Melanie Elston. When the owner first toured this 1927 apartment she knew it had magic, but she also knew it would take more than a little tweaking to draw it out. The place had longtime previous-

A deconstructed map of Paris dominates a wall in the living room. Burnished golden floor lamps from Plantation Home unify the space by picking up on traces of gold in the 19th-century American ebonized settee and the French 1950s coffee table purchased in New Orleans.



owner issues: well-worn shag carpeting, 1950s foil wallpaper, dated bathroom fixtures and an entire room devoted to an enormous vintage freezer that vaguely evoked a *CSI* morgue.

"The first time I brought my husband through, he was like, 'Wait. What? You like this place?' But I was convinced we could make it work," says the homeowner. In fact, the apartment's once ritzy décor struck a delicious note with her. "I thought, all this decorating is so glam, so 'me.' Or at least the 'me' that would have lived here in the 1950s," she says. "There were mirrors everywhere and I love that kind of glitz and glam. I felt this place was my soul mate."

Soul mate or not, it took a year and a half of construction and two of Chicago's most accomplished interior design gurus to transform the four-bedroom apartment from a dated, Eisenhower-era spread to a place where a very modern family with four children (ranging from eight to one) could live comfortably—without

sacrificing a healthy dose of glamour.

Decorating wunderkind Elston—who broke out on her own in 2004 and was on both *House Beautiful* and *Traditional Home's* lists of rising design stars—was charged with seeking out the rich materials, chic furnishings and updated accessories that would fill this blue-chip flat. And star architect Marvin Herman was asked to reimagine and reconfigure the grand old floor plan without altering its original spirit.

As it turned out, mid-century Chicago's prime practitioner of tastefully opulent modern décor, Samuel Marx, had designed much of the original interior here. And although this was in some sense a gut renovation (the maid's rooms were combined into a family space, and a new kitchen and new baths were created, among other things), Herman and his senior associate, Michael Vanderpoel, preserved original Marx details—like the foyer's elegant curving stairway—wherever they could. "This was always a luxurious apartment, we just brought it

Above: The homeowner wanted a tufted sofa in the living room, so Elston designed one for her. Elston also chose a marble top Jupiter Table from Collection Pierre for the coffee table because there were already so many reflective surfaces in the room. **Below:** In the master bathroom, a frothy chandelier from Chameleon Antique Lighting softens the dark cabinetry. **Opposite page:** In the dining room, Elston chose the large Niermann Weeks Daniela Chandelier and tall garden finials for the sideboard to bring soaring ceilings down to scale.





Left: Elston employed texture rather than color and pattern to warm this corner of the living room. The leather chest is from Formations and the 1950s starburst mirror was found at Douglas Rosin. *Below:* The homeowner's five-year-old makes her way up Weavecraft's Dink Dot stair runner, which adds a mirthful detail to the classically curved stairwell.



into the 21st century," says Herman.

In the end, Elston and Herman—in their first and only collaboration—instilled a fresh elegance. On first entering the apartment, one is deposited into a sparkling foyer, where an oversized lantern with a mirrored base adds a dose of pizzazz to the stairwell's graceful curves. "Melanie listens and then tones me down, thank God," says the homeowner. "I mean, even my own mother calls me a little Liberace!" Elston, too, enjoys a bit of frivolity, saying, "I can't tell you how much fun it is to have a client who never wants to forgo glamour for practicality."

Indeed, even the room referred to as the "Wii room" (it's where the video games live, naturally) is brimming with grown-up sophistication. Walls are sheathed in faux shagreen (eel skin) paper, the coffee table has a mother of pearl inlay, and the X-style benches are actually French antiques. This is the playroom? "Why not?" says

the fearless homeowner. "It's my dream house. I want my kids to experience it too!"

And she means it. Boisterous Friday family suppers with friends are always held in the formal dining room that spills into the adjacent living room. Both rooms have elaborate original moldings, lofty ceilings and spectacular views of the lake. But despite the imposing architecture, the spaces feel bubbly, relaxed and modern—the furnishings manage to be both swank and sturdy. The dining room chairs were chosen for deep comfort and the large, round dining table can accommodate quite the crowd. "I think this table might be my favorite thing," says the homeowner of her working formal dining room arrangement. And high-impact glitz is never more than an arm's length away—a black lacquer 1940s sideboard inlaid with butterflies and flowers, a glittery oversized crystal chandelier and a seven-foot-long mirror Elston designed "to

glamorously reflect all the activity" nicely amp up mealtime drama.

Elston's powerhouse chic carries over into the living room, where one entire wall is taken up by a map of Paris that's been reframed in sections. "The map creates a little intimate seating area," says Elston. "Plus it fits my client. And what could be more glam than Paris, right?"

Fantastic little moments like this are everywhere. The master bath, with its walnut paneling and claw-foot tub, has the offhand elegance of a posh European hotel. And the chicest little zebra-covered bench you've ever seen cries out for attention from its tucked-away hallway niche. It's all of a piece, panache everywhere you look.

The homeowner recalls with a smile what her husband said to her when they first moved here. "He said, 'You came to Chicago for me, so whatever makes you happy.'" Mission accomplished. ■



The place had longtime previous-owner issues: well-worn shag carpeting, 1950s foil wallpaper, dated bathroom fixtures and an entire room devoted to an enormous vintage freezer that vaguely evoked a CSI morgue.



At the top of the stairs, a heavy door opens into the husband and wife's shared office, while a hallway niche is brightened by a 1970s vellum mirror and zebra-clad bench.