

Lake Forest Showhouse features design ideas that are worth stealing

Forty-seven of the Chicago area's top interior designers converged upon an 1895 estate to transform it into a palace of this year's decor trends

By Jan Parr

Forty-seven of the Chicago area's top interior designers converged upon an 1895 estate to transform it into the 20th Lake Forest Showhouse, a palace of interior decor ideas.

The 3.5-acre estate was designed by Henry Ives Cobb, who also designed the Chicago Athletic Association Building, Newberry Library and several pre-1900 buildings at Lake Forest College and the University of Chicago.

The massive limestone Georgian-style main house, known as Pembroke Lodge, was built for real estate and zinc mining entrepreneur Davie Benton Jones and remained in his family for 67 years. It is a 15,000-square-foot, 30-room mansion with a hand-carved paneled living room, eight bedrooms with ensuite baths, 11 fireplaces, a second-floor lounge and kitchenette, and a spacious primary bedroom suite. The pool house and terraces feature statues and tiered limestone patios.

In 1935, David Adler renovated the interiors and designed the pool house and gated pool for Jones' daughter, philanthropist Gwethalyn Jones. Designer Frances Elkins, Adler's sister, partnered with Adler on the interiors.

Fast-forward to the 1970s, when many of the home's interior details were stripped out. For the 2025 Showhouse designers, "The challenge was to restore the home's traditional detailing while making the home a warm, inviting and functional space for a young family," said Showhouse co-chair Susan Rolander. (That family bought the estate in 2023.) "Approximately 75% of the home was taken down to the studs and mechanical systems were brought to current codes and standards, an elevator was added along with a smart home system. Hardwood floors were replaced throughout, along with the wainscot paneling, crown moldings, baseboard and casings. Original millwork and wallpaper were found beneath the layers during demolition, offering clues for the restoration work—it was like an archeological excavation."

The result is a Showhouse with plenty of inspiration for any home, manse or no. It's also just plain fascinating to tour: artistry and craftsmanship at every turn. The Showhouse, which benefits the Infant Welfare Society of Chicago, is open



The Reading Nook, by R Titus Designs | DUSTIN HALLECK

for viewing until May 25.

In past years, the Showhouse estate has gone up for sale after the event; this year, the home will remain with the family who bought it in 2023 for \$4.25 million.

They'll enjoy the benefits of new kitchens, baths, pantries, wall coverings, tile and flooring. But the furnishings and artwork are all for sale.

Here are some trends we spotted in this year's Showhouse:

Outside in

Scenic and mural wall coverings bring the outdoors in. Nearly every room featured some sort of wallpaper, including in the mudroom and laundry room, making these oft-overlooked spaces extra special. But mostly we noticed botanical designs on wallpaper, used to dramatic effect in the Pool Pavilion, designed by Mandarine Home, and the Garden Room.

Skirting the issue

Pleated skirts, gathered skirts, straight skirts—fabric was used on tables, cabinets and desks, providing soft cover and textural interest. A skirted table is the centerpiece of the Foyer by Cynthia McCullough. Skirts were seen in the Cabana, where de-

signer Meghan Jay also brought the outside in with botanical-themed wallpaper. They also were spotted in the bar of the Lady's Lounge by Courtney Pettit Design and in the laundry room by Suzanne Sykes Interiors.

Texture, texture, texture

Fluting and reeding on cabinetry and marble are prevalent, as seen in the kitchen on the countertop edges. The kitchen, by Ablaze Design Group, also shows off another trend: a mix of cabinet finishes. Here, sage green plays nicely with both dark and light woods. Another nice mix: counter- and table-height surfaces, perfect for food prep, baking or homework. Engineered stone continues to be popular for countertops: This kitchen uses Dekton by Cosentino, a composite material made of quartz, glass and porcelain.

That's a relief

Plaster applique can be seen on the walls of several rooms, including the Reception Room, where leaves and stems give a dimensional effect.

Things are looking up

The ceilings in several rooms of the house were not an afterthought: The Garden Room fea-



The front porch of the 2025 Lake Forest Showhouse & Gardens by Cynthia McCullough | HEATHER TALBERT



The Scullery, by DeCleene Creative | NATHAN KIRWAN



The First Floor Hall & Stairwell, by Lauren Collander Interiors | RYAN McDONALD

tures an elaborately detailed ceiling. A striped ceiling draws the eye up on the back stairwell of the Reading Nook (another space that features botanical-themed wallpaper).

Soft touch

After many years of favoring shiny lacquered walls, designers are turning to soft, matte finishes. One exception in the Showhouse: a few lacquered ceilings.

Serenity now

The massive primary bedroom, which features a sitting room and wet bar, is bathed in soft shades of tan and cream, an almost austere space that purposefully provides no distractions.

Floor plans

Pattern is not just for fabrics and wall coverings: Witness the carpet on the hall stairs and the bold tile in the Scullery.