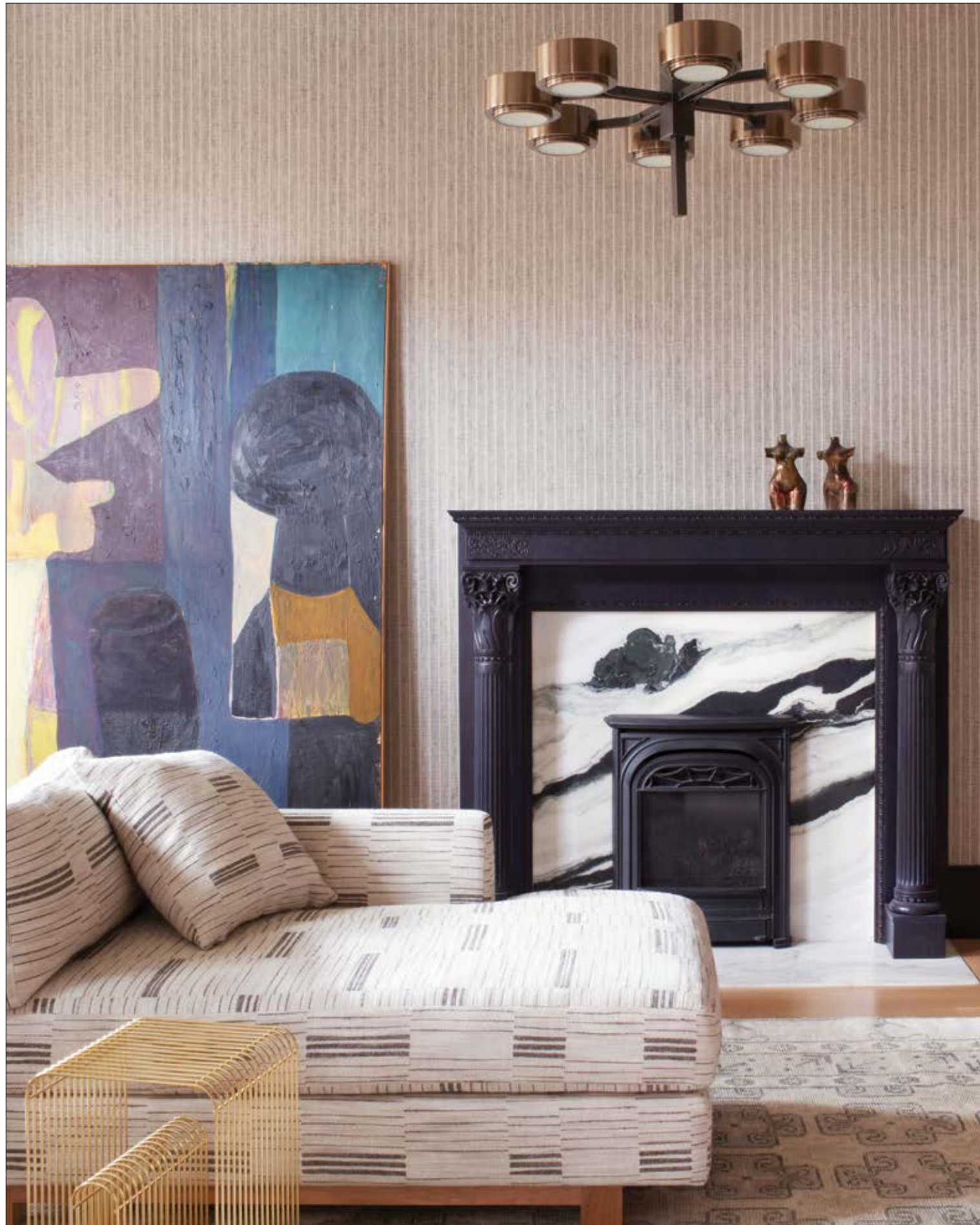


# INTERIORS<sup>®</sup>



ART IN DESIGN





## A New Life

INTERIOR DESIGN: CARI GIANNOULIAS

TEXT: ZLATA KOZUL NAUMOVSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY: ISABEL PARRA











As Cari Giannoulis recalls, when she first walked through the historical home in Chicago her clients were considering purchasing, she was slightly horrified. Ceilings caved in, mildew crept on walls, wainscoting was so heavily damaged that it could not be salvaged, and staircases led to nowhere. The couple, an artist and businessman with whom she previously had worked, turned to her and asked, "Should we buy it?" The answer was a resounding yes.

"It was love at first sight and love at first fright," says the intrepid designer. "The condition of the space would have been a deterrent for many, but we could see the ending. If we could salvage some of the pieces and get it up to modern-date time, this could be something really special. The house needed saving."

Built in 1894 for men's clothing merchant Paul J. Benson, the Romanesque Revival-style home sits on a street in which all the dwellings are historically protected. It possesses arched openings, a grand staircase and stone walls. They discovered a slope in the basement that led to a storage area, which suggests it may have been used during Prohibition. The home, in the Wicker Park neighborhood, changed hands frequently and most recently was used a boarding house before Giannoulis' clients took ownership. They decided they would salvage what they could and use color and texture on the interiors to inject warmth to each of the spaces of the massive house.

Undoing decades of disrepair took some time. Construction alone took two years. Working with a select team of restoration specialists and artisans, Giannoulis restored original millwork—including fireplace surrounds and mantels—and hardware; refinished the original front door; and stripped the two-story staircase and restained it in an ebony. She took great pains to preserve details such as the large mahogany double doors with original hardware in the office and dining room. "This kind of detail doesn't exist anymore, and I felt an obligation to the home and the homeowners to carefully preserve everything we could," she says. Most significantly, in conjunction with En Masse Architecture and Design of Chicago, Giannoulis rebuilt and redesigned a broken window along the staircase, adding an arch on top to give it some movement. The architecture firm also refurbished exterior masonry. "Restoring a home of this era and magnitude is a process," Giannoulis says. Unraveling layers of history is costly, too. "My clients didn't flinch. They understood the importance of preserving historical relevance."





**H**owever, Covid forced them to take a long pause. Rooms were left unfurnished, and walls were bare. Work resumed when the clients called and asked her to pick up where they had left off. "They gave me freedom to create," she says of her clients' directive. "They wanted it to feel like a gentleman's retreat, like something you would have found back in the day but with modern touches." Giannoulas used handsome, muted colors and texture to make the house feel intimate and allow the rooms to flow together. She enveloped the sitting room, at the front of the house, in a sophisticated earth tone from Benjamin Moore. "Painting the walls, trim and ceiling in the same color allows the room to hug you," she says. "I wanted it to be understated, sophisticated and approachable simultaneously." Drapery from Pollack contributes to the effect. She wrapped the office in a stripe wallcovering from Phillip Jeffries, while the primary bedroom is swathed in the brand's cool gray Como Silk. A terracotta-colored paper helps transition the vestibule from the sitting room to the powder room. She installed feather tiles, adorned with an Italian brass shield mirror, in the powder room for a more tactile wall treatment. "Spaces come alive through texture, materials and objects," she says.



Giannoulas created tension with furnishings by mixing modern with traditional. "I tried to pick pieces that felt like they could have been made long time ago, or in the current day," she says. "I like the idea that you can walk through the house and not be exactly sure when it got there." She custom designed the console, desk and sofa in the office as well as the powder room vanity and primary bedroom bed. Vintage and antique furnishings, including the coffee table with hand-painted abstract tile in the sitting room and the living room's Brutalist credenza, were layered in. Contemporary Le Corbusier chairs encircle a teak table in the plant-rich breakfast room. Sourcing from Paris, Spain, Los Angeles and New York, she brought in furnishings, fixtures and accents that felt authentic. "They trust me," she says of her clients. "I'm not going to buy something that I wouldn't put in my house myself."

When considering art, Giannoulas blended meaningful pieces. Family heirlooms and vintage oil paintings are balanced by modern works, such as the contemporary abstract by Jeffrey Sanderson casually leaning in the office. A colorful Picasso is playfully positioned in the bar. "Everything is beloved, but not too precious," she says. Lighting—from Italian midcentury to modern makers Roll & Hill and Urban Electric—gave each room purpose and mood.

Giannoulas credits her clients with saving this house. "It was not an inexpensive undertaking," she says of the labor-intensive work of historical restoration and of creating a home that feels authentic. At every impasse, her clients were game. "These projects are no small feat," Giannoulas says. "You have to have a love of what makes it so special. So many people wanted to tear it down and start over. I'm so glad we brought it back to life." ■ *Cari Giannoulas, carigiannoulas.com*

