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Revived colonial

Text: R.J. Weick

“When you work in older homes, whether [people] are going to keep the same essence or want to be a little avant-garde—do something transitional or modern on the inside, but maintain the outside—there is stuff going on in that house from the past. Most people like to find out what is going on, and we kind of disassemble and reassemble—it is a great experience,” said Michael Menn, AIA, CGR, CAPS, CGP, principal architect at Michael Menn Ltd. in Northbrook, Illinois.

“I think we are known for helping people achieve their solution and we love to specialize in remodel work,” Menn added.

Michael Menn Ltd. is an architectural and planning firm providing design-and-build services to clients throughout Chicago’s North Shore and the greater Phoenix, Arizona areas. The private practice was initially established in 1983 focused on small custom residential and commercial projects,

and has since developed into a firm offering diverse architectural, planning, interior design, and construction services to residential and commercial clients. While its portfolio comprises about 25 percent commercial work, the firm was founded on a passion for the residential.

“Growing up, my father worked and owned a lumber yard so there were blueprints on our dining room table from the time I was three-years-old. I always gravitated toward them and he would explain them,” Menn said. “We were in a neighborhood where they were building houses and I was the kid who would go onto the construction sites late in the afternoon or on the weekends and take the scraps to build a fort-house for my friends. I think that is why I gravitated toward it; I was around it.”

Menn, who is a licensed architect in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Arizona, spent nearly the first 10 years of his





more than 40-year-career in architecture doing commercial work. It was when he began taking residential work home as a hobby that he decided to start his own firm in the early 1980s.

“I said ‘let’s do something you enjoy,’ so we started out as a residential design firm—we did do some commercial work—and then four years later it grew into an architect-led, design-build firm,” Menn said. “We design it and build it; it is a full-service firm. People come to us, they have a project, and they are looking for one-stop accountability.”

On the architectural side, Michael Menn Ltd. offers renovation, remodel, addition, and new construction services in both residential and commercial fields, such as single-family homes, townhomes, high-rise condominiums and apartments, and multi-family projects. From preliminary design, master planning, lighting, flooring, and aging-in-place requirements, to HVAC, plumbing, and construction documentation, the firm strives to reconcile programmatic needs and vision, with budget and scheduling. Michael Menn Ltd. also collaborates with landscape architects, kitchen and interior designers, and audio-visual professionals, among others, throughout the design-build process. From documentation, the firm can then offer project planning and execution, as well as a post-project walk-through about 12 months after completion.

“I truly see my mission as jumping into my clients head, unscrambling the thousands of ideas that they have, and making it come to reality,” Menn said. “When I say



reality, it is matching budget and design. That is reality, because I can design to the nth degree, but if my client can’t afford it, it is a failure.”

For the 1926-built Colonial Revival home in River Forest, Illinois, the design follows and is informed by its past. While the existing 32,000-square-foot home was extensively remodeled with a new nearly 1,200-square-foot addition, the clients were interested in maintaining an authenticity to the home’s original architectural vernacular while updating the space with modern conveniences.

“It was a large project—it wasn’t just a kitchen or a bathroom. This was a complete gut of the house plus an addition,” Menn said. “We put together an entire team, because I believe in the team approach, and started out doing master planning. We came up with two or three different schemes...and we take elements that they like and put them together. You start out with a very wide base and hopefully through the process—master planning and preliminary design—you narrow it down so you have a plan.”

The revival of colonial style architecture that swept the nation at the turn of the 20th Century—peaking in the 1950s—was prolific throughout the United States in the 1920s, and drew inspiration from a mixture of styles that remained distinctively American. Dutch, Spanish, and British architec-

tural elements influenced its new language, as well as the ornate Victorian and Italianate homes that preceded colonial style. Often, colonial style was defined by its symmetrical, rectangular massing and simple gable or hipped rooflines; and columns, moldings, and larger overhangs were a blend of both the classic and the ornate.

“They wanted the house to look like it would have been when it was built in 1926, but with modern day amenities,” Menn said. “That was the underlying theme.”

With its grand central entrance—soaring columns reminiscent of the iconic order—restored front windows complete with valances, the Colonial Revival home welcomes visitors into a foyer reminiscent of its original time period. Black-and-white checkboard tiles, which were repurposed from an English castle, stretch across the foyer and powder room floor, complete with a heat map running beneath. Its series of rooms pair decorative fixtures and furnishings with a classic palette where patterned and painted wallcoverings are tempered by white trim, traditional cabinetry, and an expansive kitchen complete with bay windows and a built-in banquette large enough to accommodate a dining table.

“The whole design concept on the first floor was that they love to entertain informally. They are big sports fans and when they entertain, there are a lot of people and

they want a great flow between the kitchen and the family room,” Menn said. “Unfortunately it is a very traditional house: the dining room is in between. What we did was create two sets of doorways that are directly across from each other, so the flow was in and out through the dining room, but it never touched the table.”

Menn also noted the original family room most likely began as a patio and evolved into a three-season room before becoming part of the existing home. As a result, there was no foundation beneath it and was structurally unsound.

“We dug it out, rebuilt it, and it gave us the area to rearrange about two-thirds of the second floor into its current configuration,” Menn said. “We also added to the dining room, which is at the center of the rear of the house. It helped in the circulation of their everyday life.”

Initially in the front of the house with a small closet and bathroom, the master bedroom transitioned into an entire suite with additional built-in space on the back of the house. The space in the front of the house was also redesigned to take advantage of the available space. In total, the home now has four bedrooms, an office, two laundry rooms, and four-and-a-half bathrooms with an additional bathroom in the basement. The master bathroom, with its traditional cabinetry and tile; large, built-in, soaking



tub and shower; is further enhanced by the intricate chandelier, which Menn noted brings prominence at the center of the spatial design.

“The clients wanted to keep it in the style of the house,” Menn said in reference to the master bath. “Even though it is contemporary in terms of its size, it has a very traditional feel with the tile we used, with the cabinetry selected and installed, but it has all the amenities. It is an awesome space.”

Another aspect of the project was reconciling older materials with modern day energy codes, particularly as a solid masonry structure with brick on the facade. The solution was to use masonry on the outside and on the interior leverage more typical construction such as two-by-four or two-by-six boards and dense insulation. Other rooms built from scratch feature drywall—with a level five paint finish in the dining room on the first floor—while spaces in need of renovating used plaster to match the existing material. The result was a mixture of materials that matched and complemented the original infrastructure.

While other elements, such as the deep, rich blue walls in the study; landscaped patio, masonry fireplace, and outdoor kitchen; and an arched hallway are just a few features that define the renovation of the home, Menn noted one of the distinctive aspects of the project

were the clients themselves.

“When I sit down with my clients, I want to know as much about them. I’d rather go to their living environment than for them to come to our office, which eventually they do. I also try to explain to them what I like isn’t going to be what they like. Their job is to convey to me what they like—exterior, interior, details, cut stuff out of magazines, go on Pinterest, or go on Houzz,” Menn said.

“As an architect and a builder, it’s my job

to say I understand that you would like to do this, here are the pros and cons of it. The decision is always theirs—this is their house, not mine; I’m not going to push my design,” Menn added.

Renovation and addition completed, the Colonial Revival home in River Forest, Illinois breathes with an air of a bygone era, blending characteristics of the traditional with a modern vision.

