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Before Building a New Home on Lake Michigan, They Checked In With the Neighbors

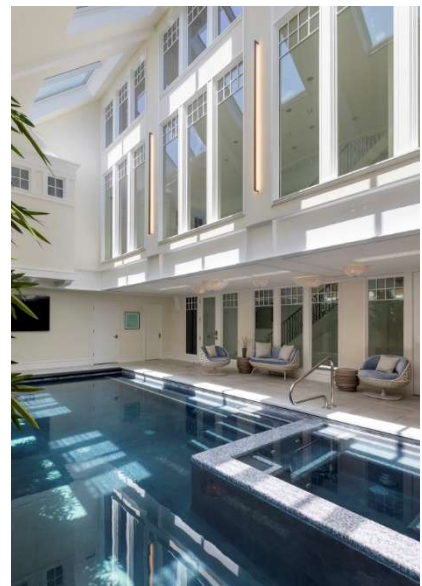
The previous owners faced fierce opposition when they planned a very modern home for the lakefront lot. Stacey Empson and Eric Ruderman wanted to do things differently with their \$7.5 million Evanston home

By Laura Hine

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When a lakefront lot sits empty for more than a decade—especially in the desirable Chicago suburb of Evanston, Ill.,—there’s probably a reason. Longtime Evanston residents Dr. Eric Ruderman and his wife, Stacey Empson, knew they were taking on a challenge when they paid \$2.35 million in 2020 for a long-vacant property on Lake Michigan, but they were determined to succeed where past owners had failed.

Three years later they moved into a 9,500-square-foot house on the site with lake views, an indoor swimming pool and space for their large art collection. The \$7.5 million process of building and furnishing the five-bedroom house required architectural wrangling to fit all they wanted on a narrow lot, and advanced building techniques to deal with the lakefront property’s high water table. Then there were the delicate dealings with the neighbors to ensure they wouldn’t contest their building plans.



Curved walls help keep waves from eroding the backyard at the home of Stacey Empson and her husband, Eric Ruderman. At right, the dining room windows overlook the indoor pool. (Photo Credit: MIKE SCHWARTZ)

They are grateful they persevered. A year after moving into the house, Empson was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. "Unbeknownst to me, what we planned in this house will allow me to manage and live with a chronic disease," says Empson, a 56-year-old principal at a consulting firm.

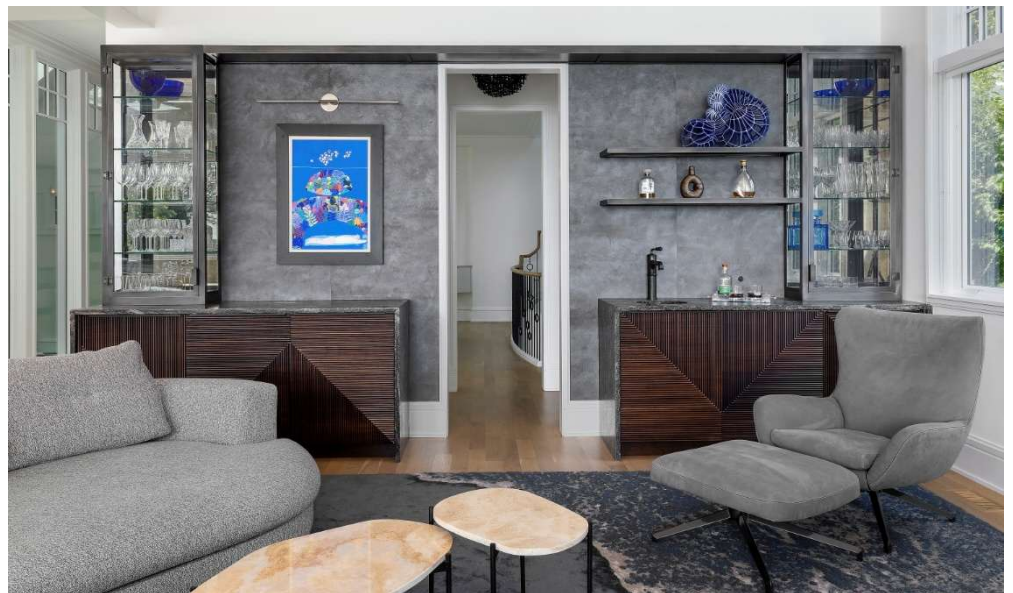
Ruderman, a rheumatologist, and Empson had lived for more than 20 years in a house that was nearby but not on the lake. They have a college-age daughter, and Ruderman has an adult daughter from a previous marriage. As they started contemplating their next phase of life as empty-nesters, they considered leaving town, but instead decided to stay in Evanston and build a house where they could age in place.



The couple chose distinctive light fixtures throughout the house. The living room light fixture is by Luke Lamp. (Photo Credit: MIKE SCHWARTZ)



The backsplash is made with blue Sodalite quartzite to serve as an artistic anchor for the kitchen. (Photo Credit: MIKE SCHWARTZ)



At left, aquatic wallpaper in a powder room off the spa area reflects the nearness of the lake. The furnishings lean modern, anchored with Minotti pieces such as the living-room chair. (Photo Credit: MIKE SCHWARTZ)

“We had walked down this block for years and saw the empty lot,” says Ruderman. “Stacey had always wanted to live on the water, so she called our real-estate agent.” The agent filled them in on the saga of the narrow lot, which is approximately 50 feet by 330 feet. Located amid the circa-1920s homes in the town’s Lakeshore Historic District, it had been owned by a couple who wanted to build a very modern house. The effort failed after neighbors voiced fierce opposition at hearings before the town’s preservation commission.

The previous owners “just couldn’t get it done,” Ruderman says. “They had gotten upside down with the neighbors.”

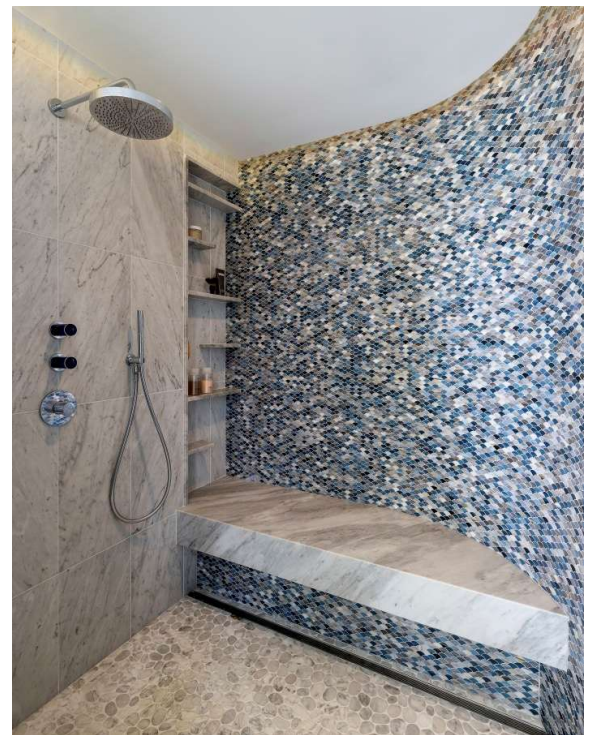
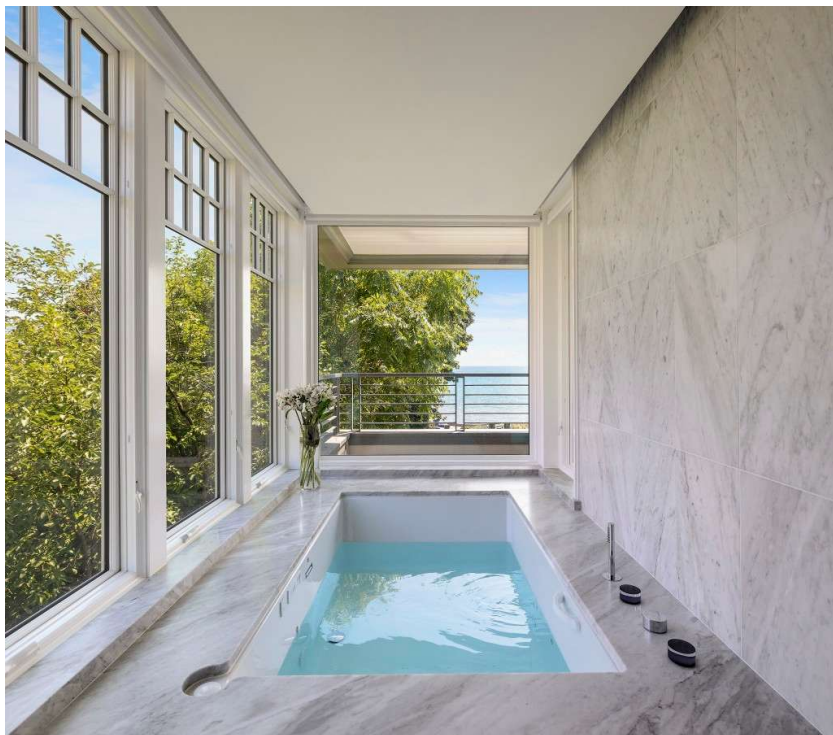


The dining room, left, a lounge area shared by the couple's daughters, center, and a guest bathroom, right. (Photo Credit: MIKE SCHWARTZ)

Ruderman and Empson didn’t want to repeat that mistake. Before closing on the lot, “I called the neighbors and asked, ‘What was the problem? Help me understand what you resisted,’” Empson says. “If we weren’t going to be able to build something that we wanted, then we weren’t going to invest in the lot.” The neighbors appreciated their transparency, the couple said, and relayed that they wanted any house on the site to blend with the existing historic homes, as well as match the neighborhood’s informally agreed upon setbacks for the lake and front yard.

Satisfied they could meet those requirements, the couple negotiated with the owners to buy the roughly half-acre lot, which wasn’t on the market.

They also had their own ideas about what they wanted in a house: a home gym, an elevator, an indoor pool and plenty of space for art. The couple collects photography, paintings and sculpture, prioritizing female artists such as Summer Wheat and Torrance York.



The primary suite has views of Lake Michigan. A soaking tub with a view was on the couple's wish list. (Photo Credit: MIKE SCHWARTZ)

“We honor every anniversary with a piece of art,” says Empson, who married Ruderman in 2004. “Some are very big pieces, so we wanted to make sure we had room for everything.”

To execute their vision, they hired Illinois-based Morgante Wilson Architects. Principals Elissa Morgante and Fred Wilson had worked with the lot’s previous owners, so they knew the site’s constraints but also its potential. Their design called for the front of the house to be traditional, with gables and a dormer, in keeping with the neighborhood. The back of the house, however, is full of light and windows, with an open-plan kitchen and family room that spans the house’s full 40-foot width. They also made sure the plan met the neighbors’ requested setbacks, Wilson said. This time, it was quickly approved by the preservation commission.

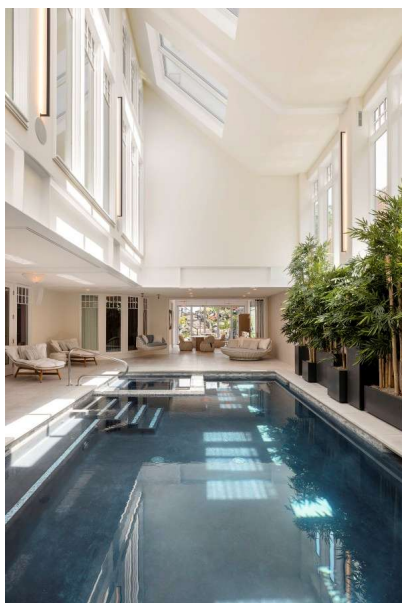
“We knew all the hot buttons,” Wilson says. “We presented a scheme we knew would fly through.”



The top floor of the house has a lounge, a bedroom and a covered space for outdoor dining. The home's palette is mostly blues and grays, with a few sharp greens thrown in for contrast. (Photo Credit: MIKE SCHWARTZ)

Construction presented challenges for the team, which included builder Bo Mikuta of Integrity Builders and landscape architect Scott Byron. For one thing, the lake's water level had been high in recent years, Wilson says, and "the waves crashing in really destroyed a lot of the backyard." To preserve the outdoor space and protect it from erosion, Morgante Wilson designed curving walls that deflect the waves.

The couple also wanted an indoor pool for exercise, a challenging proposition given the location's high water table. To address this, "We basically built a roof upside down and pushed it into the water so that it's completely sealed," Wilson says.



For their 21st anniversary the couple commissioned a mosaic wall-size Tree of Life. It will be installed this spring next to the pool. At right, the backyard has a grill and room for outdoor entertaining. (Photo Credit: MIKE SCHWARTZ)

With Empson's health challenges, the pool, elevator, gym and spa with a sauna and steam room proved immediately useful. She uses the pool almost daily for swimming laps, in-water jogging and resistance training. The Parkinson's diagnosis was a wake-up call to take better care of herself, she says, and she is planning to retire in 2026. "It gives me so much peace and calm to know that we can live here, I believe, until they have to take us out feet first," Empson says.