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## Eclectic Junction!

An indoor fishpond, a green, bee-friendly roof and an out-there, globe-trotting aesthetic bring these landmark digs into the moment **By Lisa Skolnik | Photography by Tony Soluri**

When Chicago architects Rachel Crowl and Julie Fisher, partners in fcStudio, met Amy Lehman for the first time almost four years ago, they knew nothing about her. "But we could immediately tell that this wasn't going to be a standard job. Not by any stretch of the imagination," quips Fisher.

With luminous, silver-streaked locks streaming down to her waist, an arresting Hopi ceremonial tattoo emblazoned on her chest and a dazzling West African kanga wrapped around her frame, Lehman made a fascinating first impression. So did her home, an 1896 two-flat in the Wicker Park Landmark District that was filled with exotic



**THROUGH THE ROOF** Amy Lehman's eclectic and intriguing aesthetic shines in a new kitchen, where the home's original brick walls are exposed to contrast with the glass curtain walls of a newly added sunroom. A vintage table and head chairs from Pagoda Red are paired with Moroccan lanterns from [importersfrommarrakesh.com](http://importersfrommarrakesh.com), while pendant lights from Embelezar, river rock tile from Ann Sacks Tile & Stone and faux wood antlers from Asrai Garden give a modern edge. Above: Lehman covered the roof with indigenous prairie wildflowers and grasses that benefit the environment and attract bees.















artifacts and furnishings. She was meeting with Crowl and Fisher in the hopes of turning it into a single-family residence.

The architects were mesmerized. "It was aesthetic ecstasy. We didn't know what to look at first," gushes Fisher. Fortunately, Lehman had a game plan for them, since she had been anticipating the project for a decade. "I handed them two massive accordion-files full of imagery I'd been collecting. When I bought this, I was beginning a joint M.D./MBA program at the University of Chicago and single-parenting my son, Max. So we waited. I had a lot of time to think about what I wanted to do and explore my options," she explains.

The files were not only loaded with interesting concepts and resources, "they were meticulously annotated with Post-it notes," marvels Crowl. "She was clearly a woman who knew what she wanted and was determined to make it happen."

Lehman's definitive want list and expedient approach came from the constraints of her demanding life. By then, she was a general surgery resident at the University of Chicago Medical Center, and in the throes of founding The Floating Health Clinic in Central Africa, an NGO addressing the problem of limited health care access for isolated communities in the Lake Tanganyika basin.

Not surprisingly, Lehman's requisites ran from prosaic to profound.

The fundamentals included a larger, brighter kitchen; a sunroom addition; new electrical and plumbing; and preserving the building's artistically wrought and still unspoiled Victorian details, which ranged from vivid stained glass windows to frothy fretwork. More unconventional was a fishpond in the sunroom and a reptile habitat for Bella, the family's tame and treasured boa constrictor.

Intensely thoughtful were features that related to Lehman's values and beliefs. She wanted the renovation to add sustainable heating and cooling systems, a bee-friendly green roof and total wheelchair accessibility to the structure. "All are the right thing to do philosophically and morally," she observes.

But the bee haven and accessibility are also ethically prescient on Lehman's part. The former was calculated to fill a community void. "Bees are scarce here. People don't realize how significant pollination is to growing everything," she notes. Her aging parents (both universal design activists) precipitated the latter, as well as a childhood illness that put Lehman in a wheelchair for several years. The architects devised a scrupulous and architecturally stunning program that addressed Lehman's goals. Central to the plan was an enlarged, sleek, state-of-the-art kitchen flanked with two new, equally sleek glass-enclosed structures—an adjacent sunroom, complete with a fishpond, and an atrium-like rear façade that climbs up to the green roof and holds an elevator and a stainless steel central staircase to replace the building's original dilapidated exterior porch-and-stair system.

The new façade "didn't add more square footage to the structure because it followed the same footprint, but it did bring that extra outside space inside and flooded the rear of the house with daylight and breezes when the windows are popped," explains Fisher. "It cools

*Opposite page:* In the second-floor parlor, the home's original woodwork anchors artifacts gleaned from Lehman's many trips to Africa, though a baked river mud chandelier from South Africa came from [amaridianausa.com](http://amaridianausa.com). Above: With a demeanor that pays homage to a Victorian orangery, the sunroom respects the constraints of the city's landmark provisions. Son Max and pet boa constrictor Bella join homeowner Amy Lehman in the sunroom, where translucent glass cabinets are by Minotto.





the house in the summer, warms it in the winter and brightens it year-round."

With its clean lines and graphic but subtly Asian pattern, a motif developed by the architects in response to a picture Lehman gave them of a rehabbed warehouse, these glassy additions lend the historic structure a contemporary edge.

To the surprise of all three women, it took many meetings to get the respectful and code-conscious plans past all the various community landmark committees, mostly due to the height of the elevator shaft on the

roof. But Lehman was determined to go for it all. "We had to figure out how to do everything I needed, because I'm planning on living here for the rest of my life," she contends. "Plus preservation isn't supposed to be static. Times and needs change, and structures need to accommodate greening and aging with grace."

Lehman persevered, physically and aesthetically. The structural changes finally passed permitting, the gut job got under way and she flushed out the interior spaces with the materials and finishes she had found long before the project began. Top on her

*Above: A new curtain wall on the home's back façade, designed collaboratively by Lehman and her architects, encases MILKdesign's sculptural steel staircase and a porch-like atrium on the green roof. The enclosure has just enough room for a swinging chair from [amarindianusa.com](http://amarindianusa.com).  
Opposite page: Fornasetti's Frutto Proibito wallpaper from Workroom turns a prosaic foyer into a fitting haven for Lehman's extraordinary effects, such as a collection of vintage dog collars and antique fetish sculptures she acquired in the Congo.*





list were dazzlingly dappled petrified river rock slabs she showed Crowl and Fisher the first time they met and was determined to use for kitchen countertops, and lavishly decorated Moroccan tiles and lanterns she installed in the sunroom.

Last came ornately patterned but decidedly modern wallpapers. "They look traditional from afar, but have a contemporary bite when you get close enough to see the details," notes Crowl.

Most significantly, the blend of Old World charm and New Age wit works with Lehman's ethnic and antique possessions.

Ultimately, Lehman wanted to forge "a warm and welcoming home" that would reflect her lifestyle and values, and "keep my crazy eclecticism from being too jarring and discordant," she explains. Given the eye-catching results, it's clear the doctor knows best. ■

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