



Mia Rao Is Thankful For The Chance To Make Design Homes That Clients Never Want To Leave

One of Chicago's top interior designers discusses some of her favorite rooms, including an all-blue, converted Victorian tearoom and a wine room in a luxurious, downtown penthouse.

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If you ask 100 different interior designers to describe a project that they are most thankful for, you're going to hear 100 completely different answers. That is because the interior design world is so full of unique and interesting projects that no two are ever the same. While clients are thankful to interior designers for their new and improved homes, the designers themselves are often just as thankful for the experience.

Mia Rao is the principal designer and leader of Mia Rao Design, a full-service design firm in Chicago that partners with architects and contractors on everything from design concept to construction.

“My passion for design spawns from my parents building a house when I was 5,” said Rao. “Helping pick out the color of my wallpaper and design my room ignited a passion for interior design in me as a child. Later in life, I always had an artistic knack and went to art school to eventually pursue a B.A. in interior design.”

Through her work with several high-end furnishing companies, Rao learned about furniture, design and how to communicate with clients. In 2001, she opened her own design firm with her collaborator and senior designer, Robyn Swanson.

“I am so thankful to be in an industry in which I have so many energetic and passionate colleagues and design friends,” said Rao. “If you don’t have that passion for providing the best work possible for the clients, it is hard to stay successful and keep everyone involved driven and inspired. Since every project is different and unique to the client’s home, the interior design world never gets boring.”

One space that Rao is thankful to have designed recently is a client’s penthouse in Chicago. “Every single element of the wine room was carefully catered to the client’s needs,” she said. “It was such a blank canvas and it allowed us to do all of the construction, furnishing and window treatments. The client had an impressive wine collection and we made sure to create an all-encompassing atmosphere in which the homeowner felt comfortable.”

According to Rao, the wine room features an inky blue sectional couch with swivel chairs that create a conversational atmosphere. By mixing the dark blue color with metallics, Rao was able to cultivate a dark and luxurious space. “One interesting piece was a light fixture that we created out of old car parts,” she said. “The rest of the condo is very open, so we wanted to make sure we manifested an individualized and personal feel for each room. The feeling that emanates from the space really captivates people and draws them in. I’m thankful that I got to see this space firsthand when my partner Robyn and I were invited by the client for dinner. It’s so great when you get the chance to sit in a space you designed and really live in it to understand the success of the design.”

Another room that Rao is thankful for resides in her own home. “My family and I live in a Queen Anne Victorian-style home from the late 1800s and people designed the interior layout of homes a little differently back then,” she said. “The main parlor used to be closed off where they served tea and there is an odd room that juts out from the main parlor. We knew we wanted it to be the family room so I had a custom sectional couch made to wrap around the room, built a fitted bookcase and mounted a swing-away television to the wall.”

The den has come to be affectionately known as “The Blue Room” by Rao and her family, as everything in the room is colored navy blue, including a modern paisley wallpaper on the ceiling. “We wanted this space to have its own, cozy identity as it is the main place our family comes to relax. I’ve become so thankful for this space, especially as we gear up for another Chicago winter because it is a unique and comfortable place to spend time with loved ones. Although the actual room isn’t that big, the design envelops you and makes it feel much larger.”

For Rao, it is spaces like this that make the interior design world so full of gratitude. “We often hear clients say, ‘I never want to leave home now!’ It is so rewarding to watch clients become more comfortable and satisfied with their homes, especially if they are currently overcoming significant life changes,” she said. “The home should be a personal sanctuary and the right interior design can lead to inner peace and ultimately success in life. I am thankful for being able to bring that to our clients.”