

This is the biggest interior design trend in Chicago



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At The Ritz-Carlton Residences in Chicago, the developer asked top interior designers from Europe, the U.S., and the U.K. to design models that would attract customers. Buyers, most of whom are Midwesterners purchasing a second or third home, liked three of the models so much that they bought them as-is, with all the furnishings in place, says Jane Shawkey, a Coldwell Banker listing agent for the properties.

What did these Chicago customers buy?

They went for a clean, modern look that designers say is imported from Europe and is now catching on in Chicago and other major cities. "Europe has always been more modern, and for the past three years or so, their style has been coming to the U.S.," says Julia Wong, a Los Angeles-based designer who decorated one of the Ritz models that sold furnished. The new trend involves clean, simple lines and streamlined features, she says; a contrast to the more ornate European-country style of past years. "Before, it was French country, Tuscan, and shabby chic. That's still there, but overall, the modern, industrial look is in," Wong says.

On-trend design features

So how does this Euro modern-industrial look play out in interiors?

In cabinetry, panels are flat, with good-quality grain, but no decorative trim or molding. Flooring is uniform. Instead of following the traditional model of using tile in the kitchen, wood in the living room, and carpet in the bedroom, designers are installing engineered wood flooring throughout, so that floors are "not all broken up with different materials," Wong says.

The modern look also features more built-ins, such as bookshelves and sideboards. In kitchens, instead of granite, designers are switching to quartzite, a natural stone that is translucent like crystal, Wong says, and requires minimal care. In bathrooms, the trend is marble.

Though beautiful, granite, now sold at Lowe's and Home Depot, is becoming a bit passé with high-end designers. "Granite was so overused that people don't want to say that word anymore," Wong says.

A midwestern twist

Another Ritz model that sold fully furnished was designed by Frank Ponterio Interior Design in Chicago. He agrees with Wong that the European

modern trend is working its way through Chicago and other U.S. cities, and he incorporates it, but treads somewhat cautiously in the Midwest. "In Chicago, the market tends to be more conservative," he says. "We're putting our own Midwestern twist on things, blending in the modern bits a little more subtly." He might introduce a modern element through lighting, using hand-blown glass-and-iron spheres instead of a traditional chandelier. Or he might add a chair with a thin back, and nail heads and metal in the feet.

As for colors, they tend to rotate. "For a while, everyone on the planet was using purple, but in my opinion, that's over," Ponterio says. Designers are using vibrant blue, a Mediterranean color, he says. Grays are also popular.

Another trend is kiln-formed glass, made by joining pieces together through heating or sandblasting, creating eye-catching colors and textures. It's cropping up in casings and crown moldings, and is sometimes used for tabletops here, as it is in Europe. Synthetic tables are also popular. "There's a huge use of tinted resins," Ponterio says. Resin is a synthetic material that can be produced in vibrant colors and cut in irregular shapes. "They're really fun: You can get fantastic shapes out of them," Ponterio says. He started seeing resins in Europe five or six years ago, and in the U.S., about two years ago.

Overseas trends

Though the European industrial style is catching on here, other countries have different trends. In Germany, even though it's part of Europe, the Art Deco style of the past and lavish materials like brass, gold and velvet are popular. Greeks are using cement mortar to allude to the uniform, white Cycladic architecture of their past. In India, there is a revival of traditional crafting of rugs, cushions, towels and linens. Ponterio has worked with Russian clients who like high-end brands and a combination of traditional and modern furnishings.

Wong, who was born in Beijing and speaks Mandarin and Cantonese, has clients in China who like a look that's boldly modern, but they want to hold onto Chinese features. A common request is to install a Western kitchen for show, and a Chinese kitchen — where the cooking actually takes place — in the back of the house.

—Teresa Meek, *Tribune Content Solutions*