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2026 MASTER DESIGN Award Winners

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Eight Minds Think Alike

The judges of the 48th annual Master Design Awards were tasked with reviewing nearly 500 entries from around the country.

OVER two days, eight leading designers and remodelers convened at the University Club in downtown Chicago to judge the 2026 Master Design Awards. They poured over nearly five hundred entries spanning 22 categories to award gold, silver, bronze, and honorable mention awards to deserving residential and commercial projects.

Judges for this year's Master Design Awards included (from left to right):

- **Jen Pinto**, principal interior designer, Jackson Design and Remodeling, San Diego, California
- **Jill Worobec**, senior designer, Mosby Building Arts, St. Louis, Missouri
- **Chaden Halfhill**, CEO, Silent Rivers Design + Build, Des Moines, Iowa
- **Kara Shelley**, design manager, Hurst Design Build Remodel, Westlake, Ohio
- **Patrick Finn**, president, Patrick A. Finn Custom Homes & Remodeling, Palatine, Illinois
- **Cindy Cipriani**, owner, Cipriani Remodeling Solutions, Mount Laurel, New Jersey
- **Bob Gallagher**, president, Sun Design Remodeling, Clifton, Virginia
- **Emily Stewart**, senior interior designer, Melton Design Build, Boulder Colorado

Their combined effort was herculean, especially considering Chicago was experiencing its worst air quality of the year as smoke from wildfires in Minnesota and Canada covered the Loop in yellow smog, blotting out views of Grant Park and Lake Michigan from the seventh-floor meeting room. It's safe to say that conditions weren't ideal, but the team of judges were committed to their goal of selecting the best projects in spite of the ambience.

After over a dozen hours of careful consideration and enthusiastic deliberation, in which every aspect of a project was called out and scrutinized, the judges selected their winning projects which are laid out in the following pages.

While the diversity of projects was impressive—from measured renovations of historic homes and bump-out additions to

sweeping whole-house remodels that redefined the residence for the homeowners—a few unifying features emerged across many of the winning projects.

The projects that floated to the top tended to be bigger. That included both budget and scope. A more-involved project with a deeper purse tended to trump one that faced budgetary and spatial constraints. The trend among winning projects suggests that homeowners are increasingly likely to invest in large projects at home rather than relocate to a different residence that better fits their needs. It points to the fact that Americans are moving less often than they used to, according to analysis from Axios. In 2024, only 11 percent of Americans changed residences. That was the lowest rate since 1948. Projects designed for homeowners to age in place are well represented among this year's winners as well.

When a project that was hampered by challenges and setbacks took a prize, it was often due to the remodeler's ingenuity and the creativity of their solution which allowed their renovation stick the landing. Despite the trend for big projects, small ones still beat out larger competitors when a creative solution was implemented gracefully.

Inside look

The judges discussed the pros and cons of every project before deciding the winners in the final round of judging. The level of care, as well as scrutiny, the judges used to consider each project showed their respect for each remodeler's vision and their understanding of practical constraints. Every detail was meticulously evaluated using their collective expertise and perspectives before conclusions were drawn.

While judging the kitchen categories, the judges were impressed by intentional uses of material and color, and they debated the importance of lighting in a space. When a project seemed to perform beyond the means of its category, that caught their attention, and they sought to define the extent of the project in question, making sure they weren't scoring it based on features that weren't part of the remodeling project. A

specialized function or unique characteristic could also earn bonus points, as was the case for the double-kitchen project by Drury Design in Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

Before pictures also helped frame the extent of the renovations for the judges. In the basement category, pictures taken before work started often showed cluttered and underdeveloped spaces. The transformation told by the progression of images was almost as necessary as the quality and finish of the final product. For basements, ADA compliance could earn a project extra consideration and was seen as a positive attribute.

It was no surprise that preservation was an important quality in the Old House category, for which the judges evaluated many projects where the original home was built over a hundred years ago. Respect for the original structure along with creative solutions for reinventing it went hand in hand in this category. The renovation of White House Farm, a structure which dates to 1742 and served many functions throughout its life, especially wowed them for the project's ability to honor the building's history while creating a distinction between historic and new spaces. Reader & Swartz Architects, P.C. in Winchester, Virginia, checked every box for the judges with this project.

When judging small spaces, like the projects in the bathroom categories, details went a long way and could mean as much as a reconfigured layout or expanding the square footage. Surface texture and color, wallpaper, and fixtures, along with the mood they create together, were important for creating character. The judges favored spaces they could imagine themselves living in. A charming space also scored highly, like the winning project by CQC Home based in Durham, North Carolina.

The criteria for winners changed considerably depending on the category being judged. The dynamic approach shows the judges' flexibility and ability to think deeply about every detail. Their hard work allowed the following projects to receive their recognition.



Kitchen \$100,000 to \$200,000

GOLD

BOWA
McLean, Virginia
Bowa.com

Location: Washington, D.C.
Designer: Mark Kramer, Studio Sophiste

An underperforming and dysfunctional kitchen with limited storage and an awkward layout prevented a family from making the most of their home. They wanted to increase flow while creating a practical environment for cooking that also felt like a site of connection for the family. Aligning with the home's 1930s character was also a necessity.

Removing and reconfiguring an existing staircase helped discover much needed space. An expansive island serves as a place for food preparation, serving, and dining; while the custom cabinetry and abundant marble surfaces make the kitchen feel both welcoming and practical for the busy family with school-aged children.



SILVER

NORMANDY DESIGN BUILD
Hinsdale, Illinois
Normandyremodeling.com

BRONZE

MANTIS DESIGN AND BUILD, LLC
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Mantisdesignbuild.com

HONORABLE MENTION

DESIGN BY THE JONATHANS
New Haven, Connecticut
Thejonathans.com