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Rain Forest in Winter

This Chicagoan avoids the February blues by visiting his built-in tropical getaway

BY PATRICIA TERRY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY BERARDI & SALLY GOOD / PHOTOFIELDS



Rain forest IN WINTER
The Chicagoan's built-in tropical getaway is a lush indoor rainforest with a variety of tropical plants and a tiled floor.

Even in the dreariest depths of mid-winter Chicago, Fred Akard has no need to fly off to Oaxaca or Guanajuato. Instead, the retired industrial designer brought all he loves about warm destinations to his North Side home. The ochre-and-burnt umber stucco of his hacienda; the two-story, glass-roofed atrium bursting with tropical plants; the water gurgling from a large moss-covered stone fountain, carved in Jalisco; and the light pouring in through glass doors and windows; and the colorful paintings, tiles, and fabrics—all contribute to creating the warm ambiance of the tropics.

Which is exactly what Akard had in mind when he built the 2,500-square-foot home. The 81-year-old retired and sold his trade-only giftware and design company and Near North Side building some 15 years ago, and then found the perfect location for his new home: a rare, vacant, triangular-shaped lot. "I was looking for a lot with plenty of sunshine," says the Chilean-born designer. "And I wanted this warm, welcoming look—of Mexico, of Spain, Italy, the Mediterranean. It's always fascinated me."

Akard hired an architect to bring his vision to fruition. When that first partnership didn't work out, he turned to Chicago architect Daniel Novak, who studied under Frank Lloyd Wright. Novak and Akard, an industrial design graduate of The Art Institute of Chicago, worked closely together. "It was wonderful to have the input from him," says Novak. "And the man understood building." Akard had picked up ideas around the world as he traveled for his business; Novak simply translated Akard's vision into reality.

It took two years to design and build the hacienda. Select items, such as the terra cotta tiles and carved stonework, were custom-ordered from Mexico during construction. But finally, the hacienda was ready to house the furnishings, art objects, and other unusual pieces Akard had picked up from the world's flea markets, antique shops, and suppliers.

His home's impact is immediate. Step inside the carved side doors, topped by a half circle of German stained glass, and you are shortly enveloped in a moist, lush mini-rainforest. The 25-foot rubber tree, fiddleleaf fig, and kentia palm spring from the earth—there is no basement—and wrap the ceiling in a jungle-like canopy. Ground cover grows over the base of the plants, accented by *Dracaena* and *philodendron*.

"We moved many of the large plants from [Akard's] old place—very carefully," says landscaper Ron McManigal, owner of Natural Settings & Design. "It took about 24 hours." McManigal maintains the huge plants, which rise about 18 feet, then spread out along the tapered glass ceiling, supported by poles and wires. He also tends the ever-changing plants and flowers throughout the hacienda, plus an additional gardener/handyman comes every week.

Red terra cotta tiles cover the floor, with built-in drains for watering and overflow. "I've always wanted to plug up the drains, fill the area with water, and decorate with floating candles," says Akard.

Across the sunken atrium lies the open, galley-style kitchen, its rear wall filled with cabinets, countertops, and integrated appliances. A half circle cutout above the stovetop peeks into the adjacent, green-painted hallway to reveal an elaborate *Madonna and Child* relief.

In the nearby dining room, the recycled oak table is topped by gray-green marble and surrounded by old ladder-back chairs. Akard purchased the French chandelier that is the centerpiece of the room from auctioneer Leslie Hindman. He used soft, green pine for the floors, despite warnings that soft pine would shrink. "But that's exactly what I wanted," he says. "See the lines in between the planks? I like that."

The dining room's other eclectic delights include a country cabinet, painted Chinese red, Dodie Thayer's green cabbage ware, and floral mother-of-pearl doors from India that shutter a built-in glassware cabinet.

Art adds to the ambiance throughout the hacienda. More than 100 artists are represented in Akard's home, including Ray Mejer's metal botanical sculptures, Alvin Dickstein's contemporary American paintings, Mexican artist Lucia Maya's hand-painted etchings, and local artist James Disrud's oil of a young man. The white-walled living room also showcases paintings and sculptures, while its ceiling beams and carved stone fireplace reinforce the hacienda ambiance.



Upstairs, Akard's bedroom captures the essence of tropical getaway. French faux bamboo furniture is paired with a midnight blue, hand-woven silk wall covering from the Jim Thompson design collection. A small secretary and chair stand before a bougainvillea-filled balcony overlooking the atrium.

A small walk-through kitchenette and two rooftop terraces are nearby. The owner's bath is a riot of hand painted terra cotta tiles in greens, rust, blues and yellows. A mythological Bacchus sculpture spouts water into the tub, while a skylight encourages the blooming jasmine. The terrace anteroom doubles as a greenhouse, and outside, Fred's prized cherry tomatoes flourish throughout the winter.

The charming *casita* ("little house") off the terrace provides guests with a small bedroom, bath, kitchenette, and balcony overlooking the ground-level garden. It may even be home, eventually, to live-in help. "It's perfect for a little caretaker couple, who can look after me," says Fred, planning ahead as usual. **MH**

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