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5 wacky, wonderful Chicago homes: 'I just look at it as art'

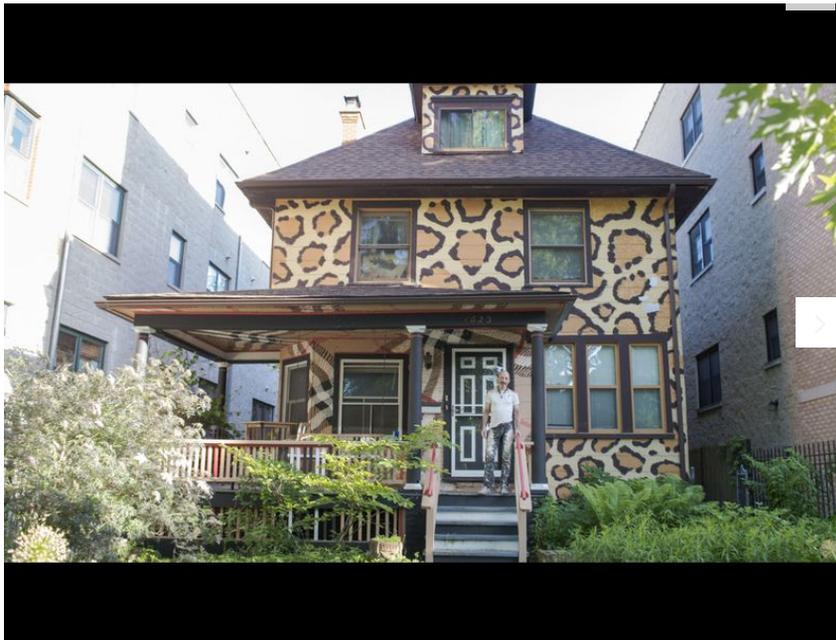
By HANNAH STEINKOPF-FRANK
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Eccentric Chicago Homes

Michael O'Reilly stands outside his Rogers Park house, which he painted with animal spots in 2002. (Hannah Steinkopf-Frank / Chicago Tribune)

1 / 20

Over time, everyone makes their house a home — hanging art, framing family photos, filling in the nooks and crannies with keepsakes and memories. Some homeowners go even further, turning their spaces into works of art, inside and out. We scoured the city and found five of the most elaborately decorated dwellings in Chicago.

The animal print abode: 1625 W. Estes Ave.

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Michael O'Reilly's leopard-inspired home in Rogers Park has been a neighborhood fixture for over 15 years. The handyman transformed the space himself over the course of a month in 2002, using special sponges to give it a "furry" look.

"There were people who moved in here specifically because of this house," O'Reilly said. "One gal actually had a leopard-spotted key made for her apartment when she lived in this building." One neighbor wrote a letter expressing concern for how the spots would affect home values, but the response has largely been positive, O'Reilly said.

A few years ago, he gave the front porch a painted Burberry-plaid motif, including the swing, railings and outdoor furniture. He joked that he can now spot a Burberry knockoff from 20 feet away.

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At 57, O'Reilly is selling the home. He said he's willing to paint over the pattern if that's what the new owner wants, but notes that it fittingly reflects the diversity and uniqueness of Rogers Park.

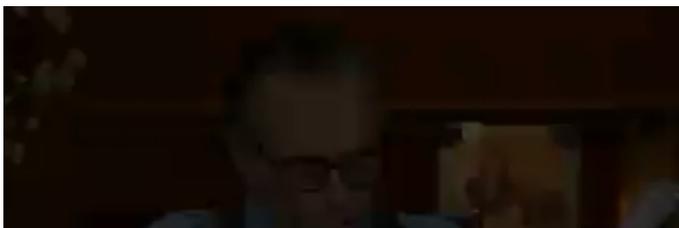
The living art gallery: 2630 W. Division St.

Although her refurbished first-floor apartment is guarded by bright red doors covered in mix-match doorknobs, Milady Velazquez doesn't describe herself as an artist. The building, in the center of Humboldt Park's Paseo Boricua, has been in Velazquez's family for decades. She moved in five years ago and began transforming the space from her father's home furnishing business into a home.

Many of the apartment's walls are painted black to showcase creations by her and artists around the world, including some sculptures by local artist [Reynaldo GuAracibo Rodriguez](#). Most of her decorations have an odd or creepy humor to them, like the display of unique toilet paper holders.

"I don't know why I'm attracted to that stuff. Maybe it's because I was goth in the '80s," she said. "So I'm attracted to the dark stuff. I just look at it as art."

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In the home, seemingly random objects are often turned into functional art, from a suitcase that serves as a bathroom medicine cabinet to shower curtains covered in strips of denim.

Velazquez's Puerto Rican heritage also shines through in a collection of photos she gathered on the island and one of her recent art pieces, "Puerto Rico Se Levanta" (Puerto Rico Will Rise). Blue mannequin heads cover an orange background, representing President Donald Trump, restrained with chains. She said it's a response to Hurricane Maria and the delay in disaster relief.

Velazquez is considering expanding her art outside the home. "It might inspire me to make because I have sketches and stuff I want to do. I just don't have the space to do it," she said.

The metal playground: 3102 N. Monticello Ave.

Hector Alvarenga originally started transforming his Logan Square home to provide outdoor space for his kids because they didn't live near a playground. The result: a yard full of garage sale artifacts and otherwise abandoned materials.

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"I made my own park inside my yard," Alvarenga said. "That was the first thing I did. I'll never forget my six kids playing out there. It was really nice."

Almost 20 years later, Alvarenga, who is originally from El Salvador, continues to grow his project, building elevated metal flower baskets, expanding decorations to the curbside grass and even adding a balcony. He designs and constructs many of the yard elements, occasionally getting help from friends.

His favorite object is a tall green cross, reminiscent of the religious symbols he saw growing up in El Salvador. Spiritual statues — from Buddhist figures to the Virgin Mary — are scattered throughout the property, along with a large American flag, kids' toys and two ice cream cones framing the front porch. The side of the house and backyard fence are painted with flags and a scene from a Salvadoran town.

Alvarenga spends hours each day maintaining his garden in the spring and summer, when flowers and lush foliage intermingle with the industrial, primary-colored metal structures. He said he's received some complaints from neighbors — mostly because cars stop to look at the house and slow traffic — but he likes having a space others can enjoy.

The not-so-secret garden: 5203 N. Lakewood Ave.

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Helen Ablan Vocaes, 76, has maintained her Lakewood Balmoral garden since she bought the building in 1977. The retired nurse wakes up at 5 a.m. to begin watering, often spending all day taking care of the plants.

“I don't give plants to people I don't like,” Vocaes joked about the amount of work she puts in.

Her plants come from all over the city — including the Chicago Botanic Garden, Green City Market and gardener friends — as well as neighboring states. Some of her favorites include blue forget-me-nots, hydrangeas, hostas and anything yellow, her favorite color.

“I like that it's relaxing, and it's creative for me,” said Vocaes, who has won neighborhood and citywide awards for her garden. The majority of the Greek, Roman and other statues that dot the yard came from local shops and estate sales, although some items are alley finds, including a bicycle tire and tub that integrate among the plants.

Vocaes said people take photos of her garden all the time, particularly in late June when it's in full bloom — one tenant even used to regularly pass by the house, waiting for an apartment to open up.

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The sidewalk green space: 4650 N. Hamilton Ave.

John Gergen's garden, right off the CTA Brown Line in Ravenswood, is a literal urban jungle. The 84-year-old learned how to garden growing up in Romania before coming to the U.S. in the '60s.

“You must have a heart to do it, gardening,” he said. “Whatever I put in, it grows. That's why I got so much stuff.”

His lush green space involves planning and constant upkeep. Due to an extensive tree root system, some planting is done in pots. Roses, hydrangeas and other flowers and greenery line the corner block. The yard is decorated with fake birds, lights and colorful wind spinners — items his wife refers to as “junk.” He even put to use chargers, keys and other objects passers-by have dropped.

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According to Gergen, the decor is most enjoyed by schoolchildren who walk by. A few years ago, he even attracted a family of wild ducks. And although he has slowed down due to a heart attack earlier this year, Gergen said he still spends hours outside each day, often losing track of time.

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“Nobody is twisting my arm: I'm retired,” he said. “Gardening is part of my exercise, and it looks good. It's green. If it would be up to me, the whole world would be green.”

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