

Metropolitan Home

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LESSONS LEARNED

Making the move from renter to homeowner is about more than just buying property. It's an opportunity to put your stamp on something real.

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A vibrant staircase is the heart of a Chicago townhouse designed by Summer Thornton. Stairs, Lamon Grove by Benjamin Moore; sisal runner, Stark; woven wallcovering, Schumacher; sconce, Urban Archaeology; midcentury bench, Galleria d'Epoca; alpaca throw, Michele Varian.

OPPOSITE: Wallpaper, Christian Lacroix for Designers Guild; trim, Snow White by Benjamin Moore; 1950s French faux-bois table; mirror, Restoration Hardware; bench, Anthropologie; rug, Madeline Weinrib. See Resources.



After more than a decade of renting, a young Chicago couple made the real-estate leap and bought something truly special: a two-story townhouse in Lincoln Park, a neighborhood of tree-lined streets and turn-of-the-century architecture that, in many ways, is a small town nestled right in the middle of a metropolis. They had been living in a house nearby for several years but craved a more permanent home, something that looked and felt more like them.

At the same time, they knew they would have a hard time expressing themselves in a top-to-bottom renovation without professional help. But finding the right decorator wasn't so easy. After several meetings and false starts, the wife was out walking when a nearby oral surgeon's office—yes, a surgeon's office—caught her eye. The reception area was the work of Summer Thornton.

The couple, both in their 30s and West Coast natives, sensed that Thornton—a designer known more for her layering of exuberant colors, patterns, and prints than for moderation—would be able to capture their style and what they envisioned: grown-up but unexpected.

That doesn't mean the pairing came easily. "Summer and I don't have the same taste at all," the wife says matter-of-factly. "But I saw something in her design that I really appreciated, and I thought I needed to lean that way." Still, she had no intention of abandoning her sense of self in the process: "Left to my own devices, I would have made it crazy," she says. "Summer helped me make it sophisticated but still retained my own identity."

The house's existing dark floors and heavy architectural details felt too somber for the joyful look the couple had in mind, and brick buildings on either side limited the natural light, so Thornton's first move was to create a completely whitewashed interior—even the floors were bleached a chalky off-white. Then she worked with the couple to furnish the rooms with modern pieces that offset the traditional architecture.


"The overall aesthetic is very minimal compared with some of my other projects, but it was an exciting challenge," Thornton says. On top of the all-white shell, she layered pieces in shades of ocher, chartreuse, tawny leather, and





In the dining room, an antique Oushak rug from ABC Carpet & Home was the inspiration for colors used throughout the house. Walls, Snow White by Benjamin Moore; vintage brass Mauri Aimarì pendants; Saarinen Tulip oval dining table and Warren Platner armchairs in a wool bouclé, Design Within Reach; artwork, Barry Nelson. See Resources.





A coffee table of stacked cylinders from Emporium Home anchors the living room. Reverse painting on windows, Brett Whitacre; sofa, Antonio Citterio and Paolo Nava for B&B Italia upholstered in a Loro Piana wool-cashmere; cane armchair with leather detailing in a Theo linen, McGuire; Arper chair in a Kvadrat canvas; rug, Kravet. See Resources.

blush, a palette inspired by the dining room's antique wool rug. To augment the restrained palette, she used midcentury and modern Italian furniture with striking silhouettes, all clad in a mix of textures and metallics. Playful touches—like a curving staircase opposite the dining table that Thornton painted a canary yellow—keep the whole ensemble from feeling too serious. "For me, it's about getting inside the clients' heads," she says. "My job is to tell their story, to create the best possible version of whatever they're imagining."

Upstairs, the master bedroom is a subdued retreat for a couple who travel often. "It's definitely my favorite room in the house, which is funny because that's where we used the most restraint," Thornton says. "It's soothing, but with the fireplace going, it has this 1970s sex appeal."

Selecting the light fixtures was a highlight of the design process for the homeowners—the ultimate personalization, and a design indulgence not usually part of the rental experience. "That was always the dream," the wife says. "Lamps are one thing, but light fixtures? They've always been the unattainable." A trio of vintage pendants in

the dining room supply a metallic flash, while a cloud-like fabric fixture in the living room has a more feminine, ethereal air.

After vetoing curtains, the homeowners commissioned a geometric reverse glass painting by an artist friend for the living room's street-facing windowpanes. It provides a bit of privacy from the sidewalk without sacrificing any of the sunny western exposure. "People are too busy looking at the design to look inside," the wife jokes.

While most people would consider all of these rooms done, this couple isn't quite finished tinkering with the decor. Whether with floral arrangements, accessories, or art, they've been experimenting with dressing the rooms up and down—sometimes whimsical, other times tropical or edgy. The process of decorating has become just as gratifying as the end result.

Recently, the wife has been toying with the idea of spray-painting dramatic black shapes on top of the delicate foyer wallpaper. Original? Definitely. Sane? Ballys, for sure. But the new homeowner has found a confidence in her self-expression: "I just want people to be able to come in and know us a little better." □



In the family room, tropical details like the pillows in a China Seas cotton reflect the husband's Hawaiian heritage. Curtains, Classic Cloth; Roman shade, Conrad; sofa, Montauk Sofa in a Perennials fabric; custom coffee table in pickled maple and steel, Aaron Bladon; jute rug, Restoration Hardware; concrete stools, Mecox. **RIGHT:** Mirror, Wisteria; table lamp, Circa Lighting; walnut-and-maple cabinet, Organic Modernism; leather swivel chairs, Design Within Reach; side table, Classic Remix. See Resources.





A custom smoky glass mirror by Aaron Bladon, set in a Lucite frame with brass detailing, reflects the glow of the fireplace. Curtains in a Great Plains wool from Holly Hunt; vintage table lamps; copper-and-glass bedside tables, Blu Dot; bed, CBz; linen bedding, Restoration Hardware; merino throw, ABC Carpet & Home; rug, Stark. See Resources.

