

Tales of Hoffman



A popular designer overhauls and overgrown house by Marla J. Kinney

Let others have their English colonials. Susan Hoffman – designer, shop owner and miracle worker – prefers the white elephants. Early in her 13-year marriage, she and her husband, G.L., took a tract house in Minnetonka and gave it a California ranch-style twist. Then they transformed a Victorian farmhouse in Deephaven into a crisp, balconied farmhouse straight from Cape Cod. Now they have taken a house wracked from four slipshod, ill-conceived remodelings--during which it grew from an original 1,500 square feet to an unwieldy 9,000 square feet--and turned it into a showplace for her infectiously warm, approachable style.

The house had such problems that it stood on the market for nearly two years waiting for a buyer. Despite its gorgeous nine-acre site straddling Orono and Wayzata, no one could see past the mangled roof lines, the dated doorways shaped like keyholes, the disparate trim styles, the rotting decks.

Not that anyone really needed a house with 20 rooms, either--especially anyone as down-to-earth as Hoffman but she couldn't ignore the challenge. "It's the desire to turn something crummy into something nice," she explains. "I hate to see something poorly done and I hate to see something go to waste."

Apparently, that goes for her time as well.

Three years ago, Hoffman and G.L. (he's never been known as anything else) bought the property and set about making sense of the house. Outside, Hoffman, 40, added gables where there were rounded, uneven dormers and eliminated the four different, conflicting roof lines, not to mention replaced windows, added a portico and rebuilt the pool and fountain.

Things inside were just as discordant.

Some doors had six panels, others had none; some trim was ranch-style, other traditional; on the floor, linoleum butted incongruously against expensive walnut parquet. In the master bedroom, a loft hung inexplicably above the divided master bathroom. That bathroom represented the most pointed inconsistency in the house: "Her" side had Spanish tile and Austrian valences over a corner tub; "his" side had an orange sink, olive tub and stainless- steel tile: In every instance, Hoffman's goal was to unify, eliminating the loft, overhauling the bathroom, even tearing out a garage-turned-eating-area and replacing it with a two-story family room (designed by Minneapolis architect Mark Kawell). By the time she finished the project 1½ years later, the only things that remained untouched in the entire house were the tile floors in the billiard room and cabana.

In tackling the remodeling, Hoffman was adding herself to her own client list, one that includes some of the best Parade of Homes entries on record, not to mention scores of design projects in Minneapolis's western suburbs. When she wasn't directing construction workers, tending to her many design clients or seeing to the car-pooling needs of gymnast Marin, 10, and sports buff Gavin, 12, Hoffman also furnished the house; she had sold most of the contents of their previous one to the buyer. Even if she had kept that furniture, it would have filled only a third of the space in her new house.



DESIGNS!

SUSAN HOFFMAN INTERIOR DESIGNS

Article Reprinted With Permission

With the furnishings, Hoffman was fortunate to be not only a designer but an entrepreneur: She also owns two retail shops in Wayzata--P.O.S.H. (it stands for "property of Susan Hoffman") for home furnishings and accessories, and P.O.S.H. Pantry, which sells kitchen needs and gourmet foods. (In the same spirit, her husband is president and chief operating officer of Insignia Systems in Plymouth, which makes retail signage machines.)



It's evident from both stores that accessories are Hoffman's passion. She has a keen sense of their importance in the scheme of a house, and any she finds with an animal theme have an excellent chance of bypassing her shops and ending up directly at her house. In her solarium alone there is a toucan, an elephant table, a frog holding an umbrella and a snake winding among oversized clay fruit in an oversized clay bowl. If the pieces have a touch of whimsy, like the carousel of cutout metal animals that makes up her eating-area chandelier, so much the better.

Hoffman's other trademark, also obvious in her house, is an ability to make even the loftiest spaces casual and inviting. "We try to make sure things are well designed but also homey," she says of her studio's design projects. One key is her use of natural materials-- leather, oxidized metal, clay, the stump of a cypress tree used as a coffee table. Hoffman's favorite example in her own house is the centerpiece on the familyroom coffee table, which consists of several antlers she and her children found on their walks.

The new house provided plenty of chances for the 18-year design veteran to exercise her talents, but now that the project is finished, Hoffman is thinking about the next house that needs her. Indeed, this remodeling makes it clear that no challenge is too great. As if to prove the point, she headed to a food show in New York right after the house was complete. She had to do her buying for P.O.S.H. Pantry in a wheelchair, however; she had broken her back while in-line skating one week before.