

Jewel BOX

A POSTMODERN FAIRY-TALE COTTAGE
IN UNIVERSITY CITY

By Stefene Russell
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When neighbors told Ken Stückenschneider his house had once been owned by a Frenchwoman who'd been born in a castle—and that she got up every morning, lit a fire, and sent smoke chuffing out the cottage chimney—he wasn't all that surprised. The house had just felt soulful and right.

In 2007, the designer, who now runs his own firm, Stückenschneider Decoration & Design, was living in a Brooklyn brownstone with his wife, food editor Rosanne Toroian. He headed architect Robert A.M. Stern's interior-design department; she was at *Good Housekeeping*. Both Missourians by birth (she grew up in St. Louis, he in Martinsburg), the couple wanted to move back with their daughter, India, then 1 year old, to be closer to their families.





They flew home over a weekend, soldiering through nearly 50 houses before finding this 1,600-square-foot 1920s bungalow. They liked it because it felt like a tiny version of Stückenschneider's family farmhouse. It also had light from all four sides, streaming in through the house's windows—and the warbled surface of the original glass panes.

"The house will tell you what to do if you listen to it," says Stückenschneider. Though when they took ownership of this one, it was speaking in tongues: "There were seven different wood floor colors!" So they started there. "I did all these floors myself—it took about a month," he says. "They were sanded, bleached, the grain opened up with a wire brush, lime-waxed,

and then three coats of wax put on top of that."

The overall concept was "English cottage meets Swedish style." The woodwork was repainted white, though the original house had darker, natural woodwork. "I specialize in a fresh, updated traditionalism, bringing the Old World to the new," he explains, noting that lots of dark wood can seem dated. As the paint went on the woodwork, it came off of every hook, hinge, and latch. And the ill-fitting front screen door, bought by previous owners from a big-box hardware store, was scrapped.

"This is an antique door," Stückenschneider says at the front threshold, working it on its hinges to demonstrate as Brooklyn, the family's affable golden retriever,

watches patiently from the front porch. "I designed the screen door in front of it, and then used a local manufacturer—well, no, not manufacturer," he corrects himself. "They're artisans. They're down on Arsenal. It costs money, but it's correct for the house." He slams it to demonstrate how neatly it clicks into its frame.

The brick fireplace was stripped of seven coats of paint. And though it sounds like the Frenchwoman built her fires from chunks of coal and tinder sticks, Stückenschneider does not. "I love fires, but I am so happy about gas fireplaces," he says. "In the city, it's the way to go." (Especially when you imagine ashes and soot flying around in these rooms, with their light floors, cream-colored rugs, and Gustavian

1. THE GUEST ROOM AND LETTER-WRITING NOOK. 2. THE MASTER BEDROOM, ITS WALLS COVERED IN COLEFAX AND FOWLER WALLPAPER. 3. THE HAND-PLASTERED, HAND-PAINTED CEILING. 4. BROOKLYN RESTS NEAR BUILT-INS HOLDING TOM HUCK PRINTS AND BUTTERFLIES THAT TOROIAN'S UNCLE COLLECTED IN AFRICA DURING WORLD WAR II. 5. THE MASTER DRESSING ROOM. 6. INDIA'S ROOM, WITH INTERIOR SHUTTERS AND SWEDISH FABRICS



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“The *house* will tell you what to do if you *listen* to it,” says Stückenschneider.

painting furniture.) The fireplace also echoes another of Stückenschneider's inspirations, legendary British design firm Colefax and Fowler. The firm's partners, John Fowler and American expat Nancy Lancaster (who once told a decorator to paint a wall “the color of elephant's breath”) originated modern English country style, with its mix of luxury, history, and comfort. “People used to ask, ‘What's her secret?’” Stückenschneider says of Lancaster. “It was fires, flowers, and candlelight. And I would add to that dogs, children, and a good cook.”

In fact, Stückenschneider says he thinks home interiors are moving in the same direction as the food movement—“organic and local”—and that is definitely how he works, using natural finishes and fabrics that wear well over time. He also likes materials and processes that require human hands. He uses custom, flat-colored paint, but never applies it with rollers—only brushes. In the dining room, with its dhurrie rug and white ceramic Capodimonte chandelier, you can see the faint tracery of pencil marks on the pale yellow walls, where the muralist marked out her design before painting white flowers. On the opposite wall, there's a framed fragment of hand-painted Chinese wallpaper; the seats of the chairs on either side of the pale turquoise sideboard are covered in hand-embroidered fabric. And on the ceiling are hand-plastered moldings by Tim Glastetter of Refined Finishes in Washington, surrounded by hand-painted birds and butterflies cut from a sheet of panoramic wallpaper.

In the living room, the wicker sofa (which traveled with the couple from Brooklyn) is dressed up with pillows made of hand-printed fabrics from England. Hanging above it is St. Louis printmaker Tom Huck's “Possum Promenade,” which alludes to both the William Hogarth prints at the foot of the staircase and a fixture of the landscape outside: a possum who used to like to take cover under their porch.

That sense of place, which Stückenschneider learned well with Robert A.M. Stern, is another crucial piece of how he approaches decorating. When projects take him to Barbados or New York or Canada or Texas, everything changes on the basis of the culture, local materials, weather, and neighborhood. For his own house, he used colors and designs that echoed what was just outside the windows. The guest room (where Stückenschneider likes to do his letter-writing) is pink, like the crab apple and dogwood that flower outside the window in spring. The walls of his office, painstakingly striped in blue by Glastetter, echo the strong lines of the Tudor house across the street. He calls the screened-in back porch, which he restored three years ago, “the best room in the house.” What was once a shapeless, grassy backyard is now a modern cottage garden, with flagstone paths, a cutting garden, and even a little corner for India's playhouse.

“We always joke with our 6-year-old daughter that this is like the cottage the princess Aurora, from the fairy tale *The Sleeping Beauty*, was banished to,” he says of the main house. He adds that one of his fellow docents at the Saint Louis Art Museum described the house as “the most perfect Hansel and Gretel cottage! I was pleased.”

It's a fairy-tale house that comes with a time-out chair upholstered in French velvet, Swedish interior shutters in the bedrooms, and Plexiglas shelves in the illuminated master-bedroom wardrobe, which throws light into the normally dark and inscrutable top shelves of the closet. Though Stückenschneider thinks through every drapery panel, paint chip, and cushion, he isn't a fan of what he calls “roped-off rooms.” He loves the woven rug in the living room not just for its color and texture, but because it gracefully accepts wear and tear from people—and dogs.

“When people come here,” he says, “They have this reaction—because it's a real, alive house.” ■

To see a gallery of photos from Stückenschneider's University City garden, go to stlmag.com/athome.