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Finding Common Ground

A duo of interior designers helped newly married Houston homeowners find an aesthetic they could both live with and love forever

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Opening pages, left to right: The main staircase of a Houston home is illuminated by a window. Her office blends a Schumacher toile on the walls with a sofa upholstered in a check that incorporates a Samuel & Sons fringe; the French side chair is from Skelton Culver Steffen. This page: A banquette in the bar sitting area is accented with a red Samuel & Sons trim. The bench, reupholstered with a Scalamandré pattern, is from the 1940s. Opposite: The powder room features unlacquered brass fixtures set on a marble console.





The dining room chairs are covered in leather. An 18th-century Irish mirror hangs over a table (far right) imported from France. A 17th-century Flemish painting is centered over an antique English sideboard.



Opposite: A floral-patterned dinner service is on display in a *buffet de corps* in the breakfast room. The chandelier, from W. Gardner, Ltd., hangs over a dining table from Dessin Fournir. The dining chairs and fabric are Rose Tarlow. The curtains are Fortuny. This page: The standing lamp is from Rose Tarlow. The room's sitting area is defined by a French 18th-century cartoon.



A virtual galaxy of antique copper pots and pudding molds hangs from a pot rack in the kitchen. Antique iron stoneware fills the glass-fronted cabinets.

WHEN IT COMES TO finding all the right things for their clients, interior designers Randall Powers and Chris Alexander admit to never stopping their search, even when a project is supposedly finished. “We really shop the world,” says the Houston-based Powers, “and even though we’ve long been ‘finished’ with this project, there are still items on the couple’s wish list that Chris and I are looking for. Chris and I are never limited to just one resource for finding what we know is right for an interior.”

But in assessing their work on a spacious, open-plan Mediterranean-style house in Houston’s “West U” neighborhood, Powers and Alexander concur that they “have had a lot of fun finding the furnishings and antiques, and we’ve shared a very open creative process with the clients. They understood and they appreciate the fact that while antiques tell a story, they also need to have a personal importance in a home.”

Of the homeowners, Laura Moore and Don Sanders, Powers and Alexander recall that it took the couple less than 24 hours to decide on purchasing the house. But the real challenge came when the newly married couple realized they had completely different tastes. It was up to Powers and Alexander to find the common ground.

“She’s an elegant professor who loves antiques, subdued tones, and Renoir,” observes Powers, “and he’s a voracious contemporary art collector who loves bold primary colors.” Fortunately, Powers and Alexander share a creative sympathy for putting together the seemingly incongruous. “Chris and I both love color and patterns and how totally different things can interject off each other,” says Powers. “We’re always looking for the rarest and the most unique things we can come up with. We love the hidden details.”

However, before luxuriating in the thoughtful touches, the design duo had to broadly test the palette, of sorts, between Moore and Sanders. The process involved a daily presentation of a variety of fabrics, furniture styles and shapes—essentially “auditioning” their choices as a way to find the couple’s points of agreement. “It was an uphill battle for them,” says Moore, “since I’m very traditional and Don’s the complete opposite.” On the practical points of enjoying their home and what mattered most, the newlyweds were in total agreement: entertaining family (including nine grandchildren) on Sunday afternoons and caring for their animals (a menagerie that at one point

numbered seven cats and three dogs).

Sanders’s contemporary art collection was another significant consideration, a rotating archival estate of some 2,300 contemporary paintings and 10,000 photographs. Over the next eight years, Powers and Alexander’s mission became the assembling of a fine collection of 18th-century French furniture—chairs, sconces, and dramatic stand-out pieces—that could coexist with the bold blue-chip canvases of painters such as David Hockney, Tom Wesselmann, and Stanley Whitney. Effectively integrating these two design worlds required finding a cohesive visual throughline. “Neither one of them had said a word about color,” recalls Powers, “but one day I started playing with a vibrant red Fortuny for the curtains, when both of them said, ‘We love it. This is beautiful.’”

Powers embraced that consensus, subtly introducing reds into draperies, trims, and furniture throughout the house. He and Alexander started to build a palette around the color, but also venturing into chocolates, creams, taupes, and pale grays. All along, though, “We didn’t want anything to overtake the art collection,” Powers says.

The visceral result of the designers’ ambition is a prevalent somewhat ornate charm—resonant, perhaps, of a *petit château*—infused with a clean modernity. The soft and subdued country classicism, for instance, of a Swedish mantel clock with a sculptural sphinx, seraphim, and urns, is offset with clean masculine lines and contemporary flashes, such as a table upholstered with a zebra print. Multiple patterns of virtually every kind are paired and layered with panache; in the living room, a red gingham couch is placed in conversation with a wall of black toile and a minimalist rug. Moving from room to room, one is struck by the consistently welcoming and whimsical use of fabric, as in the master bedroom, which is wrapped in exactly 1,000 yards of chintz. “We are all about customizing fabrics and using them in unconventional ways,” says Alexander, “We’ll take fabrics apart and put them back together. We’ll cut up a whole panel of a de Gournay wallpaper scene and put it inside of a lampshade.”

Over the duration of the eight-year project—which is still evolving to this day—the clients developed a firm trust in Powers and Alexander. Upon completion, Powers muses, “This was not about a commercial process for us. Rather, it was about addressing a lifestyle. Chris and I understand the details of design, even to the point of deciding which brand of rosé to place in the fridge.” ■



This page: Swags of Rose Tarlow's Bloomsbury draperies envelop the bed and walls. English 18th-century mirrors from W. Gardner, Ltd. work as both artwork and visual extensions of the room. Opposite: In the master bath, an antique tête-à-tête from W. Gardner, Ltd., beckons.