

DECEMBER 2017 // Fine Dining for Brunch & A Dinner with Strangers

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THE *Interesting* People 15 ISSUE

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Jacquie Gilmore

Life in a hilltop chateau

Interior designer creates her custom-built dream home.

STORY BY STACEY FREED | PHOTOS BY MATT WITTMAYER

“Every space in a home should have a voice; it reflects who you are and your perspective in the world,” says Sonya Allen, whose custom-built home is a mix of styles that work together to create something that’s functional and luxurious.

Allen, owner of Sonya Allen Interiors, grew up in Washington, D.C., and Virginia, and says she was inspired by the classical architecture there. She came to Rochester in the ’80s to work for Xerox and retired 15 years ago as its vice president of human resources.

But all her life she loved design. “As my college girlfriend would say, I was the only college student she knew who had oil paintings on the wall,” says Allen, who began designing spaces for friends and family as a hobby. “I realized I loved it and I was good at it.”

In 2002, she and her husband were ready to build their dream house. She started working with architect Jack Sigrist on the design, and she and her husband began searching for land and a builder. By 2004, they had found Marie and Charlie Kenton at Ketmar Development and the perfect piece of property, sitting atop a hill in Pittsford.

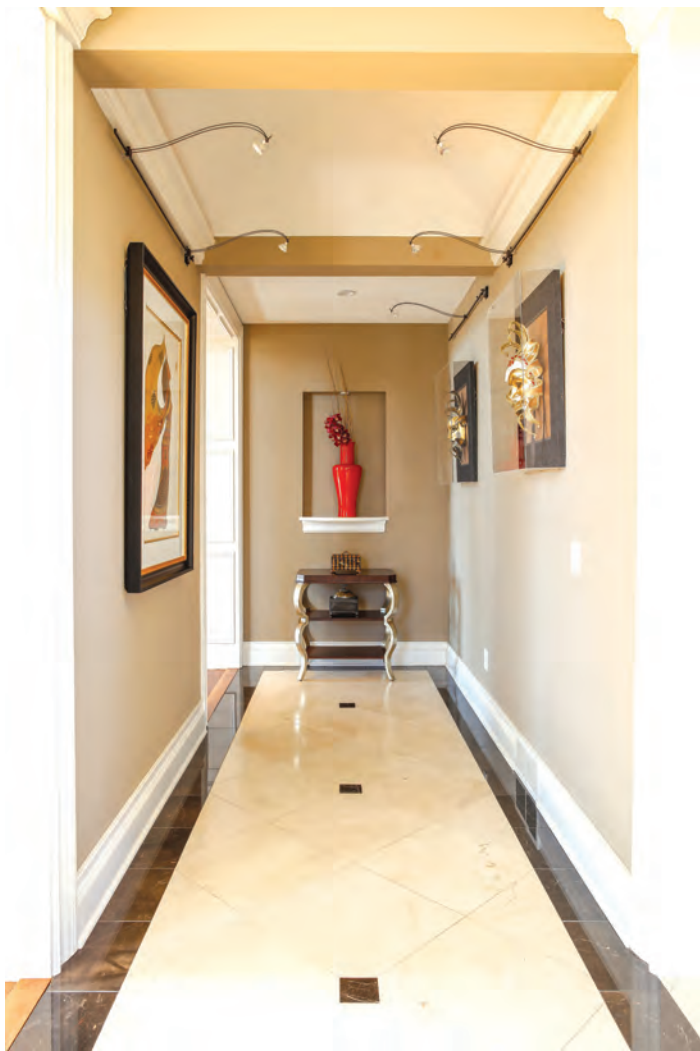
It took three and a half years to complete the house—a classic French chateau with limestone, corner quoins, eyebrow windows, garden views and incredible interior finishes. While it was being built, they lived in a house in Penfield.

Then, just a few years after the house was finished, her husband’s job change sent the couple and son back to Washington.

They kept ownership of the Pittsford house after moving, and Allen used the time in Washington to study



Triple crown moulding with metallic gold accent paint adds interest to the ceiling, which is painted in a serene blue.



Viewed from above, double French doors in the living room flood natural light through the space. Erte's "Roses de Nuit" hangs prominently above the fireplace.



(Clockwise, from top left) A front hallway uses gallery lighting on treasured art pieces. In the formal living room, an 18th-century French chandelier and custom English wall paneling add a touch of years gone by. In the open family and morning rooms, dual alabaster chandeliers and lighted display cubbies backed with grasscloth create vertical interest. The wall painting by Issa Shojaei offers a "nod" to the eclectic room design with a geometric wallpapered ceiling.

interior design at George Washington University. The family returned here in 2013, back to the dream house they had built.

Armed with what she learned in her classes, Allen began doing commercial and residential projects that weren't just for friends. And that meant some serious projects. "I'm getting older and the business plans are getting bigger," she says with a laugh.

Allen's own 9,000-square-foot home is the canvas where she can design on a grand scale.

"I love big gestures," she says. She had known even before the house was built what she wanted to see from every spot inside of it.

The level of detail and number of selections would be overwhelming to most of us. For example, choosing a large, gilt-framed mirror before the house was even under construction because she wanted the builder to center the mirror on a larger mirror situated on a dining room wall. And consider: "There are probably 40 different wall finishes and colors in the house," Allen says.

But, she says, anyone doing a custom home would have to plan ahead in this way to get the home they truly want. Her advice, from experience: "Bring in a designer from the beginning—don't do it as an afterthought." The designer needs to work with the architect and builder.

In the front entry foyer, she wanted a curved, floating staircase, a ceiling dome and views straight through to large windows overlooking a garden and hills beyond. She wanted an art gallery in a main hallway, and open rooms off the foyer. "I wanted the eye to travel, settle and travel some more," she explains.



Owner Sonya Allen insisted on a floating staircase in the entry foyer with a large-scale wallcovering extending to the second floor.



The main kitchen uses three species of wood. Cabinet details on the sides of the sink and cooktop are also pullouts for storing items. (Below) A mirror and scones Sonya purchased years before the house was designed are showcased in the guest powder room.



And the eye does travel, taking in the views reflected in mirrors and those down the perfectly lit art gallery hallway with its vaulted ceiling and walls hung with Venetian Carnival masks set in shadowboxes; then up to the swirl of a Fortuny hand-painted silk lamp; to sumptuous wallcoverings of torn paper or grass cloth and silk ceiling-to-floor drapes; and on into a birch- and beech-paneled library.

That's how it is with a well put together space: It's cohesive, yet when you look closely, you tease out the details that make it work. A curve in a coffee table leg, then an echo of that curve in an arched window, an oval chair back, a slivered moon of a bowl displayed in the dining room.

Next you notice the Erté painting, with its Art Deco vibe, but there's also a Beidermeier console, an 18th-century bronze chandelier, a set of Japanese dolls decorated with old coins. And somehow, it all works together because a designer with a practiced eye has collected and curated pieces she loves.

Allen says that the family uses every space, and it's important that every room feel comfortable; no part of the home is off limits for relaxing. She's just as likely to sit in the great room with her breakfast as she is to sit at the kitchen island.

"We love to entertain," she says "and we wanted a beautiful place, but it's all about function."

Function, and that carefully chosen hilltop spot.

"We have the best view in the world," Allen says. On a clear day, they can see all the way to Bristol. All part of that invitation for the eye to travel ... and travel some more. **R**

Stacey Freed is a writer living in Pittsford.

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