



The blues and greens in the fabrics and on the walls reflect the colors found in nature. The antique heart pine floors add a warmth to the room. Susan's collection of art and antique pieces give a zip of additional color.

# diary of a *designer*

The story of an interior designer's most personal job: her own home

By Susan Dowling, ASID

Photography by Holly Allain Photography

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG GIRL, my mother allowed me to be intimately involved in the design and decoration of my bedroom. From this experience, I developed a love for interior design. Designing the interior of a home requires both style and skill. Design is a discipline, an art, a skill set that involves manipulation of space as well as solving specific design problems. The theories of design can be learned from a classroom or from actual experience. Style, on the other hand, is more personal. It deals with taste, attitude, and point of view. Style is what makes a room “yours.”

As I began working with architect Keith Summerour on the plans for my house, I started to visualize how I wanted the rooms to feel. Designing and building a new home requires a lot of decisions. Some of the items I had to select were furniture, lighting, carpeting, accessories, cabinets, appliances, and the basic finishes, like wood floors and tile. I started with the hard surfaces—the floors, countertops, and tile. The hard surfaces were one of the easiest decisions for me. I knew that I wanted the house to look as if it had been in Fernandina for a while, so I selected antique heart pine floors for

the main floor. I then selected tile designs for the bathrooms that were similar to those used back in the late 1800's to mid 1900's. My design evolved from there.

The next step was cabinet style, appliances, and countertops. I began scouring magazines for "kitchen looks" that I liked. The magazines provided a starting point from which to develop my look and style. Some of the questions I asked myself during this process were: What color cabinets do I want? What style cabinet do I like? What brand of appliances should I use? Do I want gas or electric appliances? Do I want stone or man-made material for the countertops?

Now I was ready to shop for furniture and fabrics. This is often the most challenging aspect of designing your own home. My challenge was to blend what I call "his, mine, the grandparents', and our stuff" and create a design that looks as if everything was hand-selected, not "inherited." As an interior designer, I have access to thousands of furniture and fabric manufacturers, with just as many pattern options. For my own house, I wanted to make sure that I loved everything I selected. You ask yourself: do I really love this fabric or can I find something better? A great deal of time is spent finalizing your selections before placing an order!

Once the fabrics and furniture were selected, I began working on my paint colors. I had planned to paint my dining room chocolate brown. When I started sampling colors on the walls, I realized that chocolate brown did not work in my house. Instead, my dining room is painted a fresh sea blue color called Ebbside. When I envisioned my house in the early stages, I would have never thought I would use a sea-blue paint there!

Once everything was selected, it was time to pull the rooms together. First, I placed the furniture and rugs. Then I began hanging my artwork and accessories. Fortunately, my husband and I like to collect artwork when we travel, so I had a great base of artwork to pull from. I have several collections of accessories such as birdhouses, rabbits, porcelains, and china that I used in appropriate spots in the house.

It is not so difficult to figure out what we like, but making it all come together is often the most challenging part. Good interior design requires the ability to blend skill and style to make rooms which are comfortable, pleasing to the eye, and which make us feel good just being in them.

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Top: This room has been dubbed "the men's room," where the men of the house like to gather to watch TV. The warm red color of the oriental rug, along with the stained trim and the grass cloth wallpaper, give the room a masculine feel.

Above: The ice blue color on the walls transforms this room into a peaceful haven. The neutral fabrics on the bed are accented by the ice blue pillows and the pattern in the window treatments and bed skirt. Photographs of the Dowlings' baby personalize the room.