

WESTCHESTER MAGAZINE'S

# HOME

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## Centerpieces

Take Center Stage

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North Salem  
Garden

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An Architectural  
Treasure in  
Irvington

Mixing Toys with Style  
Great Kids'  
Rooms

FALL 2005

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Cool, Calm, and  
**Contemporary**

A  
New York  
designer  
gives a  
ho-hum  
Scarsdale  
house  
what  
usually  
comes  
with good  
breeding—

good  
bones  
and a  
dramatic  
sense of  
style

By Ruth J. Katz

Photographs by Billy Cunningham

(Opposite): To open up the space in the foyer, designer Irwin Weiner removed a sheetrock wall that was once adjacent to the staircase, and defined the family-room space by adding a frosted-glass frame around the entrance to it.



(Opposite): To give the fireplace in the family room definition, a stone picture frame with a honed black-granite border was added to it.

**“I wanted it to be distinctive and interesting, not like everyone else’s house.”**

**T**his house looks like it should be in the Hamptons!” exclaimed 16-year-old Josh Karotkin when he first viewed his family’s new modernist house with the unusual mansard roof in Scarsdale. That was nine years ago, when his parents, Nancy and Stephen Karotkin, had outgrown their traditional raised ranch and relocated to this 5,000-plus-square-foot house, scarcely a mile away from their old Scarsdale residence. But that one-mile shift resulted in nearly 2,000 additional square feet, from which they netted more capacious rooms and one additional bedroom.

Josh wasn’t far off in his first impression. Although the two-story, cedar-shingled, gray-painted home, built in 1983, had an uncharacteristically traditional interior, with the living room on the left and the dining room on the right, it was obviously more modern than the center-hall Colonial Nancy Karotkin had envisioned owning. “That’s what I had grown up in, and what I always thought I’d live in,” she says.

“I’m not basically a ‘contemporary’ person at heart,” Nancy Karotkin says, “and I definitely knew that this was a contemporary house. The goal was to warm it up, while maintaining what was appropriate for its exterior lines.” So far as the design of the interior was concerned, Karotkin was quite specific: “I wanted it to be distinctive and interesting, not like everyone else’s house, with flowery prints everywhere.”

The Karotkins started collaborating with a designer shortly after they moved in and got their kitchen and the childrens’ rooms done (Josh, now 25, no longer lives at home, though Sam, 22, and Liza, 17, still do), when their decorator suddenly died two years later. With the process ground to a standstill, Karotkin was not only back to hunting for someone whose sensibilities matched hers, but someone who was also willing to step in mid-stream and seamlessly pick up the figurative paintbrush and palette. She resourcefully and circuitously networked her way to a new designer, querying friends and acquaintances on designers whose work was regarded as “interesting.” That led her to the Manhattan-based Irwin Weiner. Weiner, a native of South Africa, works mostly in the city and the surrounding suburbs, so Karotkin arranged to inspect a home in Scarsdale that the firm had designed and, indeed, was struck by its unusual features.

“There was a chair rail dividing the wall, but instead of the walls being dark on the bottom and light on top, it was the opposite. There were countless interesting features in the house that I liked.” For one, the master bath was done very attractively. And the living room had faux-painted panels that resembled wood, and a window trimming that extended from the floor to the top of the window, “small architectural changes that enhanced the whole room and that Nancy took a shine to,” says Weiner.

From the outset, the three were a team, with Stephen Karotkin very much a part of



(This page and opposite top): Pieces from different time periods and styles were used in the formal living room; (Opposite bottom): The Holly Hunt mahogany dining-room table comfortably seats 12 guests.



the equation. "Irwin always wanted me to see things, to go to the showrooms, to share in the selections and the process," Stephen explains. Weiner has been working with the family now for nearly six years and they all agree that the house is still a work in progress. The decorating goal was to mirror the couple's lifestyle: in a word, casual. Stephen is a partner in the bankruptcy department at the law firm Weil, Gotshal & Manges, and Nancy is a stay-at-home mom (a job Stephen describes with admiration as harder than his), and their schedules are hectic. So, they wanted their home to be welcoming. "I wanted the house to be comfortable, approachable, not formal," says Nancy. "We had already moved in the direction I wanted, using tones of rust and gold, so we stayed with them with Irwin."

**T**here were, however, a few aspects of the house that had bothered Nancy and that Weiner resolved. "I liked that you could see the backyard from the foyer," she observes, "but it was just too open. I wanted the family room to be a unit unto itself." Weiner, whose work is very architectural, likes to introduce subtle structural elements that result in considerable impact. "With this house, I was able to add more 'finish,' so to speak," he states, "and enhance the bones." That is precisely what he did in solving Nancy's dilemma, adding a frosted-glass framework around the entrance to the family room, defining it, and creating a visual focal point. Also in the foyer, there had been a sheetrock wall adjacent to the staircase that strangled the space. They took down the wall "and when we did, it completely opened up the area," Nancy exclaims. In place of the wall, Weiner added a handrail he designed himself, fabricated by his contractor. "It's timeless and fresh and doesn't date the space," Weiner says.

Throughout the house Weiner introduced countless subtle, similar touches: he superimposed moldings on the living-room wall—not the usual, expected crown moldings but, rather, four rows of narrow molding, adding visual appeal. He had the chimney breast (where the chimney protrudes from the wall) finished in a Venetian plaster technique, designed to match the honed marble hearth in the floor. Although the floor is almost entirely covered with an Edward Fields' 1970s-design wool carpet, he planked it with a non-traditional, four-inch-wide white-oak—again, creating another unexpected touch. None of this was lost on Stephen Karotkin: "What he did added a lot of character, even if some of the elements were minuscule."

Another small, but majestic, touch is the frame built around the fireplace in the family room, arguably



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the most used room in the house. Faced with a raised hearth that just “didn’t look right,” Weiner created a beveled, picture-frame-style border, using a honed black granite-and-light-stone border, adding definition and grandeur.

In the master bath, Weiner cosmetically altered walls to create simple splendor. “The master bath,” says Weiner, “was just a plain box, but we gave it a sense of great luxury with white marble, all-slab pieces. We installed double sinks, and then created arched areas over both the shower and tub and sink spaces.”

The furnishings in the house are a rich and diverse blend of contemporary pieces and thoughtfully selected antiques, a combination of periods and styles. The Karotkins brought almost nothing with them, save their piano. “My taste is very eclectic, and I love to mix antiques with more contemporary furniture,” observes Karotkin. And to keep the feel of the home warm, the furnishings are amply stuffed and curved and beckoning. Both Nancy and Stephen say that one of their favorite pieces is the “tall cabinet made from one solid, seamless tree trunk [vener]—an amazing piece,” comments Stephen. “The inlays [wood and brass] in that piece are remarkable.” Weiner is particularly fond of this combination storage and display unit. Weiner further notes that this extraordinary cabinet is “from a period when they made furniture the way it should be made, without regard to cost-effectiveness.”

All the furnishings around that piece fairly glow in rich burnt umber, raw sienna, autumnal golden tones, and luxe beiges. It’s a calm and inviting tableau, from the single Baker chair, covered in an opulent Brunschwig & Fils tone-on-tone Jacquard (“Cassandra”), to the John Boone, Inc., ottoman, to the petite round cherry-wood

table that also warms the room. Weiner especially loves the black lacquered table in front of the sofa (from Gracie & Co.) “because you cannot quite put your finger on its period.”

While the formal living room may not get a day-to-day workout, the dining room definitely does. “I do like to cook and have people over,” Nancy states happily, “and I wanted to be able to seat twelve comfortably. I knew I wanted some type of traditional, round table.” The table the family ended up with, a Holly Hunt mahogany model, was the first one they saw. Karotkin was firm about having a sideboard with storage, and it was the one area where Weiner ceded to her wishes, as he had advocated a marble tabletop with an open bottom.

Weiner located “another remarkable find,” as Stephen Karotkin calls Weiner’s jackpot pieces: a 1940s sideboard (from Lorin Marsh, Ltd.), which features a goatskin façade and top. Above it, a 19th-century tapestry accents the walls, which are padded and upholstered in silk. Additional textile touches warm up the room—the 1940s carpet from Beauvais and the tailored cushions on the chairs, which are from Michael Taylor. The mid-century Italian chandelier, secured from Fred Silberman, is the tiara for this grande dame of a room; for dramatic mood lighting, the sculpted metal sconces on the wall cast leafy, moody shadows. As Nancy Karotkin muses about her home and gets ready to finish the last room, the bedroom, she contemplates what’s been done already and concludes: “I don’t think I would have done anything any differently. I love it just as it is.” **H&G**

Ruth Katz is a Manhattan-based writer and the author of several design books.

(Opposite): Throughout the house, a palette of rust-red and gold was used to achieve a comfortable, homey look, as in the bedroom. (Above): To add a sense of grandeur to the master bathroom, slab marble pieces were installed and arches were added above the his-and-hers sinks.