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# THERESA'S TALENT

Taking apart people's homes is a very serious business — this interior designer loves it  
*By Martha Uniacke Breen*

At the Interior Design Show a few years ago, I still remember an exhibit that was unusual even for the IDS, which at the time was acquiring a reputation for uncommon presentations. The unmanned exhibit consisted of a large, enclosed red box, whose sides were punctuated at intervals with what turned out to be Second World War-era periscopes. Peer through the periscopes, and you were treated to shimmering visions of crystal chandeliers, rooms distorted by convex mirrors and other visual manipulations, adding up to a commentary on the mutable, and sometimes voyeuristic, aspect of interior design. It was as much art installation as design exhibit, and its co-creator, Theresa Casey (who developed the exhibit with colleague Robert Gray), earned one of the interior design industry's top awards that year.

It's a fitting introduction to Ms. Casey's work, since she approaches it as much from the standpoint of an artist as an interior designer. Design may be her livelihood, but it's one aspect of a creative continuum that includes classical piano (she has recently returned to it after years of childhood lessons), and work in a wide range of visual art media over the years.

For inspiration, she says, she turns to books by modern art masters such as Joan Mitchell, Milton Avery, the Abstract Expressionist painter Nathan Oliveira, the vivid colourworks of Barnett Newman and Rothko. "It fascinates me how the same elements — whether in classical piano music, design or visual art — can be expressed in different ways. For example, I love the structure of Bach. But I also love the creativity of Van Morrison."

She credits much of her artistic outlook to Irish parents, with whom she and her siblings travelled extensively throughout her childhood, instilling from her earliest years a sense of the larger world. As an undergraduate, she spent a year studying in Florence, living in the Palazzo Antinori and travelling with her schoolmates as far afield as Russia and Israel. "I came to realize," she recalls, "that your environment — and in Florence, [inspiration is] everywhere around you — has a significant impact on your life and your thinking about the world."

Of course, that's an apt definition of the power of design. Upon returning to Canada, she entered Ryerson's interior design program, known for its structural, architecturally oriented approach. She was still painting, but realized that to become skilled as a designer, she had to throw herself into it all the way. "I didn't see it as a break from art as much as a natural progression, different aspects of the same impulse. I'm a learner, a seeker — I'm always eager to look into things that interest me."

Out of school, she began her career with Norma King Design, but before long struck out on her own, where between design commissions and in a series of small studios in the artier neighbourhoods of the city, she continued to produce her art. "I've always been eclectic in that way, not just in vis-

ual art, but all the arts. It's not something you can do every six months or so; it's something you need to do every day, to see what comes out."

Then as now, one keeps the other balanced, she says. The principal difference, she explains, is not so much the problem-solving aspect of creating interiors to answer practical needs, as she sees it. It's more that, in design, the spark is produced by a collaboration with a client; whereas with her art, it's defined purely by where she is in the moment.

One of her grandest collaborations was a former ballroom, part of a restoration of a large Rosedale heritage house. The owners are art collectors, and the room features a wealth of lovely details such as an inglenook at one end, soaring ceilings and a large bay window for a grand piano. The challenge was how to make the room comfortable for both everyday living and entertaining, to balance the wife's traditional tastes with the husband's contemporary bent, and to incorporate their breathtaking art.

The solution was to create several seating areas within the room, and to source furniture from the early decades of the 20th century, combing through catalogues and showrooms from New York and Europe to find pieces that were collectible works of art in themselves. Among the room's treasures: an astonishing Art Deco credenza with painted wood legs that look like hand-carved ivory, shagreen-covered doors and a mirrored top with a rich greenish patina; a round dining table with an intricately inlaid starburst pattern in wood veneer; and walls that alternated limestone and velvet, adding presence and warmth in the large space. "What I like about this space is it's very rich in materials and art, but still very approachable, very comfortable."

Her redesign for a contemporary midtown home offers a striking contrast to the richness of the Rosedale house. Brought in to rescue the house from a bad '70s reno that removed whatever character the house originally had, she painted the walls white, replaced the fireplace surround with a graphic black marble mantel and floating side shelves, and chose spare, simply designed pieces, creating a quiet gallery-like setting for the owner's contemporary art collection.

More recently, Ms. Casey's design for a lavish, romantic bathroom earned her another award last fall. The room's walls and floors are onyx, with a custom-designed marble inset of alternating circles and squares spooling around the perimeter. Silk draperies form a backdrop for a shimmering pewter-faced tub, next to an over-the-top shell chair with arms shaped like fishes. All that's missing is Jean Harlow, reclining with a flute of Champagne in the bath.

"[Designing] is always a puzzle, a challenge. You're taking apart people's homes, their sense of security, how they see themselves, really. I take that responsibility very seriously. But I love the adventure, too — getting to know the space and the client, venturing into the unknown, seeing what will inspire me."



Varied rooms by Theresa Casey show the designer's range.

TED YARWOOD