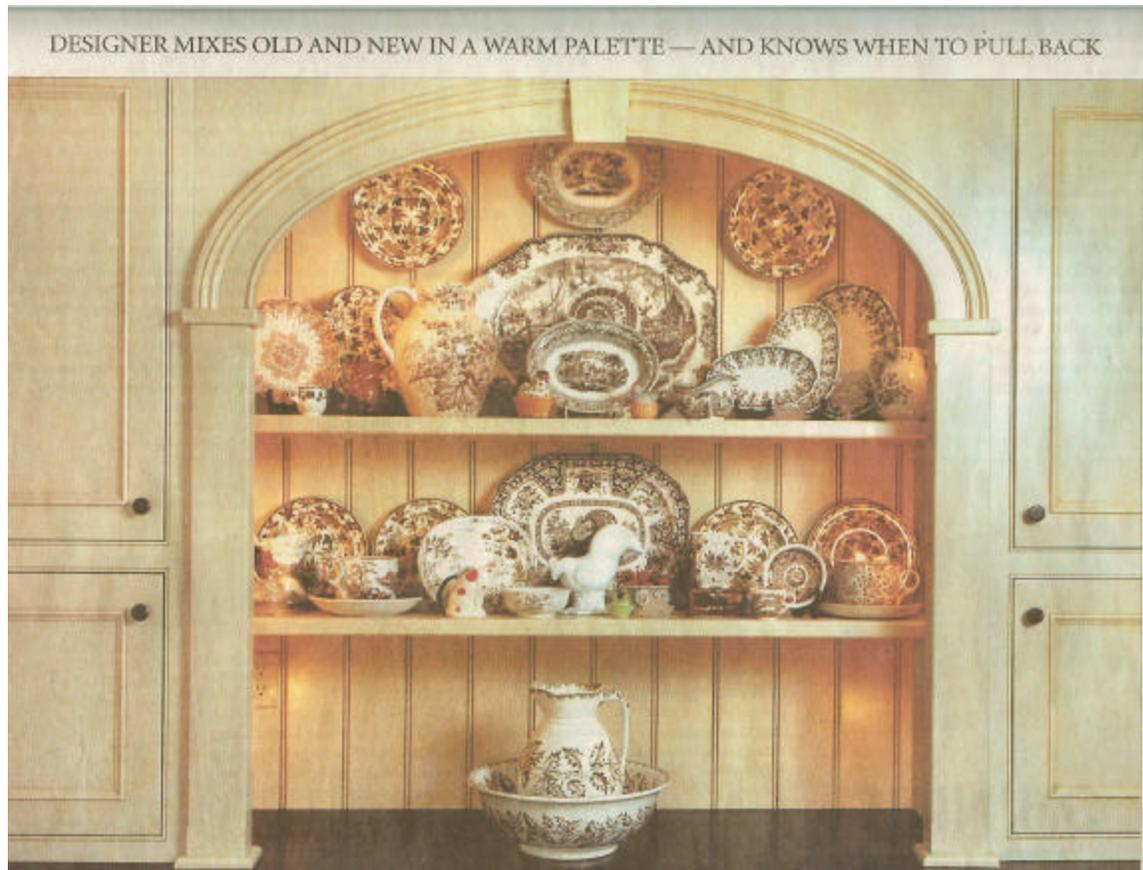


A Mellow Medley

July 14, 2006

By ANNE FARROW, Courant Staff Writer



Moving from a suburban home to a city condominium typically means downsizing, but John and Karen Byrne are happy to have played it the other way. Nearly a decade ago, they moved from their West Hartford colonial to a Hartford townhouse and they got more space, more style and a new backdrop for their furnishings and art.

The style and the backdrop are from Hartford interior designer Sal Modifica, whose trademark style combines a light touch with the traditional.



INTERIOR DESIGNER SAL MODIFICA worked with John and Karen Byrne, owners of this Hartford condo, to create the warm and inviting look that they wanted. Behind him is the living room. At top, new kitchen cabinets display Karen's collection of brown transferware, transfer-printed British tableware that dates from the 19th century.

"I love English-style interiors," says the designer, "because there's an ease of living with a strong sense of sophistication."

The Byrnes' rooms are guided by tradition and filled with family possessions, antiques that Modifica found for them and important paintings. But they also contain surprises. The newly renovated kitchen sports cayenne-red and cream wallpaper, the sunroom-den is papered with exuberant flowers, and the master bedroom is a soothing reddish brown.

"It's a nice marriage of new and old," says Karen Byrne. "When we moved in, I said,

“Let's do something different.”

That “something different” is a fresh palette of warm reds and yellows, a custom kitchen that is beautiful, functional and not at all glossy, and interior touches such as a tufted piano bench that's an adorable show-off.

“We refer to things as being ‘Sal-i-fied,’” says Karen, and John, a retired insurance company executive, laughs appreciatively. The couple has worked with Modifica for nine years, and an easy camaraderie seems to exist between them.

“I love rooms that don't look decorated in any kind of contrived way,” says Modifica, who established his design business 16 years ago and whose work has been showcased in design quartos and national shelter magazines. “I don't pay attention to the ‘hot’ colors. ... You don't want to re-create a furniture ad.”

From the entryway, simply and yet luxuriously furnished with a painted bench, a needlepoint rug and a painting, you step forward into the soaring living room. Every room needs a place to begin, the designer says, and the Byrnes' yellow living room began with two armchairs covered in a curry and brownish-red toile.

“Karen had an immediate response to this Old World Weavers toile,” Modifica says, and the toile established the palette for the rest of the room.

A Chippendale sofa covered in deep green linen damask has its back to the mirrored dining room - two columns separate the living and dining areas - and is set at an angle to the fireplace. Facing the room is a Baldwin baby grand in a light cherry wood, while a few small occasional tables and chairs round out the room. Artfully displayed on the mantle and on tables around the room are objects from Karen's collection of Herend porcelains and Katherine Houston ceramics. There are books on art and gardening on tables and footstools.



“This room tells the story of who they are, which is what it's all about,” Modifica says. Yet there is a signature, too, that comes from the designer, with a professional's eye and access to beautiful things.

A round table is covered in Colefax and Fowler glazed chintz that Karen loved, and after choosing the design of tree peonies and golden ferns, she saw the same fabric on television, in Oprah Winfrey's living room.

“I think rooms should have personalities, the same way that people do,” the designer says. “[Rooms] should be comfortable. Chairs should be placed where it's comfortable to sit.”

Everything in these rooms means something. The Byrnes' daughter studied piano when she was young and, when a lamp was needed for the piano, snippets of sheet music the Brynes had saved were “decoupage” onto the lamp by a friend of the designer's. The modestly sized lamp provides light yet also evokes memories.

The master bedroom, which Karen describes as "our refuge," is wallpapered in a soft cocoa-red and is spacious enough to contain a fireplace and two large cupboards, one a William & Mary reproduction that the designer found. Next to the bed is a small slipper chair that Karen's grandmother bought for her mother when she became engaged, and that Karen's mother gave to her when she became engaged to John.

Modifica points out that the decorative painting around the mantle, a reddish faux finish, doesn't match the red-brown wallpaper because he wanted the finish to serve as a counterpoint to the paper, and to add richness to the room, rather than to echo.

The recently redesigned kitchen is not large, but so well laid-out that there is room for a round dining table, food preparation, major storage and a display cabinet for Karen's collection of brown transferware.

The same thought-through approach seen in the rest of the townhouse is evident in the kitchen as well. The refrigerator/freezer and pantry are contained within a large black armoire Modifica designed, while on the opposite wall, handmade "subway" tiles and an anthracite counter, both in a soft black, play off the soft cream of the cabinets and arched display cupboard.

The effect of the smooth cabinetry and the soft black of the tiles and countertop is quiet and a perfect foil to the warm shades in the wallpaper and the transferware.

"You have to know when enough is enough," Modifica said, "and a line that you have to pull back from. Everything needs to be in proportion."

Karen is a docent at the Wadsworth Atheneum, and she and John are very much part of the Hartford cultural scene, as well as big supporters of the city's revival, so they frequently host parties and get-togethers.

"We've had big parties," John says, "and we always have a crowd for Easter and Christmas."

Parties can spill from the dining room into the living room and the den, which has enough big windows to serve as a sunroom.

"Sal asked if we wanted a cozy den or a flowery sunroom," Karen says. She and John opted for a cozy space for television and reading - but the room's bold floral wallpaper "makes us feel we got the best of both worlds."

