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All Mixed Up

The Things We Like aesthetic is a broad one, encompassing Shaker and Mission and a myriad other influences that shape the decor of this 1940s cabin.

BY ANDREA RAISFELD

"This is not a decorated house," says Pamela Hovland, who lives with her husband Steve Lawrence and their 12-year old son, Henry, in a 1940s cabin on Pond Road. "The decorating strategy is: 'things I like,'" she says, pointing around the living room, a surprisingly grand space, considering the modest and understated envelope in which it sits snugly atop a wooded hillside. The high-peaked ceiling is criss-crossed with dark beams that recall a certain cottage in the Cotswolds of England that the original 1940s owners, a Quaker family who weekendend in Wilton, fell in love with years before.

The Things We Like aesthetic is a broad one, encompassing Shaker and Mission styles and myriad other influences that shape the overall décor. "As Steve is Sicilian and I am Swedish, we gravitate toward Italian and Scandinavian design," says Hovland. "But I love contrast: old and new. Flea market and valuable highly crafted things. Machine-made and hand-made, a neutral palette with something colorful."

"Originally," she says, "when we moved from the city, we wanted to do the Mission thing. Heavy, simple furniture that matched the wood of the ceiling and the paneling." That segued into a taste for mid-century, and a hybrid aesthetic took shape, a principle roomy enough to accommodate any item that pleased their vision. Except for the lofty living room/dining room area, the house is of modest scale. Bedrooms are small, and storage space



TREVOR TONDRO

smaller. “You have to be a good editor,” says Hovland. “We’re not fans of excess. We already don’t use half of the rooms in the house.” Balance depends upon art of the edit. With limited space, “you need to get rid of some perfectly nice furniture when something more interesting, more useful things come along.”

The kitchen is a perfect incarnation of the mash-up of mid-century and new millennium. A 2000 renovation recalls the greenhouse that once occupied that part of the house, a very 1950s space with floor-to-ceiling casement windows and flagstone floor. Neutral gray metal window trim blends with the winter color of the bark of the trees outside, and the walls of glass virtually disappear when the greens of spring and summer appear. “They let the colors of nature be the focus,” says Hovland. A flagstone patio extends the kitchen in an almost seamless transition from inside to outside on warm days. Vintage Bertoria chairs share space at the kitchen table—a long narrow surface of pure functionality covered with tidy, brown craft paper—with contemporary repros.

In the living room, tucked behind “rip-off” Saarinen chairs, sits a Paul McCobb modular bench, three naugahyde squares of orange, black, and white, that Hovland found outside the Wilton thrift store a few years back. Five Florence Knoll credenzas—rescued 15 years ago from a NYC office undergoing renovation—now line the walls in the dining area, office, and bedroom. Beside them, or on top, sit objects gathered lovingly along the way from Ikea, tag sales, thrift stores, nature herself (see: the bird nest collection in the mudroom), and yes, the occasional dip into a dumpster. It was serendipity that led Hovland to spot, 20 years ago in a Union Square trash container, a yard-long scroll of white paper inscribed with verbs of love in the hand of an amateur calligrapher, which she presented to her husband that Valentine’s Day. It has been tacked next to their bathroom mirror ever since.

To Hovland, pedigree takes a distant second to perception. The thrill is to find something “that speaks to you loudly,” she says. It is a pursuit that derives from her roots, growing up on a farm in Minnesota where the ethic was “make do with what you can.” Even Otis the dog, a lively, handsome Vizsla, who, perhaps not accidentally, fits right into the décor with his clean lines and orangey coat, was rescued and not purchased. “In the spirit of recycling,” says Hovland with a smile, “don’t go buy a fancy, new dog—find one that already exists!”

Hovland is more curator than decorator, with an eye honed by her work as a graphic artist since earning an MFA from the School of Art at Yale. With the title senior critic, she has taught intermediate graphic design there for 18



years. The house is a study in clean, strong, graphics, neutral grays punctuated with vivid orange, dark wood tones set off with stripes or polka dots. The simple dot is one of Hovland’s favorite motifs, seen en masse in glass-faced Duralab kitchen cabinets in the form of Hazel Atlas glassware, one of the many collections on display in the home. The cabinet’s top shelf is stacked high with Melmac bowls, a familiar and homey standard of 1950s kitchens. “I used to buy them for 25 cents—now they sell for seventy-five dollars.” Needless to say, Hovland is no stranger to [eBay](#), [Etsy](#), [Norwalk’s Braswell Gallery and Auction House](#), [Wilton’s Thrift Store](#), [Anthropologie](#), or [Ikea](#).

Much of the art that hangs throughout the house comes from friends, colleagues, and the Yale MFA students. The striking black-and-white photograph hanging over the soaring stone fireplace is of a 1960s industrial park outside of Rome with a giant flock of starlings forming an amoebic cloud overhead. It was shot by a photographer whom Hovland met while spending a year as a fellow at the American Academy of Rome. “We mainly buy photography,” says Hovland, “and it seems there is usually either an architectural element or an agrarian theme in the photos we purchase.” Among the prizes the couple is on the lookout for? No pause for thinking: “Steve covets a DeKoonig painting or a huge Andreas Gursky photograph. I’d love to have a Chuck Close, Alice Neel, or Modigliani portrait. Or something by Sally Mann.”

Afternoon sunlight streams dramatically through double-height French doors in the living room. Around them, 12-foot bookshelves line the entire wall, crowded with the food of hungry intellects: on one side, hundreds of books on art and design, on the other, as many novels and CDs, and like the décor itself, a mix of high and low. Otis the recycled dog sleeps happily in a faux Saarinen womb chair, Hovland’s favorite place in the house, too.