

DESIGNERS' OWN HOMES

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DESIGNERS' OWN HOMES ISSUE

Jill O'Shea

INTERVIEW WITH JILL O'SHEA, JILL O'SHEA HOME DESIGN | PHOTOGRAPHER STACY BASS



The designer's updated Westport home is full of **FAMILY MEMORIES** and thoughtfully retains its **STORYBOOK CHARM**



O'Shea includes a flagpole with almost every project. She added the picket fence back in 2000, and later the stone wall. Chats with neighbors are also treasured. "A number of them knew my mom, and she's gone now. So it's nice when someone says to me, 'Your mom used to do this or that.' It feels really homey."

opposite: A vintage photo of O'Shea's parents; an upholstered white denim bench from Dovecote is both coffee table and ottoman in the family room; a bookcase near the front door holds family mementos; the garage/barn houses the designer's office/studio on the second floor.



above: A pair of antique chairs were a Christmas gift in 1998 from O'Shea's grandmother to her two daughters. The then-92-year-old wrote dedications to the girls underneath the seats. **right and far right:** In the front room, a white denim slipcovered sofa from Lillian August sits underneath a painting by O'Shea's grandfather that depicts his childhood home in Iowa. On the other side of the concrete coffee table from J. Seitz & Co., two linen slipcovered swivel armchairs flank a marble side table from Browne & Co., and an antique French gilt sunburst mirror reflects the light.



opposite: The family room's reclaimed brick fireplace is accented with a satin nickel screen from Klaff's, and a round linen pouf functions as an additional seat. The front door is painted in a high-gloss navy from Fine Paints of Europe, and the walls are a custom blend of Benjamin Moore's White Dove and standard white.



You have an interesting history with this house. Where did it all begin?

I was originally a creative director, but after having my fourth child, I quit working and freelanced at home. I was constantly adapting our home to accommodate everyone, and it was something I'd always been interested in, even as a kid. We bought this house in 2000 to live in while we were building a new home down at Compo Beach. It was near condemnation—there was no working plumbing, and the whole thing was a disaster. We put on a new roof, redid the floors on the cheap and just Home Depot'd it to make it a nice, clean place to live with our kids while we built our new home.

And then you eventually moved out a year later? Yes. When we moved into our Compo Beach home, my parents were retiring, and they actually moved into this little Home Depot reno. It was perfect for them—they were downsizing, and they could be near us and the beach.

So how did you end up living in this house yet again? We'd lived in five other homes since buying this house, and each of the houses that I've done and sold have been purchased basically furnished. It was never my

plan to buy and flip houses; it was more about adapting to the changing needs of my family. The reason I came back to this house is that about five years ago, when my parents were living here, my mother passed away unexpectedly, and I ended up moving my father into assisted living. At the time, I had divorced, had two boys out of college and two girls in college, and I was home alone. I started eyeing this tiny house and thought it would be a perfect "empty nest" home for me.

What drew you to it? I've always adored it. It has a charming, almost storybook quality to it. It's always reminded me of the little engine that could! [*laughs*] It has a personality that I really appreciated, so I decided to put all of my eggs in one basket and do it the way I would do it if I were going to live here long-term. Every time I've done a house, that's always the hope—that I'm going to live in it forever, and I honestly believe that every time! So I took the time to do it and moved in here last August.

What were some of the challenges with this home? One problem was that the kitchen was in the rear of the house. It was probably added in the early 1900s, and there was no second floor above it. A very old, very steep





left: The custom sofa is topped with a merino wool throw and a linen throw from Bungalow. An existing window behind the sofa compromised privacy and would have reflected light onto the TV, so O'Shea removed it. "I wanted to feel safe and tucked in," she says. "Now the TV is sheltered from glare, and there's light streaming in on both ends of the room. I have morning light coming in through the kitchen and afternoon light coming from the front room." **below:** The family room is anchored by an area carpet from Redi-Cut, and a small primitive antique stool from Bungalow finds a home next to the sofa.



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below: In the sun-dappled dining area, slipcovered armchairs from Wisteria are pulled up to a whitewashed oak table from J. Seitz & Co.; an Aerin chandelier from Circa Lighting is above. Antique six-inch chestnut floors are found throughout the house. "I wasn't able to save the original floors," O'Shea says, "so I searched and found antique chestnut. It's meant to get better with age, so with every nick, the corners get softer. It'll continue to develop a patina that warms it up." **opposite:** The home's custom millwork and cabinetry were executed by Royal Woodcraft, and a nook tucked into the side of the fireplace features chestnut shelves that hold a collection of family antiques, beach finds and books. On the edge of the kitchen, O'Shea designed and installed an all-glass cabinet to showcase her stemware. "I have a thing for glassware; I love drinking out of different glasses," she says. "I wanted to have a little bar area, so I hung that cabinet there. There's also a concealed liquor cabinet underneath it with a wine fridge on the other side. My kids make fun of me, since it's a little fifteen-inch fridge, but it holds a lot of wine. It's my favorite thing!"



winding staircase led up to the second floor. Upstairs, there was only one bedroom that could be considered a real bedroom, the other room was just big enough to put a twin bed in, and there was no bathroom. There was a first-floor bedroom, but it was just large enough to fit a bed in. So the larger bedroom that was a suitable size was on the second floor, the only bathroom was on the first floor, and the winding, antique staircase was in between. While the house was very charming, this layout was really challenging to live in.

How did you improve it and make it work? I added a master suite onto the second floor in the back. I wanted to maintain the character of the house, so I was very careful about adding on to the back; I didn't want it to detract from the house. The gable faces the front and then reverses in

the back, which I did to maintain consistent window sizes. I opened up all of the ceilings on the second floor, and I turned the little room that could only fit a twin bed into a bathroom. So now there's a real bedroom with a hall bath, a master bedroom in the back with its own bath, and a laundry alcove at the top of the stairs. I was also able to improve the stairs. They're still a little steep and a little short, but there was no way to do it without compromising or cutting off a whole part of the house. By doing that, I was also able to expand the kitchen a bit underneath that footprint. All of the systems were upgraded, and now the house is super streamlined and efficient—the bills are fantastic!

What drove the interior design? I've always been drawn to space and light as much as anything else, and I love symmetry; I like things to feel



left top: Kingsley Bate furniture from Patio.com is complemented by outdoor pillows from Terrain; a shiplap-paneled mudroom houses a painting by O'Shea and her daily "uniform"—her favorite American flag baseball hat, navy Hermès garden party tote and white denim jacket. **left bottom:** The kitchen's white honed Carrara marble counters and backsplash are from Everest Marble and fabricated by Superior Marble & Tile. The small sign over the door was a gift from O'Shea's mother shortly before she passed away.



above Antique blue Canton china from the designer's grandmother dots the wall. The farmhouse sink is from Bender, and all appliances, including the Sub-Zero fridge, Wolf range and Bosch dishwasher, are from Aitoro. The extra-deep windowsill "greenhouse" is ever-changing. A small African violet, flanked by maidenhair ferns from Terrain, was O'Shea's mother's and has been lovingly cared for.



above left and right:

The first-floor guest room, originally used as the master bedroom by O'Shea's parents, is adorned with sconces from Circa Lighting. The XO artwork framed in whitewashed barnwood is from Millie Rae's, and the white linen duvet and gray quilt are from West Elm.

right: The glass railing by Fairfield Glass was a fresh update. "The old railing was adorable but not up to code. I didn't want to do wood again, so I went with glass," O'Shea says. "It's quirky—the rest of the house is traditional, and then there's this modern railing." A stack of family antique stools sits beneath portraits of her children by Bruce Plotkin Photography in Weston.





this page: O'Shea relaxes on her front porch; the second-floor guest room has high-gloss shiplap ceilings with a capiz shell chandelier from Anthropologie, and one of the family antique maple beds is topped with a pink pillow from Dovecote.



“I could **TELL YOU A STORY** about every little
piece in here, and that’s what
MAKES HOME, HOME.”

—JILL O’SHEA





above: Family antique baskets, books, blankets and beach collectibles rest on a console table from Millie Rae's; the master bath beckons with a round black mirror from J. Seitz & Co. and a brass shelf from Browne & Co. **below:** The laundry alcove houses a family antique pine table that used to sit in O'Shea's childhood kitchen, an oil painting by the designer and custom cabinetry. **opposite:** An upholstered linen bed from Restoration Hardware commands center stage in the master bedroom. The graphite drawings of Compo Beach's marina are by one of O'Shea's sons. "When he was in high school, he worked at the gas dock at Longshore in the summer, and he would do sketches. I found these two so charming," she says. The two oak nightstands from Bungalow were must-haves. "I fell in love with those. I know they're not the right size, but I love them, so who cares!"





above: O'Shea's office/studio is home to a large slab oak table, a Feiss chandelier from Klaff's and an oil painting—a work in progress—by the designer. **opposite:** A trellis on the side of the house is layered with climbing roses; a bluestone back patio is sheltered on one side by the house and on the other by the garage. Strategic tree plantings ensure privacy. "I wanted to be able to be outside and not feel like I have houses looking at me," O'Shea says. "I surrounded the whole patio with hydrangeas, and when they're in bloom, the bright green contrasted against the dark gray on the garage is gorgeous."

balanced. I'm also not a fan of anything too trendy, so I stick to fairly classic elements. For the most part, I've always gone with clean, white walls and rich woods. I like materials that are organically what they are—rough brick, antique floors, smooth white walls—so I have a consistent neutral palette that's based on the materials themselves. I want wood to be wood, marble to be marble; it's more about that than adorning anything.

Did the existing fireplace need any rehabbing? It was a brick fireplace with a plaster front and a small mantle. I took the plaster off the chimney and clad the downstairs part in reclaimed brick to unify it. When all of my kids are home, we're a watch-a-football-game kind of crowd, so rather than put the emphasis on a big fireplace with a big firebox, it was all about the TV! [*laughs*] So it's a big TV over a little fireplace because it's about priorities—you really couldn't do both, and this house was all about picking what was important and going with it.

That sofa looks ideal for watching football games. It's a big, twelve-foot custom sofa with four generous cushions, and when my kids are visiting, each of them will naturally go sit on their cushion. It's funny because there's a bit of a play going on throughout the house with the sizes of things—there's the tiny room with the huge sofa, the small room with the large bed, the two tiny chairs next to a giant lamp in front of two big windows. But when we're watching TV, with everyone on their seat cushion, it's just cozy. That's the nature of a small house—it brings everybody together. I love it.

How did you redesign the kitchen? Even though it was small, I didn't want it to feel like it wasn't a high-end, quality kitchen. I wanted to spend money on appliances—I wanted my Sub-Zero tall refrigerator, but I didn't want to see it sitting in the family room. Because it's an open space, I didn't want anything exposed; the only exposed item is the Wolf range.

I've only been here a year, so the kitchen hasn't gotten a ton of use, but I love it. It works really well.

You've celebrated a year of holidays in this house. How has that been?

I've hosted every holiday for twenty-five years, and my family was worried because we gave up a dining room moving into this house. There's only that small kitchen table, and with four children and their significant others, that was a concern. So for Thanksgiving, I moved all of the furniture out of the front room, rented a big round table and set it up for dinner. But for Christmas, I put food on the kitchen table, set up a bar, had a firepit out on the patio and had music blaring. Everybody was snuggling into spaces, and it was the best holiday we ever had. I was worried we would lose the ability to host events, but it's turned out to be the place everyone wants to go to.

What makes this house feel like home? I have a storage unit with family antiques, but I didn't want to fill the house with them; I wanted the house to have what it needed to work, and then have places where I could put all of the things that make me feel good. It's silly, but my favorite table in the world is the one that's in my laundry room. When I was a kid, that table was in the corner of our kitchen, and it's where I ate my Cheerios. Those two antique chairs near the bookcase? My grandmother wrote a dedication to each of my daughters underneath those chairs. I could tell you a story about every little piece in here, and that's what make home, home. —INTERVIEW BY LAUREN FETTERMAN

Resources:

Interior designer/architect/builder: Jill O'Shea Home Design, Westport; jillosheahomedesign.com

