

A decorative interior scene. In the upper right, a large, ornate crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling. In the center, a vase of white flowers is visible. In the foreground, two white ceramic lanterns with intricate cut-out patterns are prominently displayed. The background features a framed picture of a landscape with trees and a body of water.

# DESIGN CONNECTION

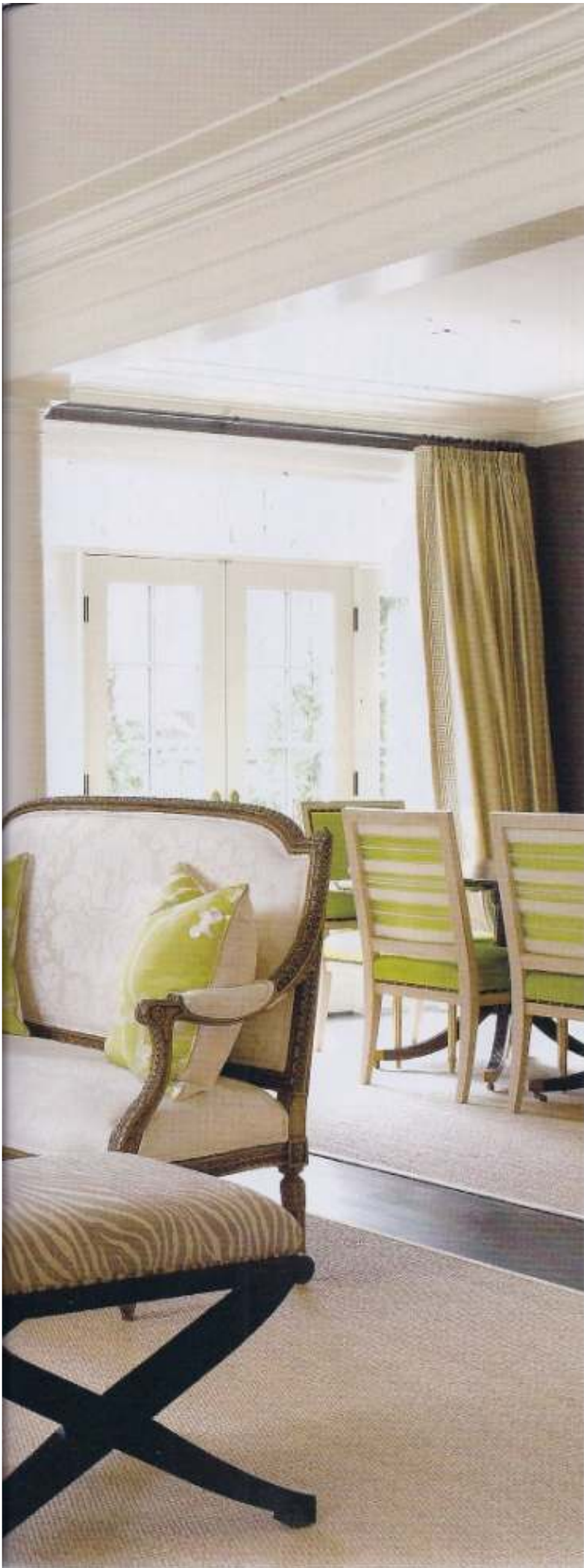
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THE SPACIOUS DINING ROOM IS BOTH BEAUTIFUL AND FUNCTIONAL. INTERIOR DESIGNER GRACIELA RUTKOWSKI STAIN-TESTED THE BRIGHT-GREEN UPHOLSTERY AND BROUGHT IN TWO PROTOTYPE CHAIRS FOR HER CLIENTS TO TRY OUT FOR COMFORT.



IN THE LIVING ROOM, REFINEMENT AND PLAYFULNESS MIX WHEN AN ANTIQUE SETTEE GETS A JOLT OF COLOR WITH CUSTOM PILLOWS MADE FROM BRUNTSCHWIG & FELS FABRIC. THE SPACE OPENS UP INTO THE DINING ROOM, WHERE THE TABLE SEATS 10.





## *Interior designer Graciela Rutkowski decorates a gracious home for her Medina clients*

Each perfect relationship begins in its own way: a chance meeting, a blind date, a friendship that grows into something more. For interior designer Graciela Rutkowski and her Medina clients, it started about five years ago with a mutual friend and a phone call.

The homeowners had just finished building a new house and were looking for someone to help them finish the interiors. "We've used several designers in the past, and my husband has been like, 'Nope, next one,'" the wife explains.

A mutual friend got wind of their dilemma and gave them Rutkowski's name—and a ringing endorsement: "She's the best." One phone conversation later, the designer was on her way to Medina for a first meeting.

The connection was instant. Rutkowski thought her clients were "lovely, sweet and gracious" and saw that the home had beautiful bones and great potential. The homeowners appreciated Rutkowski's attention to detail and sense of style.

"She has this perfect balance, and it spoke to both of us," the wife says.

They decided to take it slow, working on the home one room at a time. First up was the eat-in kitchen area: the heart of the house, where the homeowners share family meals, entertain and help their two daughters with art projects.

Rutkowski took into account their love of a refined-yet-casual look. She also heeded their request for comfortable, functional and child-friendly pieces. After the design choices for the eating area were discussed and finalized, the homeowners headed to Hawaii for a planned family vacation and Rutkowski started working on the installation.

When the family returned, the space had been transformed. Rutkowski had added a wood trestle table that easily accommodates six, as well as comfortable seating in the form of open-back chairs, upholstered armchairs and an easy-to-clean white sofa to keep things elegant but relaxed. Lighthearted orange gourd lamps and trellis-patterned citrine curtains frame the window looking out to the backyard.

**opposite:** THE EATING AREA NEXT TO THE KITCHEN IS THE FIRST SPACE THAT RUTKOWSKI WORKED ON IN HER CLIENTS' HOME. **right:** RUTKOWSKI GAVE THE KITCHEN A MODERN FACE-LIFT WITH MESH-METAL CABINET FRONTS BUT KEPT THE LOOK TIMELESS BY USING HONED CALCUTTA CARRARA MARBLE FOR THE BACKSLASH AND COUNTER TOPS. **below:** THE FAMILY ROOM IS FULL OF PATTERN AND COLOR WITH LEOPARD-PRINT CHAIRS, A TURQUOISE MOHAIR OTTOMAN AND WALL-TO-WALL TRELLIS CARPET.







THE MASTER BEDROOM, THE LATEST ROOM TO GET THE RUTKOWSKI TOUCH, INCLUDES A DOG BED FOR THE FAMILY'S JACK RUSSELL TERRIER, MAX. **opposite, left:** SEATING IN THE BEDROOM MAKES A PERFECT READING NOOK. **opposite, right:** THE WF'S OFFICE DOWNS STAIRS IS FEMININE AND GRAY. "I JUST WANT TO EAT THAT ROOM—IT'S SO CUTE," RUTKOWSKI SAYS.

*"Graciela is it. She is the look. We love her style. She has this perfect balance, and it spoke to both of us."*

—HOMEOWNER





"My husband said she is like the Four Seasons of decorating," the wife says of Rutkowski and her special touches. "She had the most beautiful flowers and champagne out. It's first class. She makes it really personal, and she adds that extra boost of service."

Over the next four-plus years, Rutkowski and the homeowners worked their way through the rest of the home. And as in every successful long-term relationship, they collaborated and compromised along the way.

It took Rutkowski and the homeowners nearly a year to discuss and choose the design for the dining chairs, for example. The husband, who Rutkowski jokes should have been an architect because of his great eye, was all about the details. Rutkowski recalls debating the wood finish (whitewash with gold trim or entirely gold leaf), the cushions (she brought in three versions for sit tests), the fabric (options were stain-tested in Rutkowski's office) and the embellishments (two different rosettes were made for comparison) before finally picking a winning combination.

"He put me through my paces," Rutkowski says with a laugh. "He made me a better designer."

Throughout the rest of the home, the steady designer-client relationship has produced beautiful results. In the family room, Rutkowski redesigned the built-ins around the fireplace and added wall-to-wall chocolate brown carpeting in a square-trellis design. Playful patterned pillows give the neutral-colored seating some extra life, while a pair of leopard-print armchairs and matching dog bed for Jack Russell terrier Max show the designer (and, by extension, the homeowners) isn't afraid to take some risks.

In the kitchen, Rutkowski scaled down the island to better fit the size of

the space, added honed Calcutta carrara marble counter tops and painted the cabinets a fresh white. Orange leather barstools with nail-head trim tie in to the eating area's orange accents.

The house also has a personalized space for each family member. Rutkowski decorated the wife's home office in hot pink and black. She added a zebra-print area rug and a black lacquer chair for a touch of glam and three wall-mounted memo boards for displaying pictures and cards. Upstairs, the husband's office features dark walls and built-in cabinets, with a comfy leather chair for reading. Max also has his own giraffe-patterned dog bed on the floor here, too.

In the playroom, Rutkowski gave each daughter her own desk space and pink lacquer chair for doing homework. A custom mural by Roxanne Murphy-Smith depicts an imaginary scene in Paris, which the family often visits in real life. The painting includes the family's favorite shops and even miniature versions of the girls and Max.

As the project nears its end—the master bedroom was just finished earlier this year, and Rutkowski plans to work on an outdoor seating area next—there are hints this close designer-client relationship will continue in a different way.

"I really have gotten to know them as people," Rutkowski says. "They've become really good friends, and I'm lucky to have gotten to work with them."

The feeling is mutual.

"She's our friend, and she's just a lovely, wonderful person," the wife adds. "We're so glad that we found her." ■

**For resource information, see Sources, page 94.**