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natural SELECTION

Following a major renovation, this light and airy **New Canaan** home celebrates clean lines, elegant antiques and a Belgian influence, all reflecting the designer's **evolving taste** by SUZANNE GANNON photographs STACY BASS





The 16-sided custom coffee table from Profiles in New York is made of bronze and features a glass top in antique glass. Upholstered pieces are covered in linen, which breathes and possesses a texture that you can both see and feel, according to Shelley Morris. A Moroccan urn was made into a lamp and features silver detailing with semi-precious stones. "The more primitive the better!" Shelley says. She favors reed rugs like this one made of jute because they feel "silky under bare feet."



To visit interior designer Shelley Morris at her home in New Canaan is to spend time with a woman in the throes of her own aesthetic evolution.

Just off Ponus Ridge Road, on the spine of a gently sloping hill, the low-slung, cupola-topped ranch sits within a stone's throw of Philip Johnson's Glass House. Though Shelley's home was built just seven years after the architectural icon was, in 1956, and expanded over time, the one-story, white cedar-shingle-with-a-courtyard house bears no recognizable resemblance to its famous neighbor. Whether its owner has been influenced by the proximity of greatness, however, is another matter entirely.

Before purchasing the house in 2007, Shelley and her husband, Seth, an executive in women's sleepwear, were living across the state line in Bedford, New York, in a house they managed to unload just as the market was morphing from a stiffly boned corset into a plushly piled robe.

The empty nesters then spent four bewildering months without a clue about where they were headed, ultimately moving into a rental. New York City was an option, as was finding a suburban fixer-upper to flip.

From New Rochelle to North Salem, real estate agents weren't showing them houses they liked, perhaps because they assumed their interior designer-client required a structure of architectural note or

left: Interior designer Shelley Morris says she feels like she "earned" this house, which she concedes would be hard to leave.

right: Shelley, who grew up near the ocean, where she enjoyed hunting for shells, found this selection at a boutique in the Caribbean several years ago.

opposite: An early 20th century portrait hangs above a Chinese table made of elm wood in the 19th century. The ornately detailed Buddha, sourced from a dealer in Woodbury, Connecticut, is a few hundred years old. Shelley found the cradle-like basket at the D&D Building in New York.



antique character. So, with the lease on the rental running out, they headed across the border.

"I had a gun to my head," says Shelley, recalling that the weekend she found the house was the last she had left to hunt.

One iron-clad prerequisite was that the total package – house and property combined – possess an appeal capable of luring the couple's 25-year-old daughter out of the city and into the country for an occasional weekend with friends.

"Location comes first, property second and footprint third," says the designer. "You can always make a house fit your needs."

This philosophy ultimately guided her toward the 3,400-square-foot linoleum palace that sat on two acres along what struck her as an exceedingly pretty road. And its courts for tennis and bocce, a pool, an expansive bluestone terrace – and an entire wing that could be dedicated to a bedroom-bathroom combination for their aforementioned only child – sealed the deal.

"Usually I fall in love with houses; they speak to me," she says. "This one was different. We had no time left, and this was the best financial decision we could make."

They moved into the squared-off horseshoe: a center-hall with eight-foot ceilings that Shelley says had no relationship to the features of the land that lay outside its windows, including gnarled apple trees, large rhododendrons, climbing roses, and a pergola full of ancient wisteria. A pool table dominated what is now the kitchen/dining area; the plumbing was shot; there was no powder room to speak of; and there was plenty of wall-to-wall nylon carpeting applied directly onto the slab, and lots of, er, linoleum.

What had appeared to be a purely cosmetic job soon revealed itself to require a complete gut. After a misstep by her original architect – involving an omission about the necessity of support beams – Shelley called in her collaborators: architect Jeff Kaufman of JMKA Architects in Westport and New Canaan and Rick Krug of Redding-

The formal dining room, located adjacent to the living room, features a Turkish urn atop an 18th-century English flamed mahogany pedestal, a 19th-century Italian chest once owned by Raul Newman and Joanne Woodward and a reproduction mirror from Niemann Weeks. The crystal-and-iron chandelier creates a counterpoint above an informal tabletop featuring a grouping of vases intended as a study in monochromatic objects with different textures.





top and bottom center: Open shelving in the kitchen reinforces an airy ambience and provides a showcase for Shelley's collection of ironstone pitchers and terrines. The stools from Lillian August demonstrate a preference for industrial pieces in a residential environment, bottom left and right: Shelley found a large 19th century clock that once adorned a train station in France and gave it center stage in the kitchen. It hangs above an old bakery table she found at an antique shop in New Preston, Connecticut.





In the master bedroom, ceilings were raised to 12 feet and accented with 100-year-old reclaimed beams. A patterned and embroidered pillow adds a splash of color to the antique cannonball bed, below: Shelley found this Waldo Fernandez sofa 10 years ago in Los Angeles; it is covered in a silk velvet by Lee Jofa.

based contractor TR Building & Remodeling. Together they executed a suite of interior alterations intended to transform the house from hunkered-down bungalow to airy sanctuary.

"Jeff got to see the extent of what I do, and he knew exactly what I wanted," she says, adding that they now frequently collaborate on projects. "We were very simpatico."

The master punch list included raising the ceilings to 12 feet in some cases, laying wide-planked floors of white oak, installing 100-year-old beams reclaimed from the bottom of a river where they landed after falling off a barge and re-fenestrating the entire building with windows to the floor.

"My intention was to make it feel integrated with the property," Shelley says.

When, after three or four months, permits were obtained and the construction began to impinge on life as they knew it, Shelley and Seth moved into another rental and remained there for about eight months.

Though she may have begun her career steeped in English country antiques, collecting all manner of Staffordshire transferware—black, brown, and mulberry, for the record—and generously layering with trim and tassels, she has now emerged on the other side of the





above: An African mask is mounted above a 20th century Chinese stool. The master bath is like a personal spa, featuring a freestanding tub from Waterworks and a steam shower where Shelley says she steams at least three or four times a week.

design continuum. Texture has trumped pattern, and she is forever in search of a place where her eyes can rest.

"There's no question I've become more of a modernist," Shelley says. "As I get older, I edit down more and eliminate the superfluous things I don't identify with. I'm a completely different human being."

She points to the simple lines of the trestle table in the dining area of the kitchen and the dreamy quality of the oil-on-board painting she picked up in Florence ten years ago, which she finds "restful."

"Architecture and light source are the most important elements," she said. "The better the architecture, the less need there is for distractions."

In this spartan ambience she now favors, a muted, natural palette predominates, serving as a backdrop that showcases Dutch and Belgian influences. In the living room, she upholstered her sofa and chairs in fabrics with a deliberately slipcovered look. A 17th-century Swedish table has nary a hint of paint left and thus serves as a counterpoint to a shiny baby grand piano.

Interspersed throughout are French, Italian, Asian and African pieces. A large clock from a train station in France hangs on the dining-area wall above an old bakery table she found in

New Preston, Connecticut. Chalice-shaped bronze sconces that look as though they could have been designed by Giacometti are mounted nearby.

"Axel Vervoordt is my God," she says. "John Saladino, Vicente Wolf, Michael Smith — I look to them when I'm lost to get me back on track."

Evidence of her well-trained eye is everywhere. In the living room, where she raised the eight-foot ceiling and created a tray effect, she also covered up the 1950s brick fireplace with sheetrock and Venetian plaster and then installed a honed black granite surround and hearth that is flush with the floor to expand the space. The dining room features a 19th-century Italian chest-bone escutcheons, original hardware—once owned by Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, while the library features a massive 16th- or 17th-century European tapestry, complete with the wear and tear of age.

One-hundred-year-old ironstone pitchers line a kitchen shelf; a large and arresting self-portrait by a female Czech artist who lives in Westchester (and reminds her of her daughter) regards her daughter's bedroom; and ornaments from African tribal headdresses accent the mood in the library; a primitive Turkish urn sits atop a flamed mahogany pedestal in the dining room. »

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and FOOTPRINT third," says the designer. "You can always make
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opposite, top, and below:
 In the study, a room not given
 to a lot of light, Shelley went
 "with the flow," painting it in
 Balsam by Ralph Lauren,
 which, she says, gives the study
 the feel of a "cozy paneled
 room." It contrasts with the
 rest of the light-filled house.
 Expansive bookcases provide
 space for collections, and table
 lamps were made from old
 coffee canisters with
 grasscloth shades.
 right: A large European
 tapestry from the 16th- or
 17th-century adds a touch of
 texture and history.
 opposite below: Sleek sconces
 and fittings give the
 all-white powder room a
 modern sensibility.



A fine art major, Shelley once worked as a fashion stylist in advertising at Macy's before joining the executive training program as a buyer at Bloomingdale's. It was being "sent to Siberia," i.e., the Bloomingdale's Toy Department, that ended her retail career, though not before she met her husband, who was selling Snoopy and other Peanuts toys.

Together they purchased a house in Pound Ridge, and Shelley decided to study interior design as a way of learning how to decorate it. Over the course of four years, she attended Parsons at night, all the while designing interiors for clients on the side. Her creative juices flowing, she found she could not get enough. The freedom to design in three dimensions proved irresistible.

Seventeen years into owning her own firm, Shelley has designed homes for clients in Connecticut, Westchester and the Hamptons. Occasionally she moonlights on special jobs that take her into New York City, up to the Cape, and out to California. »



above: Intent on luring her daughter up from the city on weekends, Shelley outfitted her bedroom with a canopy bed in tiger maple based on an antique four-poster, an old Chinese garden stool she borrowed from her mother-in-law and a glass-fronted cabinet from Thailand. The figures atop the cabinet are Indonesian. below left: Shelley designed a boutique hotel bathroom for her daughter, who works at MTV. The floor is limestone from Waterworks; fittings are from Rohl; medicine cabinet and sconces are from Restoration Hardware. opposite: Shelley chose this large self-portrait by a Czech artist because it reminded her of her daughter.



She regularly sources goods all over the state, from dealers and shops in Stamford, New Canaan, Sharon, Woodbury, New Preston, New Milford and Hudson, and says she prefers to work with vendors with whom she has a relationship.

"I feel I've earned this," she says about the house she admits would be tough to leave. "I worked so hard to be here, and in my darkest moments, I didn't believe it could happen."

The former traditionalist has migrated toward her own interpretation of modernity, producing a totem to the tranquility and simplicity of that famous house around the corner.

With phase one complete, phase two—re-designing the cupola, tweaking the exterior finish, adding a pediment to façade, shingling the roof and adding copper gutters and leaders—can't be far behind. **am**

Resources

Shelley Morris Interior Design, 203-801-9911; shelley Morris interiors.com

JMKA Architects, 203-222-1222; jmkarchitects.com

TR Building & Remodeling, 203-664-1303; trbuilt.com

