

# THE SURPRISE *WITHIN*

A self-described “glutton for construction,” a Houston designer updates her family’s home in three phases, strategically keeping pace with their evolving lifestyle.

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THIS PHOTO: A revamped reading niche hosts Courtney Elias' extensive collection of art history and interior design books. The bookcase's custom aubergine marine-grade paint "is so high gloss it looks wet," she says. OPPOSITE: From upholstery to flowers, Courtney's favorite lavender hues are threaded throughout her home.



Courtney Elias remembers a lot of carpet padding, sawdust, and eating out of coolers in her childhood. “I’m so lucky my Mom taught me about renovation and design,” says the owner of Houston’s Creative Tonic design firm, known for her gutsy blends of color, pattern, art, and diverse styles.

That pedigree erased the qualms she might have had the stormy day she and husband Mark stopped at the open house of a modern stucco. Its defining exterior features were clerestory windows, a metal roof, and its evident repair needs. Those maintenance concerns fell by the wayside when she stepped inside and beheld floor-to-ceiling windows and an open floor plan that seemed perfect for their three young sons—skateboards, scooters, and all. “Most people would fill this house with iconic midcentury furniture,” she says. “But I wanted a bright, happy home.”

Rather than renovate all at once, the couple stirred up sawdust in phases, primarily as time and resources allowed. First up: overall maintenance and the enclosure of a balcony to double the bedrooms from two to four without changing the home’s overall footprint. The second phase jump-started when a burst pipe warped the original redwood floors, sparking a proverbial domino effect that led to new flooring, then a major kitchen overhaul, a revamped reading nook, and a whole-house decor refresh

involving rearranged artwork and new fabrics and rugs. Three years later, phase three started when inclusion on a holiday home tour prompted redoing the master suite, covered patio, garden, and swimming pool.

“The boys were older, so it was time for Mark and me to spoil ourselves a bit,” Courtney says of the new dramatic bath tiled in black-and-white marble and the flower-bower bedroom that rivals a Parisian boutique hotel. And following her philosophy that every room needs three purposes, Courtney flipped the suite’s unused exercise space into a ladies’ lounge—complete with cotton-candy pink walls and electroplated crystal-flower chandeliers—where goddaughters prep for prom, girlfriends gather for sushi, and Mark sits and talks while Courtney finishes dressing.

“Not renovating all at once has really suited our needs,” Courtney says. “At the time we bought the house, it was perfect for the boys. And now we’re finding it is a great house for the two of us to live in and entertain. To me that’s been the biggest and happiest surprise of all. My Mom thought you should move every seven years to meet changing family needs. But we overstayed our welcome, preferring to rethink our space than move. And it’s worked out wonderfully for us.”

FOR RESOURCES, SEE PAGE 122.

THIS PHOTO: The entry's gilt furnishings juxtaposed with mod lavender fabrics clue visitors they're in for some surprises.

OPPOSITE: Abstract paintings by Amanda Talley elevate the living room's decor. "I don't view art as an accessory," Courtney says. "I view it as part of the heart and story of the home, part of your travels and journeys, and an expression of the things that you love."



LEFT: Grandma's opaline chandelier commands top billing in the sole dining area, where up to 10 comfortably circle around a glass-top table. A vibrant blue fabric showcasing a modern take on toile embraces the pool view. OPPOSITE: To align the original kitchen with the home's bright, art-gallery feel, Courtney installed a campaign chest-style island capped with a waterfall marble countertop, enlarged two corner windows, fronted existing cabinetry with mirrors, and swapped upper cabinets for a 4-inch brass art shelf.





## Q&A with Interior Designer Courtnay Elias

Never one to shy away from pattern, color, or an unorthodox blend of styles, Courtnay Elias shares why going bold and being fearless with your design choices really is the most fun.

**Q: What do you like about pattern?**

**A:** My eye always wants to be stimulated, so I love pattern for the visual interest it provides. People are afraid of pattern, but look in nature. There's tree bark, leaves, rocks, and the

sky filled with clouds. Or look back in historical design books, and it's pattern on pattern on pattern. It's classic.

**Q: You seem to have a thing for wallpaper.**

**A:** I'll use as much wallpaper as a client will let me to add texture and pattern. There are incredible designs available today. Wallpaper is a very traditional element, but it fits any kind of home. I like to use it in a modern way. Even if your whole house is painted white, pick one room and do a grass cloth just to add texture.

**Q: Can you have too much of a good thing?**

**A:** If you love a lot of pattern like I do, you need places for your eye to find rest. So if you have a room with a patterned wallpaper and rug, then maybe the next room is painted white, and pattern transitions to pillow fabrics, artwork, and accents. The next room can be busy again. With that ebb and flow of pattern, every room still has that element of boldness to it.

**Q: Why go bold?**

**A:** I think: *Why not go bold?* If you like to have fun, why not bring that into your house? Even if you gravitate to a monochromatic palette, throw some oddball thing in the room for interest. Your home should be a collection of things you gathered over your life. It doesn't have to feel decorated. If you inherited Grandma's crazy china, put it out. You can't have everything out of catalogs. Let's put Grandpa's traditional clipper ship painting in a modern acrylic frame and do a powder room around it.



“On the inside, our house is a little bit like a French macaron.”

HOMEOWNER AND  
INTERIOR DESIGNER  
COURTNAY ELIAS

ABOVE: A brass-and-agate lamp reflects the barely there quality of vintage acrylic-and-brass nesting tables in Courtnay's lounge. ABOVE RIGHT: Plexiglass fronts provide a clear view to the accessories inside drawers in the lounge. RIGHT: Sliding glass doors flood the lounge with light, which bounces off the high-gloss walls, mirrored shelves, and black-and-white marble herringbone floors. OPPOSITE: Courtnay swapped the bath's once-dark shower and awkward climb-up-and-over tub for an open shower, burnished aluminum tub, a new 12-foot industrial-style window, and double skylights overhead. “I lucked out and found a busy modern tile for the bath that was way under \$10 a square foot,” Courtnay says. “I used four different sizes of that tile in our bath to lay a Versailles pattern.”





RIGHT: The master bedroom's 20-foot ceilings lower to a 7-foot alcove—perfect for wallpaper. FAR RIGHT: Courtney debated the bedroom's floral headboard fabric choice and magnolia wallpaper, which extends inside built-ins flanking the bed. "I kept thinking: *You can't put these two together, you just can't*," she says. "But they made me smile. So I did." OPPOSITE: Courtney gave an ornate glass-fronted cabinet and gilded frame pride-of-place in her dressing room.



## Floor plan

TOTAL SQ. FT.: 4,800

BEDROOMS: 4

BATHROOMS: 3 full, 1 half

## UPPER LEVEL



