

The architectural curve of the staircase creates a natural nautilus shape, with the dining area at the bottom. B&B Italia's Seven dining table with Cappellini slipcovered chairs, at Intersum. Foscarini Twiggy ceramic lighting pendant. White porcelain animal sculpture on table is a flea-market find, discovered by Strickland's daughter.

# Beyond the pale



SCRATCH THE SURFACE OF DESIGNER JAN STRICKLAND'S PALEST TONAL-GRAY MUSEUM DISTRICT HOUSE, AND YOU'LL FIND MORE WHISPERS OF GRAY AND WHITE ... AS WELL AS TEXTURE, WIT AND EXQUISITE CRAFTSMANSHIP.

**W**hen designer Jan Strickland decided to move to a warmer climate from Westport, Connecticut, where she'd raised her two children, she picked "the most beautiful place in America," she says. "I had one kid in college on the East Coast and the other going to school on the West Coast. So I headed to Santa Barbara. I didn't know a soul. Haven't you ever just up and moved somewhere because it was so gorgeous?" It's a rhetorical question, but a revealing one. A Houston native who studied art, architecture and design at the University of Texas, Strickland was

enchanted by the area's Spanish Colonial Revival style architecture, with its monumental white stucco walls and pitched red-tile roofs, most of which was built in the early 20th century by noted architect George Washington Smith. So, when Strickland returned home to Houston in 2010, finding a house with architectural interest was a priority. "I knew I didn't want a typical two-story house with a long hallway with bedrooms coming off it," she says. "There are so many houses like that in Houston. I was looking for something with an unusual layout that still felt homey." A broker showed her a pocket listing in the Museum District for a modern 5,000-square-foot

house. "I walked in before it was even on the market and said, 'This is it.'" Built in 1997 by Glassman Shoemaker Maldonado Architects for artist Pam Johnson, the house's pitched metal roof and broad, white stucco exterior reminded her of Santa Barbara architecture. "It's almost a modern version of George Washington Smith's style, with its front a fortress of stucco, few small windows and the mystery of what lies inside," she says. "The front architecture does not hint to the internal layout."

Neighbors had nicknamed it the "coffee can house" because of a front feature that pops out in a semicircular fashion to coddle a winding staircase —



much like a coffee can sliced in half. The architectural element provided the unusual interior spaces Strickland wanted. But first, a few changes were needed to make it more personal, including adding a missing entry vestibule. "I like an entry so that when guests walk in, they can take a pause, then continue to the rest of the house," she says. To carry out the renovations, she enlisted the help of the original architects, working directly with Ernesto Maldonado and contractor Gary Irman. "It was important to keep the integrity of the house," she says. "They had spent months and months designing it the first time and knew it better than anybody."

In addition to expanding the master bedroom and bath upstairs and a downstairs powder room,

Strickland converted a bar area at the bottom of the "nautilus" created by the staircase, into a small but spectacular dining room. "It's the most beautiful space in the house, with all the light coming in," she says. The former dining room then became a living room. "For me, interior design begins with the architecture and the feeling the space creates. From there, the space is brought to life with the furnishings and artwork it inspires — the things that bring soul to a home."

But, making existing furnishings fit a new house, especially one with unconventional spaces, can be tricky. Luckily, Strickland was able to start from scratch. "When we closed on my house in Santa Barbara, they called and said the buyers also wanted to purchase all of the furniture," she says. The dining area, with its

half-circle shape, presented one of the biggest design challenges. A round table would be expected, and a rectangular or square would be too stiff. She chose B&B Italia's Seven dining table for its soft triangular shape. "It's perfect for that area," she says. Foscarini's Twiggy ceramic pendant arches over the center of the table from a tiny patch of ceiling to the side — a graceful solution to an almost impossible overhead lighting situation.

Moving the dining room into the nautilus area opened up a large space for the living room. Selecting the right pieces for it was a matter of reimagining how the room would be used. "You have to think, 'Hmm, this was actually designed to be a dining room, and to make it a living room, you have different traffic patterns,'" she says. "So, positioning the furniture



In the entry, a collection of Piero Fornasetti's *Tema e Variazioni* plates, Cappellini chair, at Internum and side table.



wasn't easy. It was originally designed to have a dining table, and you could walk on either side of it. It was very hard to come up with furniture that would make a comfortable conversation area." Playing off the semicircular space in the next room, Strickland focused on curved Italian furniture, such as a rounded-edge Poliform sofa, a pair of B&B Italia Husk chairs designed by Patricia Urquiola and a round Cappellini coffee table. In fact, rounded softness repeats throughout the house, with few hard-edged pieces anywhere. With so many rooms flowing seamlessly into each other, Strickland wanted to create a sense of intimacy within the open spaces. "I used cedar stool tables in each room and chose different things to create coziness, such as the color palette and alpaca-fur pillows," she says.

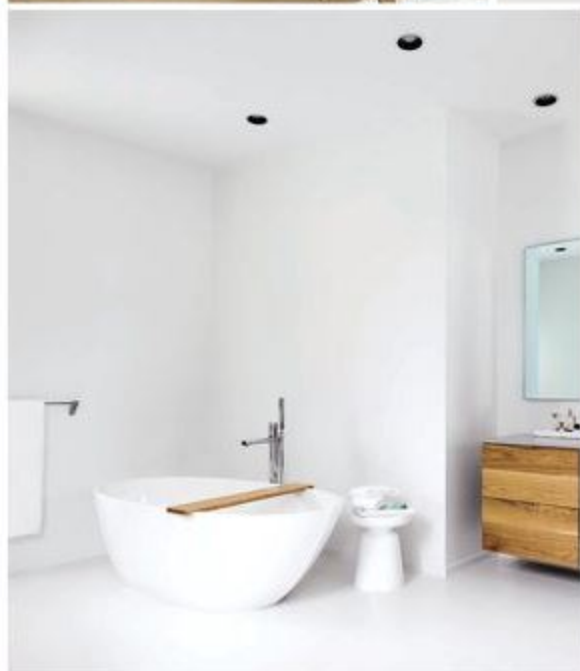
Ample natural light, gentle hues and unstained natural oak add to the diaphanous quality. "The feeling of the house is very Zen and serene," Strickland says. "It's almost like living in a tree

house, with its random windows and light coming in at different times of the day." The walls' gray paint "is very pale on the spectrum," says Strickland, who found that "even the palest colors seemed garish. It's as if the house doesn't want color." But it's people who make a space pop, not color, she notes. "One of my mentors once told me people should stand out in a room, not the furnishings."

But don't be fooled. There's plenty going on beneath the subtle surface of Strickland's rooms: White rubby linen upholstery contrasts with the smooth gloss of white tables, designed to bounce sunlight. Unstained oak floors, natural-wood furniture (such as Marc Newson's Wooden chair for Cappellini in the entry) and oak cabinetry in the master bath keep things grounded. Unvarnished wood also references nature — another tenet that recurs throughout the house and includes a Cappellini oak Antler chair that Strickland wittily upholstered in curly lamb. Other flights of fancy occur in a

Louis-style chair called *Deshabillé* — or undressed — by Italian manufacturer Baxter, which has stripped the backside to expose the bare stitches of its jute padding and knots of string. It's both an ode to ancient craftsmanship and a nod to furniture as conceptual art. In the living room, a sculpture of a sitting dog created by an English artist from repurposed rope that is amusingly realistic, and, in the entry — as if to set the tone for the rest of the house — Fornasetti's *Tema e Variazioni* face plates hang en masse on the wall, a chorus of innumerable expressions.

Full of good art and fine contemporary furnishings, Strickland's museum-area house works beautifully on many levels. But it wasn't easy getting there. "It's very hard to do your own house, especially if you are a designer — you have so many options, and you know too much," she says. "But I'm very happy with the way it looks, the way it feels and functions."



Second page, clockwise from top:

Jon Strickland and her 16-year-old Yorkie, Kirby, in the TV room. Minutti sectional, B&B Italia ottoman and side table, Cappellini Antler chair, Poliform cedar side table. Horse artwork was a gift from the artist.

Natural oak and art of animals in the dining area play up the house's nature theme.

In the living room, the equine artwork and rope dog sculpture have both wit and a nature feel. Poliform sofa, Cappellini coffee table, French-style chair, *Deshabillé*, by Baxter; David Weeks chandelier; Poliform side tables. Ochre lamp, Pair of Husk chairs by Patricia Urquiola for B&B Italia.

This page clockwise from top left:

A built-in wall system by Molteni & C. Cappellini Antler chair, from Internum.

Jon Strickland ascends the stairs to the second-floor landing. The curved staircase is enclosed inside a half-circle area that pops out from the front facade.

In the master bedroom, the sandblasted oak mirror is from Italy. The chair-and-a-half is by Casa Milano.

In the powder bath, tiles designed by Patricia Urquiola. Chrome towel bar by Gessi.

In the master bath, oak custom cabinetry, Westlyn tub, Gessi fixtures, West Elm ceramic stool.