



Photo by Barry Fitzgerald

FIRST BODIES, NOW BEDROOMS

WRITTEN BY VICTORIA LESSER

I'm a New Yorker, born and raised, but in 1981 an adventure was in the making. I took my then ten year old son Justin, a Master's degree in psychology, a sewing machine, a tiny clothing business (I only knew how to sew leather, fabric needed a skill greater than what I possessed), one thousand dollars (\$1000), and we moved to America's southernmost city, Key West Florida. It was a blissful time of six toed cats and coconut smoothies and all one needed to get around was a great bicycle. Everyone knew each other, the name and number of kids you had and it was the smallness of the island and sense of community that kept my attention while I honed my craft.

But after twenty-five years, Key West no longer felt like home and it was the Catskills that beckoned me to once again move north of the border. So I planted my feet in Sullivan County, which for me has always been a place of imagination and dreams. It was here that I spent my childhood summers and we all know what those summers mean when it comes to the development of who we might later become. It is the spirit of place found here which helps inform my aesthetics; so I was excited and honored when the Jeff Journal asked me to write about my life and experiences as an Interior Decorator. Whether at work



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Top: Here is a great example of creating a place that fills all of one's needs in just one room. This loft had such a sense of space, it's height and width made it possible to fill each corner without making it feel cluttered. Great light and an eclectic collection of furnishings turned this one room into a complete home and office that was a joy to be in. **Bottom:** This client loved her bedroom and was not concerned with what it would cost to make it her most special place. The armoire was hand painted by an artist who mimicked the pattern of the silk fabric used to custom make the bed-skirt, the bed was dressed with the finest linens from Italy and the window treatments were also made of the finest silk.

on a home space, workspace or both, I create in response to my own inner rhythms. My training in psychology has given me an edge that enables me to understand what others want and need for themselves, so that I can create functional spaces within the structure. What I do is reveal the process needed to transform the interior walls of their house into their home.

I don't ever claim this is easy, it is, however, simple. Webster's defines interior design as "The art or practice of planning and supervising the design and execution of architectural interiors and their furnishings". At heart is the art and science of understanding people's behavior in order to create functional spaces within the structure built or in the process of being built. So let's say you already have a house or are thinking of buying one, maybe it will be a full time residence or just a weekend/summer retreat. With this in mind there are important questions to be asked and ultimately answered, since a relationship will be formed between you and your home. What you are willing to put into this house will determine what it gives back to you. It's essential to know your hopes, needs and wants if you're going to be able to create that space within the given parameters of the building and most importantly, the "budget".

I chose the title of this article "First



Top Photos: Here's a perfect example of how one can expand a space beyond what it first presents itself to be. Taking ceilings back to their original height, removing a wall and finding just the right furnishings to make the room work for one's wants and needs. **Bottom Left:** My attention to detail helps connect the interior to exterior spaces.



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Bodies Now Bedrooms" because prior to dressing bedrooms I dressed bodies (living ones, that is). While I was never one to personally like to "dress up", I made my living "dressing up" others. I mostly dressed people in the entertainment industry and came to know what demands were put on them. My celebrity clients lived a good portion of their lives in the public eye and needed to have their clothing reflect their respective, distinct images. With this in mind, I learned to become sensitive to what would make them not only look good but enable them to feel comfortable in the outfits that would often times define them.

I did however love dressing up my home. As my clothing business grew so did my passion for renovating and decorating homes. So when I left New

York and moved to Key West I had the good fortune to renovate and decorate more than a few places. Being someone who does not like long commutes (and having raised a child by myself) I always created spaces wherein I could both live and work. Clients coming for fittings would see my home and, more often than not, express their wish for their own place to look and function as did mine. My response to their compliments was to say, "Well I've dressed your body so why not let me dress your bedroom".

The measures used to make a body look good in a linen outfit are similar to those needed for decorating the interior of ones home. Size is a given, shape a consideration and comfort is what I demand when creating spaces for people to live in. My job is to take the products categorized as "Home Furnishings" and-

correctly place them in rooms that have been painted just the right colors and hues so that all these furnishings can comfortably coexist. Whether those furnishings are in a living room, a kitchen, a bedroom, or the makings for an entire old country inn, the functions of form and their placements are configured to reflect the stories of who will be there and how they will play.

When it comes to color, I choose carefully. I visit the room as the sun rises as well as when it sets. Paint colors change dramatically once in spaces and at different times of the day. To be able to create a space that will fulfill its function properly means listening to client's expectations of what their homes should do for them. Will the house meet the demands of small children? Will the one who loves to cook not only have a kitchen that looks good, but one that works as well as it looks? Do they want a show place or just a place? Will they let the dog sit on the couch? With these



Here's Roxie the Dane, Baxter the Pug and Ruby, my little Frenchie right at home.

thoughts and a myriad of others I come up with a plan. Bare spaces become kitchens, bathrooms might become the most important room in the house, and I've made the indoor spaces expand to join the outdoors....and so go the transformations.

When it's a new construction or an addition to an existing home, what gets done behind the walls is very important. Having done many homes I know that the plumbing and electric upgrades can be some of your greatest costs, but this is not where you cut corners, since water (plumbing) and fire (electricity) can destroy a home in an instant. With this said, if I'm called in during the early stages I help my clients make decisions that will be made once, ultimately saving them the major costs of re-doing a sloppy job. With the budget in mind the goal is to make sure that



Due to the room below, that had a vintage tin ceiling that I did not want to disturb, an entire bedroom was devoted to this bathroom. Plumbing was raised to accommodate the bathroom's needs and this made it possible to create the favorite bathroom at The Old North Branch Inn.

there will be funds left to dress the well-built room with well deserved and loved furnishings.

I know the decorator in me is more in tune with how I approach the spaces that I create. This is what I like most to share with others – whether the people are new owners of property in Upstate NY or long-standing homeowners who just want to spruce up what they already have, wherever it may be. This is how the process works for me, it comes from my experience renovating, restoring and decorating homes for the last 25 years of my life. The advice that I give to people makes it possible for them to create spaces that are personal to them.

So as I run this 100 plus year old place known as The Old North Branch Inn, that I so lovingly restored and that has become a great space for me to showcase my work, I am happy for the opportunities that I have had since returning to Sullivan County. I have now added farmhouses, loft apartments and offices to my portfolio, and soon I will be part of the team refurbishing The Antrim Lodge. My responsibilities being to consult, furnish and complete the interior spaces. The famed fishing lodge that has been so challenged due to no fault of its own, will once again open its doors

to serve the town of Roscoe, a community that stood by the lodge all these years. Once again visitors will be drawn to this area and hopefully they will appreciate it here as much as we do. Understanding its important place in over 100 years of history and its position in Sullivan County, I will take care to decorate the 14 bedrooms,





This intimate courtyard makes bathing on a moon lit night absolutely delicious.

bathrooms, dining rooms, lounges and bar honoring its past as well as its present.

I believe it's important to try and spend your money where you live and I share this philosophy with my clients. With this in mind I comb the local townships first, which are rich with some great shops and great finds. I look for that unique piece that will start to define the room as well as represent the style of the home. I love mixing different periods of furniture and accessories, this makes shopping more fun, since one can choose to fill their room with favorite pieces, which when placed properly can live side by side without concern that they won't match.

So as the adventure continues I encourage others to enjoy the ride, that ultimately brings them to the threshold of that place you so dearly call home.....



This client found that their newly purchased weekend retreat had a kitchen that barely met their needs. We took the existing space down to the studs, repaired, strengthened, insulated and upgraded the wiring to accommodate new lighting and appliances. Using their existing cabinetry, adding a fresh coat of paint we gave them a fun kitchen to work in while keeping costs down.