

Seeing a Pattern

In her textiles, as well as in her home on Long Island Sound, Susan Harris energizes the familiar with color and fanciful forms

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Susan Harris, the designer behind Sea-Cloth fabrics and home furnishings, in the studio of the Connecticut house she shares with her husband, Chuck, and their twin sons; the interior was decorated by Lynn Morgan. Facing page: The house, designed by architect Bruce Beinfeld, evokes a classic seaside cottage. See Resources.



With all the bad press on suburban sprawl—it's a blight on the landscape, a drain on natural resources, visually monotonous—it's hard to remember how wonderful sprawl can be, provided, of course, that it's confined within a single structure. There's a lot to be said for houses with long hallways, screened porches, big windows fronted by window seats, clattery back stairs, and expansive rooms with overstuffed chairs for reading and capacious tables on which to spread out newspapers, homework, puzzles, and Scrabble. And that's just the kind of house Susan Harris has created for herself; her husband, Chuck, a retired investment banker who now works as an education advocate; their twin teenage sons, Rob and Alex; and the family's three dogs.

Harris, an artist who paints watercolors inspired by nature and patterns, has seen enormous changes in the past decade. Eight years ago, she and her family moved from Old Greenwich, Connecticut, to nearby Darien, where she grew up.

They originally bought a house on a tidal inlet of Long Island Sound, with a view of the brown-and-white Greens Ledge lighthouse. The setting may have been idyllic, but the house was "shamefully ornate," says Harris. "It was full of marble. One room was French, another was Italian. The kitchen had been designed for servants—with no windows. It was a real hodgepodge." Initially the family planned to renovate, but discovered there was so much weight on the foundation that it would be safer, and easier, simply to tear down the place and start over, a process they began four years ago.

About the same time, Harris launched an entirely new venture, transforming some of her patterned drawings into screen-printed fabrics. Then she met Deirdre Halper, a former marketing executive with Coach, and the company SeaCloth was born. Now Harris finds herself manipulating her watercolor designs in various color combinations using computer programs and creating patterns that are featured on everything from upholstery

In the living room, a sofa and slipper chairs are upholstered in Facet cotton-linen and topped with pillows covered in Gypsy Bloom and Flutter fabrics, all by SeaCloth; the vintage French bentwood-style chair is from Bungalow. Prints by Howard Hodgkin and Richard Diebenkorn share the mantel with an etching bought at a local auction. See Resources.









In the dining room, Palecek's Bistro chairs surround a French zinc-top farm table from Barbara Garfield Design; the Ferro iron chandelier by Formations is from Holly Hunt, and the hand-woven linen rug is by A.M. Collections. Facing page, clockwise from top: The library's club chairs are covered in Gypsy Bloom cotton-linen and the ottomans in Archidot cotton-linen, both by SeaCloth; the Spider's Nest tables are from Tucker Robbins. Vintage French bistro chairs from Barbara Garfield Design and a slate-top table, Deauville chaise longues by Janus et Cie with cushions covered in SeaCloth's Chic Stripe acrylic offer a view of the dock from the back terrace. See Resources.

In the poolhouse, vintage rattan furniture is updated with cushions covered in SeaCloth's Big Bloom cotton-linen, the circa-1900 bronze window grill is from Pam Martine, and the Union Pier sisal rug is by Crate & Barrel. Facing page, clockwise from left: Chuck Harris's office cottage. Morgan had the master bedroom's four-poster painted a soft blue; the wool rug is by Country Swedish. A vintage pedestal table and upholstery slipcovered in SeaCloth's Sea Vine cotton-linen. See Resources.





textiles to tote bags and garden umbrellas. The fabrics are sold through designer showrooms and at the SeaCloth home-furnishings store the partners recently opened in Greenwich.

But if SeaCloth is ongoing and expanding, the house, thankfully, is complete. Harris hired architect Bruce Beinfeld to design a place that is at once spacious and cozy, rambling yet intimate. "Bruce is brilliant," says Harris, "because he thinks more like an artist than an architect. He has great, bizarre ideas." From the front, Beinfeld's design appears almost storybook charming with its triple peaks and skirt siding, an effect furthered by the adjacent gable-roofed, window-boxed cottage that serves as Chuck's office. From the back, however, the house has a nautical feel, reminiscent of a gracious old seaside country club, with a terrace, a wall of windows, and a turreted screened porch. Up a rise, near the tennis court that her sons have turned into a skateboard park, is the stone pool-house, with Harris's skylighted studio above it.

Inside the house, the floors are reclaimed planks; the ceilings are hand-hewn beams; and the walls are gleaming white paneling. A warm golden yellow emanates from the expansive kitchen. ("I love to cook," she says, a fact attested to by rows





of cookbooks.) A hall runs parallel to the main rooms. "I took my mother's advice," says Harris, "and added guest suites on the ground floor. She told me you don't want to climb the stairs as much when you're older." Upstairs is the master suite and bedrooms for the boys as well as a playroom, complete with pool table, easily accessible by those back stairs. "I grew up in a small house, so I was under my parents' noses all the time," says Harris. "I wanted to give our boys more privacy."

With the help of decorator Lynn Morgan, Harris has filled the rooms with comfortable upholstered pieces, slipcovered in SeaCloth patterns that look as if they might have been produced by some unlikely love child of Billy Baldwin and Lilly Pulitzer, boldly colorful and reassuringly rational at the same time. On the walls are prints by her artistic hero, British painter Howard Hodgkin, and a few of her own works.

"We wanted to take advantage of the views but to create a place that looked like it had always been here," says Harris. "We wanted it open and informal, a house for entertaining, and eventually," she says with a smile, "for grandchildren. I've always loved old barns and boathouses, and Bruce captured that feeling. It's funny," she adds, gazing out from an expansive upstairs window as the tide retreats. "I never thought I'd come back to this town. But I love it. I even love the mud." ■

In a guest room, a headboard in SeaCloth's Water Flower cotton-linen, a bed skirt, bedcover, and pillow shams in the firm's Boardwalk cotton-linen, and a wool rug by Country Swedish; the vintage French rattan bureau is from Bungalow, and the lamps are from Dovecote. Facing page, clockwise from top left: A limestone floor and a shower curtain of Boardwalk cotton-linen in a guest bath. The powder room walls are papered in Hinson's Madagascar wall covering. A guest room's curtains and shades are of SeaCloth's Sun Stripe cotton-linen; the headboards, shams, and tote are of Big Bloom fabric. See Resources.



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