

Design Like a Pro

text Michelle Gringeri-Brown
photography Lincoln Barbour



Jessica Helgerson lives in a 540-square-foot cottage with her husband and two kids on an island in Oregon's Columbia River. Its green roof is planted with local mosses, the interior is vaguely Swedish-schoolhouse-meets-midcentury-and-modern and Paul McCobb chairs surround a custom walnut dining table made by her architect husband. Naturally, their remodel emphasized reuse and sustainability, of course there's a chicken coop and beehives, and yes, they've hosted farm to table dinners. But this story isn't about Helgerson's home.

The owner of an anonymous interior design company in Portland, when Helgerson was younger, she thought that green building was going to change the world. "I don't think that anymore; I've mellowed with the years," she says with a smile. "My green inclinations manifest themselves now by real respect for the structures we work on and [by] wanting each remodel to be [that home's] last. We want to get it right."

Here she shares several midcentury-flavored renovations, along with her thoughts on why these rooms work and what a professional eye brought to the party.

1957 Split-level Ranch

Starting with a house that was run-down and had been bungalowified by the previous owners, Helgerson relocated the galley kitchen to make it part of an open plan living/dining room. The hardwood floors were ebonized and every-

thing else was painted white—her favorite color.

"I love white—it creates a beautiful, airy backdrop," she says. "[Here we have] a pale, fresh, restrained canvas with little touches of green in a room that looks out to the garden. The brick fireplace surface was mamed and had epoxy from the previous remodel that we couldn't remove, so we opted to paint it.

"Because of all the white and lightness, we wanted some contrast and grounding on the floors," Helgerson continues. That grounding was repeated in the decorative sculptures on the fireplace wall, the legs of the live-edge coffee table, the contemporary floor lamp and the base cabinets in the adjoining kitchen. Helgerson's firm—currently six women designers—worked with the homeowners to find vintage furnishings, including a rocking chaise, a black-frame daybed with original upholstery and two Danish modern armchairs.

"We were going for high contrast and things that would pop against all the white, so that was the reason for dark elements," Helgerson says.



Shot from the new open kitchen, a dining area is off camera behind the Danish modern armchairs; before, the kitchen was behind the left wall. Helgerson's husband, Yianni Doulis, crafted the spalted-maple coffee table, while other high/low elements include a Kenneth Coburne floor lamp and a \$150 IKEA natural fiber rug. The daybed (previous spread) wears its original nubby boucle, while the chaise was recovered in white leather. Decorative details include the Portuguese eel traps over the fireplace, the Niche Modern trio of pendant lamps, the Chinese garden stools and the French blown-glass demijohn bottles.

Contemporary Condo

In a small Portland condo in the trendy Pearl District, the Jessica Helgerson Interior Design staff listened closely to their clients' less-is-more philosophy. Instead of filling a blank wall in the

dining area with built-ins, a credenza or bookshelves, an abstracted land and seascape mural gives the area lots of impact.

"Emily Knudsen Leland, one of our designers,



first proposed the mural as an upholstered headboard on a previous project but it didn't happen. The [condo] clients were on a limited budget and live a very environmentally minded, spare lifestyle: everything is pared down and they borrow books from the library—they wouldn't have had stuff to store," Helgerson explains.

"The apartment is north-facing so we chose a soft yellow for the ceiling to bring in a feeling of warmth and sunlight, while the walls are a pale grey. The couple were quite cautious, worried the gray would be depressing, but they love it."

A show-stopping light fixture over the reclaimed teak table and reused Eames shell chairs mirror each other in the designer's eye. "The chairs are an inversion of the light fixture, which looks like ship's sails and is in the style of an abstracted Fortuny lamp," she explains. "I like big pieces of wood, particularly in a table. Glass and stone and metal tables are kind of cold—there's something really nice about leaning up against a piece of wood. We frequently pair it with something more modern, in this case, the chairs."

The firm fitted a niche on the mural wall with open bookshelves and minimal built-in storage. The chandelier is an Oly Sabina and the Eames shell chairs have chrome Eiffel bases; the table is to the trade only.



Before





Gray walls, heavy drapes and a cowhide on the light carpet make the den cozy. The typographic artwork, cube coffee table and planter behind the tripod floor lamp are all bold, chunky elements, while the vintage-style pillows inject a shot of color. The built-in housing the TV is off camera on the left wall.



Before

Builder's Special

For a late-'70s builder's house, JHD designer Jesse Moyer contrasted large, open, light-palette rooms with a dark, intimate den. The dining room, with its 13' table, flows into the kitchen, and a white-painted brick fireplace divides the living and dining areas. The couple who own this home divested themselves of all of their furniture, starting fresh with a white sectional that would easily seat 10 and sculptural midcentury chairs on dark wide-plank hardwood.

In the den, which is visible from the great room, the designers flipped the dark-floors-light-walls model on its head. "The owners watch TV in the den, and dark colors are fantastic at creating a warm, comfortable, cozy, intimate environment. The carpet was existing, so the light floors were just what we inherited," Helgeson says. "Running the wood floors in from the adjoining room would have been our dream."

The television was relocated from the back wall to above an existing built-in that the firm modernized by adding solid doors and painting it the same gray as the rest of the room. Now the center of focus is on the silk-velvet couch custom made for the space and a framed silkscreen print designed by Knudsen Leland that includes words and dates important to the family.

"It's a nice counterpoint to the great big living room, and they say guests always gravitate to it," Helgeson mentions. "There's something about the human scale and the intimacy of a small, dark room."

Remodel 1.0

For a family in a 1954 walkout ranch, updates are scheduled to take place over a number of years. "The upper floor remodel included the kitchen, dining room, living room and hall. The original kitchen and dining room had dark wood

paneling and only a few small windows despite the beautiful south-facing views," Helgeson says. "We added windows and French doors along the whole south facade and removed a wall separating the kitchen and dining room."



The footprint of the kitchen expanded a bit into the back hall, making room for a center island, and low bookcases replaced the wall between the dining room and kitchen. White lacquer and bamboo cabinets, quartzite counters and hardwood floors were chosen for this new version. "Flat-panel doors feel appropriate to this period of house; when we work on earlier, turn-of-the-century houses, we usually do an inset door," says Helgeson. "We try to stay away from trendiness with the permanent things we do. A cool light fixture or trendy chair that the next person might not like, that's not a big deal."

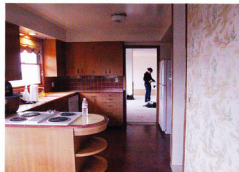
We asked if there are common missteps they see when homeowners design their own kitchens. "A lot of remodeling gets done rather haphazardly. People often think they can do things themselves because they have a flair, a nice sense of style, but for me, flair and style is the icing on the cake," she says.

"Space planning comes first. We try to have 48", or at the minimum, 42" from one counter to the next; when we have enough room to get an island in and still maintain those [measurements], I think an island is awesome and a good idea. But it doesn't matter how beautiful the finishes are if you're always bumping into things or struggling to get around the space well, so that's the first thing we look at."

If you're despairing that your own stabs at interior design will never look as polished as these homes, chalk part of that up to the set dressing Helgeson does for Lincoln Barbour's photo shoots. "You really have to declutter. When we shot our own kitchen, we habitually have a lot of things on our open shelves; we had to take out about a hundred percent so it didn't just look like a mess. What looks good in reality doesn't always look good in a photo."

Before shots courtesy the designer. See more coverage at jhinteriodesign.com, and view photographer Lincoln Barbour's work at lincolnbarbour.com.

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Before

Below, left: The original kitchen had some awkward retrofitting, like the cooktop dropped into a short peninsula counter, but the biggest driver of this remodel was the desire to open up the floor plan and bring more light and views into the space.



Crestwood cabinets with flush overlay, flat-panel doors, an island with no appliances or fixtures to break up the work surface, a Nobel small pendant light over the sink and two Balroom pendants from Eureka were chosen for the new look. Seen on page 53, Kari Merkl of Merkl&

Studio fabricated the plywood table, which is wrapped with powder-coated steel and has a chrome base. The chairs are from IKEA, the Valiha pendant lamp is by Eureka Lighting and the pillow fabric on the bamboo banquette is from Amy Butler.