

style



Diva Designs

Interior designers draw on multiple talents to work wonders in our homes, aptitudes that often take years to perfect. But Glencoe interior designer Petra Adelfang was lucky enough to get a head start on many of those critical qualities early in life — as she embarked on an entirely different career.

Adelfang honed her keen mastery of spatial intelligence not during design school but during her

Glencoe designer Petra Adelfang learned the power of straight lines and clean form in her years as a prima ballerina. Today, she draws on that knowledge to work magic in area homes. *By Lisa Skolnik*

training at the School of American Ballet in New York City, where she studied to be a professional dancer, and later during her 10-year career as a member of the corps and a principal with Maria Tallchief's Chicago City Ballet (which became Ballet Chicago).

It's a talent she draws on every day.

"When I see a space, I know how to use it efficiently, or transform it into what it needs to be,

almost immediately. It's an intuitive response. And it's never a big drama that I have to brood over," she says with matter-of-fact candor.

"On stage, the way you have to interact with the space and other dancers, while at the same time follow a choreographer's directions, trains you to continuously analyze proportion, form and line. It became second nature to me. I find the same principles apply to the way you use space and furnish



a home. But it's easier to deal with all the pieces in a residence because they aren't moving targets," she teases.

Then there is her innate ability to blend furnishings of every ilk, be it the old with the new, the high with the low and the unconventional with the usual. In her living room, a Boesendorfer baby grand piano, Ikea lounge chair, Domicile Asian-style coffee table and tailored Room + Board day bed illustrates all points.

The venerated instrument is a cherished family heirloom, while the new pieces have been added thoughtfully, though irregularly, as budget allowed, with deference to substance and style.

"I figured the sofa would work for five to 10 years, the chair was chic but comfortable and the coffee table pulled the pieces together. Plus everything was cost effective," explains Adelfang, a single mom to Nick, now 12. In fact, the chair, an oiled acacia wood and rope affair for a mere \$59, is meant to be used outside. But Adelfang believed it would be one of those transformative pieces that would give the vignette an intriguing edge.

She chalks her mix-master tendencies up to yearly summer visits in childhood to see her Swedish grandparents.

"The Scandinavians live in harmony with the past and update things with a few carefully chosen new pieces," she explains. "You can't move forward without looking at the past. I believe that is a universal that applies to everything — not just our homes."

Despite these artistic gifts, Adelfang is a staunch pragmatist. "The reason why my clients end up hiring me is because I'm expedient and decisive. I have a clear vision of things, from what needs to be done to how to execute all the pieces of a project," she reckons.

And she has good reason for coming to this conclusion, since Adelfang, now 45, has made a number of speedy decisions in her life that have worked out well.

Joining Chicago City Ballet rather than holding out for a spot in the New York City Ballet, where she had also danced principal roles, was one such decision, a move that brought her to Chicago. And

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leaving ballet at her prime when the company ran out of money was another.

"I could have gone somewhere else to dance, but we had put down roots here," she notes.

But Adelfang was also intrigued by the students she saw attending classes in the Fine Arts Building, where the troupe practiced and Harrington School of Design (now Harrington College of Design) was based at the time.



"I thought it was a career with long-term potential, unlike ballet, so I enrolled and got a design degree," she says. After school, she interned for several firms and opened her own atelier in 2000.

Not surprisingly, when Adelfang and her husband decided to move to the suburbs six years ago for the schools, she knew immediately that the 1910 Glencoe farmhouse they saw was right for her family — despite multiple drawbacks.

"It needed a new foundation wall, the kitchen was awful and the room sizes weren't perfect, but I knew how I could rework the spaces to make them perfect for us," she explains.

Though the bulk of her renovation budget went into fixing the foundation's structural issues, "I had to do the kitchen quickly too because I couldn't live with it," she admits. Its 'issues' included "hideous tan tiles on the floor set in grody grout, characterless cabinets and ugly marble countertops in salmon, pink and black granite that reminded me of head cheese" she quips. "And there was no backsplash."

It took her less than a month to install new oak floors to match the rest of the house, a few new

Stairway and hall area: Persimmon paint on selected ceilings and walls energizes and unifies the entire environment.



Chair: Adelfang brings an oiled Acacia wood outdoor chair from Ikea inside to mix things up, much the same way her Swedish relatives do.



Kitchen: Adelfang splurged on a telescoping Artemide task lamp, which she installed as a pendant fixture. The tactic brings utility and a dose of industrial style and excitement to the sweeter, cleaner and more elegant elements in the kitchen.

appliances, new Carrara marble countertops, a stainless steel sheathe on the existing island and coat the kitchen cabinets with several coats of glossy white paint. The tactics turned the kitchen “from a muddled mess into a harmonious, pristine space,” she says.

She painted the rest of the house white until she could catch her breath and rebuild her budget, but even here she maximized the home’s architectural panache by using two different Benjamin Moore whites (the yellower China White on walls and bluer Super White on the trim) to make the home’s intricate millwork stand out with subtle definition.


Then came the fun part. “My house is like an experiment. I’m always changing things around and trying new strategies, but only when I have time. I’m usually thinking about my client’s house, so mine is catch as catch can,” she confides.

Still, when she painted a ceiling in a client’s home a bold color to lend a cavernous dining room more intimacy, she was inspired to do the same in her place with a persimmon red that has bold orange undertones. The success of the tactic encouraged her to use the color on a few living room walls as well.

“It’s strong, so it make a great counterpoint to all the whites and creams, and adds contrast and life to the spaces. But it’s also surprisingly neutral because I’ve stuck to such an edited palette,” she explains.

Also, in the last few months, Adelfang has had the time to track down a few new pieces, such as the Asian-style coffee table in the living room and an Eames-inspired lounge chair in her bedroom. “Both act as bridges to unify the other furnishings in the room, which are both traditional and modern,” she explains.

But someday, when budget allows, she plans to replace the daybed with an authentic Mies van der Rohe Barcelona version in white leather. “I think the scale and detailing on that piece is as perfect as you can get,” she muses.

Given her MO, we know that Adelfang will take the plunge when the time is right. Until then, she is sticking to the design dictums that have worked for her clients and in her own home. 



Here’s a short list of her tried and true strategies.

- 1. Simplify things.** Limit your palette and keep the materials and hues you use consistent. It’s not only easier — it yields better results. It makes your environment more cohesive and harmonious.
- 2. Don’t get overwhelmed by all the options in the marketplace.** When you see something and think you love it, you have to think it through before you buy it. Consider how much use you will get out of it, and how enduring it will be aesthetically. It requires discipline, and you have to train yourself to do it.
- 3. Look at your home as a whole, and furnish it holistically, even if you are doing it in bits and pieces.** You don’t want jarring style differences from room to room, which doesn’t mean you can’t be out-of-the box a bit. When you have a unified and simplified palette of materials and furnishings, something unusual becomes an intriguing counterpoint.
- 4. Don’t toss or tear out anything without thinking about how you can give it new life.** A decrepit old mahogany Empire bench she ebonized and recovered in trim cotton velvet went from fussy to feline and now holds court in her bedroom hallway.
- 5. Edit, edit, edit.** Less really is more, and you don’t want too many counterpoints. Otherwise they won’t stand out. You risk giving your place a flea market sensibility, though some go for that look.

styleBOOK

Rule-Breaking Rules: Get as tricky as the economy by mixing irreverent power pieces with basics you already own. Here are some chic but versatile options you can find in New Trier boutiques that will help you rock the rules.



► **Alexander McQueen Black Skull Ring Clutch:** With its glitzy but ghoulish clasp, this ladylike gem manages to be naughty and nice. \$1,795 at Shirise, 341 Park Avenue, Glencoe, 847/835-2595, www.shirise.com.



► **Jimmy Choo Fran Boot:** Super-slim stilettos, robust laces and peek-a-boo toes add glamour to a timeless bootie. \$1,095 at Shirise, 341 Park Avenue, Glencoe, 847/835-2595, www.shirise.com.



► **Christian Dior Thigh-High Boots:** Use the classic equestrian theme and sky-high length to your advantage by pairing these with a mini or short shorts. Don’t forget the tights. \$1,690 at Neapolitan, 715 Elm St., Winnetka, 847/441-7784, www.neapolitanonline.com.



► **VBH Messenger Bag:** Thanks to its slightly distressed leopard patterned demeanor and a clip that changes its position from across the body to your shoulder, this boldly printed Cavallino bag can dress an outfit up or down. \$3150 at Chalk, 2611 Prairie Ave., Evanston, 847/424-0011, www.chalkofevanston.com.



► **Prairie Underground Guinevere Hoodie:** Organic cotton and a made-in-Seattle provenance make this PC, but its super-fitted lines add a little rule-breaking sassy side (not to mention the platform heels). \$254 at Vibrato, 1515 Sheridan Road, Wilmette, 847/853-1434, www.vibratoboutique.com.