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**INTERVIEW WITH
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URBAN CALLING

WRITTEN BY DONNA PIZZI PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG KOZAWA

WHEN A RETIRED COUPLE WHO HAD SPENT THE LAST 45 YEARS of married life moving from one corporate East Coast location to another, decided to move closer to their children in Oregon, they assumed they would only need a part-time pied-à-terre. Before long the lure of urban life in Portland's Pearl District seduced them into seeking a larger, more permanent abode.

"We were looking at other condominiums," recalls the homeowner, "when I saw Becky Jackson, the real estate agent who had sold us our first fully-decorated condo at The Henry, in the lobby. She was there to show the condo next to ours, which was up for sale." Together the women viewed the all white space with 800 additional square feet, a terrace and three-directional views. It had, she concluded, great potential. Her husband agreed and the move was on.

"My husband and I were raised in Missouri. We like to watch the weather as it is happening, whether it's the beauty of the leaves changing, or the clouds rolling in from the coast. We get all of that here." Now the peripatetic couple was in virgin territory. They had never had the luxury of decorating an empty canvas before, and needed someone who could create the environment they were seeking: A sophisticated urban home that radiates calm amidst décor that is at once adult and grandchild friendly. "With lots of good gray Portland days," says the homeowner, "we wanted a light, sunshine feeling that wasn't bright or interfering."

Becky Jackson recommended Marilyn Soljaga of Soljaga Design Group because of her broad range of experience, which spanned the very same territory in which this couple had worked and played: Westport, Connecticut, Sun Valley, Martha's Vineyard, and, of course, the Pearl. Jackson and Soljaga knew one another's work as members of the Wednesday Women's Group, a bevy of high-end business women each hailing from a different profession. "Becky was right," says the homeowner. "Marilyn was excellent. She asked us to describe what we saw in our mind's eye in terms of color, words, emotions and practicality. She and Emily Augusta, Marilyn's senior designer, listened to our thoughts and visions, and then did the necessary space planning before presenting us with their ideas."

Once the space planning was achieved, the designers created a formal presentation for the homeowners, which they spread across the new condo's kitchen island. The presentation included three separate color palettes with corresponding furnishings, sustainable materials, and drawings of additional architectural details. The designers then walked through each room, illustrating which items, furniture and fabric were selected for each room, counseling the couple to feel free to mix things up as they saw fit.

"We were very involved in the whole process," recalls the homeowner, "and it was very exciting, fun and pleasant to see how much they respected our opinions, and balanced them against their expertise and our



Portland interior designer Marilyn Soljaga of Soljaga Design Group brings serene colors and a Zen-like atmosphere to this former all white condo - an anchorless space, say the new owners that used to "float away." To soften the vertical space, Soljaga hangs a pair of stunning custom iron pendant lights with organza shades as voluptuous counterpoint to the beveled silver leaf edges of the Pierrot Michael Berman mirror. More sensuous curves are found in the dark walnut Holly Hunt Siren chairs upholstered in a linen fabric by Jack Lenor Larsen. The McGuire Palazzo table is in a dark tobacco.



Artist Jeffery Brown's (Poulsbo, Washington) "Big Slant" from the Museum of Contemporary Craft adds drama to the fireplace mantel. The remaining balance of limestone slab used in the fireplace was used in the master closet countertop to reduce waste. The Kravet bamboo-style rug in a sand color echoes the wheat-painted walls, while a custom A. Rudin sofa done in Delano Peron Romo fabric sits in counterpoint to the A. Rudin chair, the side table for which is ironically named "The Henry" by Ironies. The Wendell Castle flemish mahogany coffee table has a chocolate lacquer underbelly. Two small Spinneybeck leather ottomans from Bright face off with the glass work on the coffee table by Jeremy Newman (Museum of Contemporary Craft), a Washington glass artist who also created two pieces on the Ventana console table behind the sofa.



having to live with our decisions.” All agreed that the biggest eyesore was the long alley-like entry way. “It needed to be divided or sectioned off to add interest,” explains Soljaga, who added two sets of pilasters crowned by contemporary headers to divide the space. “We repeated the same rhythm down the perpendicular hallway, and created a portico at their point of intersection.” Color also played a significant role in moving the eye along the hallways and into the main living area. “It was Marilyn’s brilliant idea to paint the opposing walls two different colors,” recalls the homeowner. “I never would have come up with that as a solution to draw you into the condominium. The warm grey wall acts as an anchor that blends with the dark pilasters and leads you to the deep, warm gold inset.”

Furniture maker Mike Manion built the pedestal which Soljaga designed to present the Julie Speidel sculpture as the focal point for the entry. “The pilasters have a reveal at the bottom, which defines the base where they begin,” explains Augusta, “so we added the reveal on the pedestal to match the pilaster design.”

Soljaga chose Olson & Jones Construction to carry out her design work, after learning they had done work in The Henry in the past. “Olson & Jones Construction were a tremendous team to work with,” says Soljaga. “They were very responsive and respectful of both the client and building’s needs. It was our first union, and I felt a very successful one. We’re looking forward to working together on another project soon.”

In an effort to create a more human scale to the living room, Soljaga had Olson & Jones tear out the original granite fireplace and replace it with Sea Grass limestone from Oregon Tile & Marble, which she tied to an adjoining built-in television cabinet via a low horizontal line that flows downward toward an eye-catching custom metal bench by Trovo Design Works. A stunning piece of glass art from Bullseye Gallery by Ted Sawyer reiterates the horizontal line as it crowns the built-in. Another Bullseye artist - Kirstie Rea - created the glass-tinted fork that rests below. “Living downtown,” say the homeowners, “has caused us to look for more industrial pieces of art that look as if they belong in this urban environment. We chose the Mark Bailey paintings for the entry for that reason.”

A healthy dose of cooperative give and take helped make the entire four month journey a delight for all concerned. “This was a huge undertaking for us,” admits the homeowner, but the designers and contractors were so professional, so in tune to our program and not theirs, that I would highly recommend them to anyone!”



OPPOSITE The den features a Michael Berman desk atop a Madison Millinger Oolong rug known as “Feathered.” The designers made the desk grandchild-proof by adding extra coats of lacquer to its top. The antique bronze table by McGuire adds a dash of urban flair to the den. Built-ins done in the same wood species and finish as the living room television cabinet rise from floor-to-ceiling. THIS PAGE Soljaga spotted these high-back Sorbonne chairs by McGuire prior to starting this job, and thought they would be perfect for this cozy spot near the window. An abstract flower painting by Allison Stewart of New Orleans (Gail Severn Gallery) completes the vignette.



SHOPTALK: SOLJAGA + AUGUSTA

Q: WHOSE WORK HAS HAD THE GREATEST INFLUENCE ON YOUR STYLE AS AN INTERIOR DESIGNER?

SOLJAGA: Locally, architect John Storrs, now deceased, who left his mark on the Northwest landscape with such notable projects as the Salishan Lodge in Gleneden Beach, the Portland Garden Club, and John's Landing, as well as numerous contemporary residences in and around Portland. I interviewed him for my thesis and he was very generous in loaning me numerous articles and stories regarding his successful career for my research. He was a wonderful man who has been called one of the fathers of northwest regional style. I love his use of wood and stone, the deep overhangs, and the simplicity of design. He believed that architecture should blend with the surrounding land. I was told he used to draw details on sheet rock at the job site – just take out his pen and draw the detail right on the wall. He called wood “an understandable, romantic material.”

Q: WAS THERE EVER A PROJECT YOU SAW THAT YOU'D LIKE TO BE PART OF?

SOLJAGA: My passion for skiing took me to South America, where I stayed at a mountain resort in Chile high up in the Andes called Portillo. This fabulous resort was totally self-contained and the only lodging, food and entertainment for miles around. Since much of our firm's work over the past 10 or more years has concentrated on resorts, recreation and hospitality, I would have loved to have been a part of designing this elegant mountain lodge. The dining room was huge in size and volume. The walls were covered in leather with nail-head trim around each panel. The chairs were hand-hewn with leather strapping for the seats and backs. I was able to translate that wonderful image of leather-covered walls to a home in Aurora in the client's 'adventure' room. The 30' x 30' room is where the family planned their hunting trips to Mongolia and the like.

Q: CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE WAY THAT YOUR KNOWLEDGE AS A DESIGNER CREATES A UNIQUE STYLE THAT ALSO ANSWERS A CLIENT'S NEEDS?

SOLJAGA: In meeting with a new client, I try very hard to “read” the client or clients from the way they choose their art, their existing furnishings and what they wear. With nearly 30 years of experience listening to clients, I am careful to hear what they are telling me and deliver their style not mine. >>



“For the most part, Olson & Jones Construction fabricated the pilasters off site,” says Soljaga, “but put them together on site. There were a few revisions in terms of the height of the reveal, but responsive and cooperative, the crew worked diligently until they were absolutely perfect.” By increasing the height of the baseboard and staining it a dark walnut to match the existing windows, Soljaga added a richness to the formerly all white space. Augusta recalls how ecstatic the clients were the day they first walked into their new home. “They loved it!” she says. “It was just so rewarding.” Sculptor Julie Speidel of Vashon Island stepped out of her comfort zone to create this piece for the Gail Severn Gallery in Ketchum, Idaho. The iron table at left by Holly Hunt features a limestone top.

REMODELING CONTRACTOR:
Olson & Jones Construction 503.244.7467

INTERIOR DESIGN: Soljaga Design Group,
Marilyn Soljaga, Emily Augusta 503.228.5122

SOURCES: Cabinetry: Anderson Custom Cabinets; [redacted]
[redacted] Hardwood Floors: Kip's Hardwood Flooring; Painting
Contractor: Barrett Painting; Den Rug and Runner: Madison Millinger.

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SOLJAGA + AUGUSTA (continued)



From that, I create design elements in original ways that reflect a client's style and personality in a way that becomes timeless. If I were to identify a particular design style, I would gravitate toward Northwest Regional Modernism as influenced by Japanese Architecture, which was the subject of my thesis. I like clean lines, simple design, natural materials and a warm rich, palette. One of the hallmarks of our firm is the use of sustainable materials whenever possible and the education of our clients to do the same.

Q: WHAT IS YOUR DESIGN PHILOSOPHY?

AUGUSTA: I have two rules when it comes to design. First, I believe that as a designer, you should look to the past and pull inspiration from such greats as designer Charles Eames, whose work, which I have studied in great depth, has contributed to both modern architecture and furnishings. There have been many great designers and architects before us and there is nothing wrong with interpreting their design within your own. Second, I believe you also have to take risks by working outside your comfort zone in order to stand out and become known as a great designer. Great things happen when you let "comfort" fall aside and create something new and different.

Q: WHAT WOULD YOU SAY YOUR INTERIOR DESIGN "STYLE" IS?

AUGUSTA: I have always been heavily influenced by architecture and the lines and angles that form a building. As a child, I would spend hours flipping through books that contained blueprints, imagining myself walking around the building, through each room, envisioning what each space would feel like. Often, I am more inspired by an exterior than its interior. By reiterating the angles and lines found on a building's façade in its furniture or by adding a paint color that emphasizes a particular architectural detail, one adds a great deal of visual interest to the space.

I also like to incorporate old pieces in a new, modern space, because I have a place in my heart for antiques that I believe bring more life and history to a space. Mixing design eras and styles creates a more interesting space.

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