

Creating a Sense of Place



Designer
Mary Rentschler
 Creates Artistic
 Solutions for the
 Way People Live

Profile by **Julian Wise**

According to interior designer Mary Rentschler, a human being is a nesting creature by nature. “We have an interesting sense of what makes us cozy, what makes us happy, what makes us feel empowered,” she says. “How people live is a measure of who people are.”

In her profession, Mary uses an aesthetic sense honed by both training and intuition to match the needs and temperament of a client to a home space. Her intent is to create a living environment that flows with the life patterns of the inhabitants. The Chicago native’s artistic sense was shaped and inspired during the decades by her contact with the Island’s culture and natural beauty.



In this major renovation of a 20 year-old house (right) with a spectacular view of Sengekontacket Pond, marshes and the dunes beyond, Chuck Sullivan of Sullivan O’Connor Architects created new spaces with handsome architectural details including beadboard ceilings and wainscoting. The complex ceiling angles and detail were beautifully executed by contractor Laurence Clancy and his band of ingenious subcontractors. High ceilings and many windows made placing the bed in the Master bedroom (opposite, top) a challenge. In order to maximize the view, the designer and architect collaborated to create a freestanding paneled wall for the bed to rest against. The reverse side of the wall is outfitted with a full-length mirror including his and her’s bookshelves. The freestanding wall conceals the entrance to the master bath.



Mary Rentschler
continued



The blue walls of the Dining Room (right) and the blue painted backs of the shelves in the Living Room (top) are directly inspired by the intense blues of the pond and ocean that are visible from both spaces. This direct influence serves to connect the rooms to each other and to the outdoor environment.

The inspiration for the Living Room's design started with the purchase of an antique rug with a soft patina of seaside colors. The bar (above) repeats the black honed granite of the kitchen countertops, which are within eyeshot.

The bold graphics and colors of Claudio Gasparini's painting accentuates the drama of the Dining Room's architecture, balancing the waterview on the opposite end.



Mary began coming to Martha's Vineyard as a child in 1954, the summer Hurricane Carol struck. Her maternal grandparents owned a home in Edgartown where the entire family gathered to enjoy the summer season. She took watercolor classes at the Old Sculpin Gallery and spent hours atop Memorial Wharf trying to record both the swirl of bustling humanity and the serenity of the harbor backdrop beyond. Her grandmother and mother were both house mavens who surrounded the young Mary with examples of domestic beauty.

After high school, Mary attended Beloit College and the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she studied studio art, art history, and Italian. She spent a semester in Florence, Italy and took additional courses at the San Francisco Art Institute. After graduation she worked for a catalog production company in Chicago handling layout and drafting duties while taking graphic design courses at the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1977, Mary moved to Martha's Vineyard, making the Island her permanent home. She worked as head of

continued on next page



The sunny kitchen (top) truly is the heartbeat of this upside-down house with a dumb-waiter that originates in the downstairs front hall. Generous work spaces, an adjacent deck for grilling and a counter and table seating are all situated with a water view through the Living Room and beyond to a distant Cape Pogue. The original house is connected to the large master bedroom/garage addition by a state of the art office/breezeway (above) that stretches over an open deck below.



Designer
Mary Rentschler
In Her Own Words

Whenever I am asked to speak about the business I immediately head to the people who make this enterprise the wonderful experience that it is. Kira Sullivan has been working with me since the beginning, and she has grown into an incredibly versatile and valuable player. She's fabulous at navigating human interactions, which are so important, and she has wisdom beyond her years. She skillfully helps manage the many details of scheduling, ordering – which there are so many – and is also involved in weighing in on the design process. Her sense of style and proportion and helping figure out solutions for problems that arise is unmatched.



Designer Mary Rentschler
in her home garden

Also I couldn't live without Kate Desrosiers, who is way more than our bookkeeper. She's the queen of systems to track the details. We're so lucky to have Agnaldo Dias and his band of 'we can do anything guys' who help us move and assemble things and install whatever we need at any hour of the day or night.

Additionally we work with a spectrum of talented, knowledgeable professionals, subcontractors, artists and artisans from whom I continue to learn. I marvel at their particular skills they bring to the project. Furniture builders, stone masons, craftspeople, finish carpenters, painters, fabricators, metalworkers, electricians, plumbers, window treatment installers, sheetrockers, insulators, heating/cooling specialists, antique dealers and store keepers are all part of what sometimes seems like a symphony orchestra. They all perform together perfectly, and when one craftsman's work is featured, it's like a solo.

The process of interior design is about as custom and personal as it gets. The clients are the impetus for how the job evolves. My job is to listen, observe and distill as much as possible from them and then to guide and lead.

My greatest aspirations are to take a project beyond the original scope and provide an unanticipated dimension – to stimulate and surprise the clients beyond what they had imagined or visualized ... to take them on a journey to uncharted lands. That makes them feel at home in the end. **vs**



Upon completion the Sengekontacket Pond project, the family enlisted Rentschler Interiors to redo a Boston apartment (top and above). Their daughter, a Marine who served two active tours in Iraq, returned from her service with several Iranian rugs, which became the backdrop and inspiration in her South End, Boston brownstone.



The den/family room (above) is a cozy insular room with a rich color palette, leather furniture and wood burning stove offering a juxtaposition to the sunny and breezy surrounding rooms. The guest bathroom doubles as a powder room with a custom vanity (far left) which was collaboratively designed by the designer and architect. An oversized chess set (left) on an inlay stone gameboard offers a place for contemplation.

the design department at Woodchip Designers, where she met freelance artist Carol Kolodny. For the next 23 years the two would run a graphic design company together. During that time Mary made the transition from graphic design to interior design, supported by coursework and training at Harvard Extension, the Rhode Island School of Design, and the Architectural and Interior Design workshops in Boston.

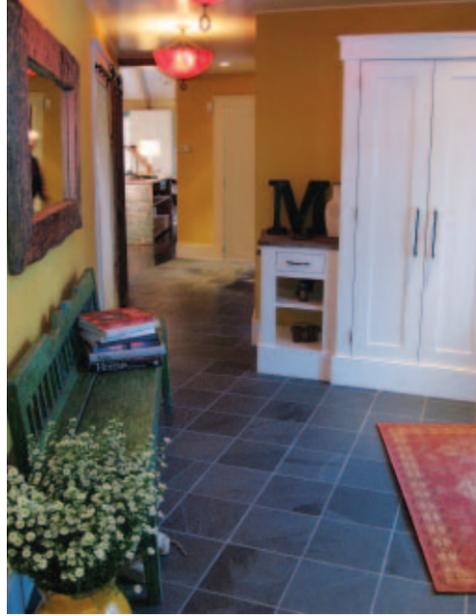
Mary says the ideal stage for her to be involved in a home's interior design is

at the planning stage, when the nuts and bolts of construction can be matched to the owners' lifestyle. She has trained herself during the years to read architectural and building plans with a sharp eye to detect details the client may have missed.

"My favorite time to be involved with the project is before it's etched in stone and I get to see plans, look at them and ask if this is what they were hoping for, do they know that from the bedroom

continues on page 46



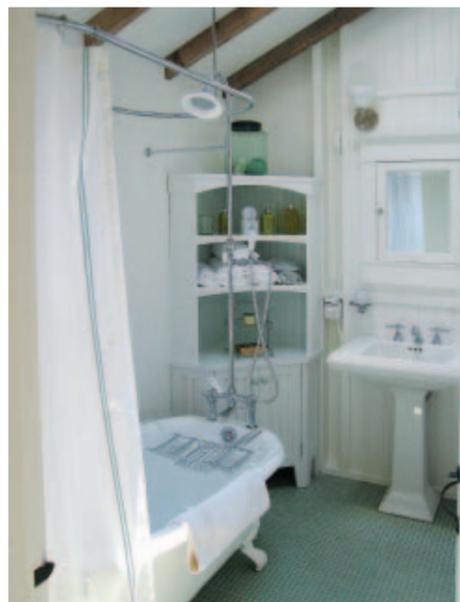


The generous, welcoming entry hall (top left) serves as the connector between an existing Chilmark home and its multilevel addition. Bold colors, antique barn wood and slate floors blend the client's eclectic style with the clean, elegant structural designs by Breese Architects.

The gracious kitchen (top right) features tall custom cabinets, Moroccan tile and honed granite countertops. Most interestingly, the high eat-at table attaches to an oval shaped island with Kohler's "lazy river" sink as its quirky focus. The Master Bath (above) evokes a spa-like refuge, featuring custom poured concrete sinks, counters and fine cabinetry by Traditional Woodworking. The client found a sculpted head of "Zephrus," Greek God of Wind, with a challenging idea of creating a powder room around this piece of art. The Master suite, with its deep blue walls (middle right) is as calming and soothing as the Clifford Smith painting, which hangs above the "found" door headboard. A second story deck allows for circular flow through the suite, offering access to the master bath from both inside and out. The comfortable screened porch (above) is an extension of the existing house and offers a sweeping view of the client's reclaimed vineyard, surrounding decks and artfully, terraced stone patios. A comfortable solitary perch (right) gazes out over meditative herb gardens and stone walls, an expert collaboration of Carly Look, Landscape Architect and Atlantis Hardscape.



The connector between the old house and the new is the culmination of the artfilled spaces, materials, textures, transitions, light and views, which is the hallmark of this Chilmark home. Details such as this window seat were skillfully crafted by contractor/builder Laurence Clancy. The slate floors are complemented by strips of beach-stone inlay



This compact Chilmark cottage was a diamond-in-the-rough with breathtaking views curving down the Vineyard's South Shore. The client demanded an authentic and honest execution of all the details from the team of Breese Architects and Rentschler & Company Interiors. The colors, fabrics, surfaces and hardware were carefully chosen to echo the seaside environment and enhance the natural vistas. The ensuing look and feel became a template to be echoed in larger, later projects adjacent to the cottage.

they will not see the view they thought they would?"

Much of her initial work with clients involves getting to know how they intend to live in the home, from their daily routines to their leisure activities. A consultation begins with Mary giving the client a packet of material that outlines costs, policies, and a three-page questionnaire. "I give them homework immediately," she says.

While filling out the questionnaires, clients come face to face with the legion of variables that factor into a home's interior design. Do they like to entertain? Do they have pets? Do they favor modern touches or prefer to fill the home with old family antiques? Where do they like to have their morning cup of coffee? Where do they like to nap? Do they want open

windows with sea breezes or air conditioning? Does anyone have any allergies? "You've got to ferret out the details," she says.

The process can be unfamiliar for clients. "It makes people define what they're looking for," she says. "They have to articulate how they live, and they're not used to that. Sometimes they give me one word answers and sometimes they give me paragraphs."

Much of Mary's work is defined by the stage of the building process at which



Oversized pegs (right) make their way into every Rentschler & Company project as a "signature" nod to form and function. Whether painted in a mudroom or marching in a row, clients use them in endless creative ways both indoors and out.

she's contacted. She explains the difference between interior design and interior decoration, a distinction not all people are aware of. Interior decoration is the more familiar concept, when the decorator helps the client select window treatments, slipcovers for chairs and couches, lamps, furnishings, and other decorative touches. Interior design is a more technical approach that works from the framing shell of the house inward. It includes choosing the type and location of lighting, the textures and surfaces of walls (plain sheet rock vs. skim coated plaster, wainscoting, window trim), and reviewing building plans to make sure the layout of the home will suit the needs of the owners.

When she's hired after most of the building is finished, she focuses on interior decoration. On other projects Mary is able to work with architects to insure kitchens are large enough or breakfast nooks can accommodate the entire family plus a guest or two comfortably.

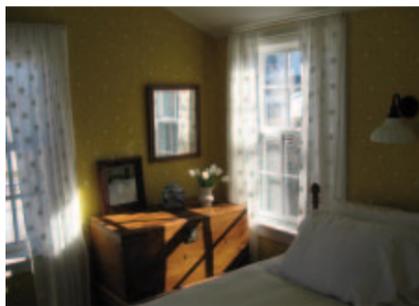
She says lighting is a particular focus for her. "My favorite projects are where I get to be involved in the lighting," she says. "I think it's critical to how people live. It really affects mood and function."

Whenever possible, Mary uses the services of local craftsmen and artisans on behalf of her clients. She praises the work of woodworker Ruffy Eakins, who recently designed a wooden table with antique touches, metal smith Whit Hanschka, painter Allen Whiting ("he's someone who to me is quintessential to the Vineyard. To not have an Allen Whiting seems like a huge omission if you work here") and woodworker Mel Gauley ("he has a great aesthetic, a great eye for making things offbeat, not garden variety"). She often selects art and antiques from many Island stores and galleries including Rush & Fisher, Able to Cane, Forget Me Not Antiques, Abby Em's, The Red Barn Emporium, Tuckernuck Antiques, and Alison Shaw Photography. For furnishings Mary likes Midnight Farm, Bramhall & Dunn, Vineyard Decorators, Menagerie, and Pik Nik.

Mary uses environmentally sound materials in her work as often as possible. This might include using reclaimed barn wood from local builders. "I love using old wood whenever

continues on next spread

ADS



Hired by her mother, this total house renovation in Edgartown was near and dear to the designer's heart. It became a family collaboration, with her brother acting as general contractor on the the project and other members collaborating on architectural and interior choices. Building designer Margaret Curtain seamlessly blended a new sunroom and kitchen renovation (top) with the existing turn-of-the-century structure. Every effort was made to preserve the spirit and interior aesthetic originally created by her grandmother. Painted floors, wallpaper, salvaged doors and antique hardware all reflect what had so beautifully existed before.

VINEYARD style

possible," she says. "Reclaimed floors take the curse of new off."

She describes the toxins that can show up on a work site, from insulation and glues to creosote and urethane. After years working in graphic design, where she was exposed to a wide range of chemicals, Mary says she's become sensitive to the scores of chemicals and pollutants that insinuate themselves into our daily lives. Her self-described "crunchy" nature and penchant for green materials seems to be ahead of the curve, as more of the building trade moves in a sustainable direction. "There are better products available now and certain things being eliminated," she says. "It's getting stricter and stricter, moving in the right direction."

The character of the Island landscape informs and shapes her work. "Living by a large body of water has always been a big part of my visual landscape," she says, whether it's Lake Michigan, the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans. "The sheer physical beauty of the Vineyard has always been a great source of inspiration for me."

During her frequent beach walks Mary draws inspiration for projects, composing color schemes that include the full-bodied blues of the ocean, the faded greens of dune grass, the pale flesh tones and acid greens of the woods and hills in spring, the hot pinks and starched whites of beach roses in the heat of summer, and the rich auburns of fall underbrush.

Much of her success as an interior designer hinges on her talent for making a personal connection with the client and taking time to understand their lifestyle, rhythms, and idiosyncrasies. The way people live in the privacy of their homes is often different from the public persona they project, and finely honed listening skills augment her effectiveness.

"The process of interior design is about as custom and personal as it gets," she says. "The clients are the impetus for how the job evolves. My job is to listen, observe, and ferret out as much as possible from them and then to guide, lead and problem solve. 'Creating a Sense of Place' has always been my tagline. Collaborating with the client to find a solution that resonates with each of them is what makes a job successful.

continues on next spread

ADS



The idiosyncrasies of the human condition can lead to many uncharted places and for me this is what is endlessly interesting and challenging.”

The approach works. Many of her



clients call her back for future updates and renovations of the home, creating an ongoing relationship that evolves over various iterations of the home design. One client has hired her for four separate



Among Mary’s personal favorites, this custom built, swinging daybed (far left) was designed for a high-powered client’s “screened house” and allowed a place for dreamy naps between conference calls. Antique stained glass doors (middle) part to reveal another favorite napping spot in this West Tisbury post and beam addition. A graceful staircase defines the home office entry to Rentschler & Company Interiors.



The designer’s own front hall and kitchen incorporates columns recycled from a family house. One of Rentschler Interiors commercial projects, Boucle Salon & Spa’s color schematic was chosen to imitate make-up colors, foundation beiges and rosy rouges.



properties, on and off the Island. The repeat business is a reflection of the trust Mary has developed with the clients through her careful listening and attention to their individual needs.

In the future, she sees herself traveling internationally to bring foreign influences into her work. As a teen she spent time in the south of France and

traveled throughout Europe and Morocco. After her son departs for college next year she sees herself venturing forth again. “The opportunity to travel is not so far off,” she says. “It’s certainly something that will enrich my life and inform my work in a more global way.”

In the meantime, Mary continues to enjoy the pulse and rhythm of Vineyard

life. “I must say in the end I feel incredibly lucky to live on this crazy and diverse Island, overwhelmed daily with the beauty of it all, surrounded by such great and interesting friends and acquaintances and getting to do what I love to do. I have always loved to leave the Vineyard, and I love to come home just as much.” vs

ADS

ADS