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From Garage to Manor House

A designer is inspired by a garage to create a showcase home



Rich Hein/Sun-Times Photos

This home was created when a two-story Cape Cod-style addition was built on the front of a three-car garage.



Interior designer Marilyn Akins shows off her home's family room. The room's focal point is an oversized custom built brick fireplace. Resting on the wooden mantel is an oblong cast-iron piece salvaged from the old Corn Exchange Building in the Loop. Akins found it in a junk yard.

By Celeste Busk
STAFF REPORTER

When most people look at a garage, they see car space. But, when interior designer Marilyn Akins looked at a 3-car garage with a second-floor apartment, she saw her dream home.

She had kept an eye on the house with the 3-car garage in Hinsdale. "I had been admiring it for a long time, so when a client of mine moved into the main house, I said that if the coach house ever goes on the market, call me," Akins said. "So, one day she called and I bought it." That was 23 years ago.

"I originally planned to fix it up and sell it, but I decided I liked it too much and built it for myself," she said.

Akins hired an architect to put a 2-story addition on the front of the garage, complete with Cape Cod architectural influences, cedar shake roof and siding, four dormers and a quaint porch. The addition, which looks like the front of a traditional home, now accommodates the foyer, living and dining rooms and second-floor master bedroom.

"I love the charm of the exterior — it actually looks like an older house, like it was here for a long time," said Akins, adding that she thinks the

house looks smaller than it is. The rest of the garage was gutted to the 2-by-4s and all the walls were moved to create a variety of spaces, including 4 bedrooms and 2 1/2 bathrooms. In total, Akins home now has about 4,000 square feet of space. "Everything in my home was new — windows, electricity, plumbing, heating and two fireplaces," she said. Akins, who has been an interior designer for 35 years, said she chose a floor plan geared to entertaining and an interior design. Her vintage English country home reflects the foundations of her design style: a brilliant mix of rich, clear color, dramatic textures and attention to detail.



Shelter

What: Akins residence
Architecture: Cape Cod style
Built: Garage circa 1917
Location: Hinsdale

Akins advocates restrained use of knickknacks/ Important collectibles should be displayed properly.

Akins signature look also pays homage to fine craftsmanship. For example, her family room has a large brick fireplace, with wood storage, that takes up almost an entire wall. The fireplace, the room's focal point, is topped by a large cast-iron piece from the old Corn Exchange Building and salvaged from a junk yard. It is flanked by a pair of buffalo-checked easy chairs. The entire room is a study in shades of blue, white and beige.

"This is the room I live in," Akins said. "It's my TV room, my reading room and the room I do most of my entertaining in."

"It's connected to the kitchen by a breakfast area, so the whole thing flows together and is perfect for entertaining."

The living room opens to the formal dining room, which features a hand-painted ceiling of clouds by Akins' daughter, Caryn Akins, a Chicago-based decorative painter.

The room is eye-catching, with its bright coral red walls. "The red creates a warmth. When I entertain, I want people to feel warm and comfortable," Akins said.

The dining room also is a showcase for her collection of blue-and-white porcelain English and Chinese collectibles, some of which are hung on



The living room is formal and features walls painted in shades of green and a spectacular wood fireplace with blue-and-white Dutch tiles for the surround. 'I covered the walls with linen and painted with brush strokes using four colors. The effect is a room that is sun-dabbled, like light filtering through the leaves of the trees and resting on the walls,' she said.

the walls. An antique oak dresser, a glass table on a French steel base and an antique Heriz rug in blues and coral reds complete the room's design.

Akins said she became an interior designer 35 years ago. "For me, it was a calling, my niche. So, I went to design school to get started. Now, it's like I'm doing what I was meant to do," she said. "I love the creativity and being able to make a difference in homes and people's lives."

Most of the mistakes she sees do-it-yourself decorators make are in three areas that are simple to correct:

- **Scale.** Pay attention to the size of the furniture and the room. "People either buy too small or too large and are not thinking of ... how it will actually look in the room," she said.

- **Clutter.** "Deliver me from knick-knacks," Akins said. "They look messy and not focused. Collections should be displayed together, not spread out all over the house, or they'll lose their impact."

- **Color.** People tend to be afraid of it, she said. They tend to go with white because they don't know what will work. "Maybe it's because the colors they see in most furniture stores are pretty drab," Akins said. "My company does a lot of bright, happy colors."

"One thing people have to remember is that if they make a color painting mistake, they don't have to live with it forever. Just paint over it."

Akins said she painted her bedroom three times until she was able to get the shade of yellow she wanted.



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Akins & Associates is based in Hinsdale. After years of designing, she opened a retail showroom in 1990 as a resource to finish her interior design projects and to provide the perfect complement to her interior design firm.

"No job is complete without the accessories," Akins said. "The store provides one-stop shopping for the designer."

The retail showroom specializes in the "Akins Look": country French and manor house English styles. The showroom also features room-size vignettes arranged with fine furniture, unique window treatments and accessories ranging from vintage to modern.

Akins, a member of the American Society of Interior Designers, said her custom design process often begins with an at-home consultation.



A guest bedroom has English wallpaper, a hand-carved mahogany bed with a chenille spread that Akins found in a rummage sale.

Akins & Associates furniture lines include: Milling Road, Pearson Upholstery; Hickory Chair; Edward Ferrell and Carol Bolton, a division of E.J. Victor. There are monthly special events, including 'how-to' sessions by guest lecturers and trunk shows.

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