



ONCE UPON A TIME

Once upon a time, a shabby little inn sat in a copse just a block from the Lake Michigan shoreline. In desperate need of a fairy godmother, the original 1922 structure had been added onto and renovated over the years and not to its advantage. It was overwrought and misunderstood: Think glass block windows, whirlpool baths in the bedrooms, and dropped tile ceilings. But like any down-and-out protagonist, beauty glowed within. “There was this Alpine fairy-tale feel to the project,” says Chicago-based designer Summer Thornton, whom the new owners hired to reinstate the inn’s allure for seasonal visitors. “It’s in a heavily wooded area, so there isn’t the openness and brightness of a beach house. Rather it’s eclectic with potential for a little country fantasy or even a quirky English cottage.”

So much potential, in fact, that once Thornton began waving her wand, the owners saw a new vision materialize: a private summer retreat for their family and friends. The decorating would remain rooted in the genre of an inn,

with the seven bedrooms outfitted as charming guest quarters and an independently operated restaurant open to the public downstairs.

In a twist for Thornton, the jumping-off point was a series of Russian floral needlepoint Bessarabian kilims. “I usually start with textiles, but I knew I wanted this particular kind of rug—it’s busy and lively and can take a lot of wear and tear,” she says. “These rugs are inexpensive and totally granny, but I love a design mash-up; they look almost radical in this space.”

Though Thornton tidied up some of the underwhelming architecture, prints and colors were dispatched to a magical, almost exaggerated effect to help veil eccentricities like oddly placed beams and small room sizes. Checks, stripes, and botanicals—a tried-and-true combination for combining patterns, notes Thornton—followed the Eastern European rugs as did a few more wild cards. “We did more layering of textiles, including suzani and Indian block prints that are not so preppy in the mix,” she explains. “I think people feel most comfortable in a room when there is something that they are familiar with but excited when something new is



ABOVE: A Dutch door painted Farrow & Ball's Brinjal and jaunty striped umbrellas make for a cheerful summer greeting. RIGHT: A riot of color and texture in the upstairs lounge includes a sofa fabric inspired by Ghanaian prints (Jennifer Shorto) and a 1940s Scandinavian armchair in its original sheepskin upholstery.



introduced. There's a sense of nostalgia in this house, but there is also the unanticipated."

Thornton also dialed into her past for inspiration. "It's very old-fashioned to have guest rooms in different, distinct colors," she says. "In my grandmother's house we had the 'blue room.' So when you are inviting guests to stay, you can direct them to this or the yellow or green bedroom for example." Here the color schemes for each sprang from wallpapers or curtain fabrics, and the effect is both charismatic and quaint.

Many pieces of furniture are vintage or antique sourced in nearby shops. "It was so important that this house feel collected and authentic, like you've just been adding things in over the years from different places," says Thornton. "There are the usual suspects in summer homes such as wicker, bamboo, rattan, and old painted pieces like trunks and tables but all thrown together in a very whimsical and colorful way."



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—INTERIOR DESIGNER
SUMMER THORNTON

Throughout the color wheel of guest rooms, common elements bind them. Custom headboards share the same form but are covered in different fabrics; the bathroom sinks are all porcelain on shiny nickel legs; and each has a Carvers' Guild mirror with fanciful forest creatures and floral motifs. Almost every piece of art—flowers, animals, and ships—was commissioned from Connecticut artist Mary Maguire. Sofas and slipper chairs are skirted either with ruffles or pleats. "We wanted to stuff the place full to make it feel super cozy, and legs have a sense of airiness whereas the skirts give a sense of groundedness and are obviously more old-fashioned," says the designer.

With the old design banished to a faraway land, a romantic new chapter takes its place. In this one, conviviality and lazy afternoons reign, inviting long games of chess in the upstairs lounge and naps under a paperback on the sundeck—a modern fantasy playing out in a century-old hideaway. ♦