



FLIGHT *of* FANCY



Pragmatism and whimsy combine as designer **Summer Thornton** and her husband, Josh, transform a 19th-century Chicago townhouse into a theatrical wonderland for their family.

INTERIOR AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN BY **SUMMER THORNTON**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MELANIE ACEVEDO** AND **WERNER STRAUBE**
WRITTEN BY **CELIA BARBOUR**



THE THORNTONS' HOUSE-HUNT was going nowhere—one property after another proving “so expensive yet so cookie-cutter,” recalls Josh Thornton. At the close of a particularly frustrating day, he asked his then-pregnant wife, designer Summer Thornton, “If we could live anywhere, where would it be?”

She didn't hesitate: “That white house on the corner.” She was referring to an elegant but run-down, 19th-century townhouse a few blocks from their Chicago condo. Though it wasn't for sale, Josh contacted the elderly owners anyway. As luck would have it, they were happy to sell so long as they could rent the ground floor as a pied-à-terre for themselves.

“That's Josh's M.O.,” says Summer. “He can always figure out a way to make things happen.” This division of labor is the key to the couple's strength as a team, both as life



PREVIOUS SPREAD: Hand-marbled ceiling paper (Marbled Art) crowns the apricot living room. Summer and her son welcome guests on an entry stairwell cloaked in panther-print carpet (Stark).

THIS PAGE: The sunny second-floor kitchen overlooks a walled courtyard. Range, Lacanche

OPPOSITE: Flowering cherry standards and maidenhair fern flourish in the side garden.

THIS SPREAD AND PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPHY AND INTERIOR STYLING (S) PORTBALT AND TILE: T. MELANIE ACEVEDO

In the courtyard, classic stripes (fabric, Perennials) cloak steel dining chairs. Stone flooring, Exquisite Surfaces

OPPOSITE: The lattice-cloaked garden room. Brass sconces, Circa Lighting



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELANIE ACEVEDO, STYLING BY MIKE TEN HAVE.

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“The *trellised walls in the garden room* are my ode to The Decorator—legends like *Bunny Mellon, Parish Hadley.*”

—INTERIOR DESIGNER AND HOMEOWNER SUMMER THORNTON

BELOW LEFT: In Summer and Josh's bath, she oversees the children's evening soak. The polished cast iron tub is by Catchpole & Rye. Mirror, House of Honey. BELOW RIGHT AND OPPOSITE: The window shade fabric in Summer's closet repeats the Indian tree of life motif that graces the walls in her bedroom (Pierre Frey). The iron bed is by S&L Designs, and the rug is a vintage Afghani Khotan carpet. Closet stool, Frontgate with Studio Four NYC fabric



partners and business partners. “Where Summer is super dreamy and fantastical, I’m very rational,” says Josh, owner and managing director of Summer Thornton Design, Inc.

After a quick remodel, the Thorntons moved into the house’s upper floors, then spent the next five years planning an extensive renovation while expanding both their business and their family (they now have two children). Summer’s goal for the house never wavered. “*Romance* is the word I kept returning to,” she says. “I’m an escapist; I love the idea of creating imaginative worlds that spark a childlike sense of joy.” (No surprise that her recently released book is titled *Wonderland: Adventures in Decorating*.)

In the heart of pragmatic, chilly Chicago, Summer looked to fairy tales and far-off latitudes for inspiration and envisioned

a storybook-worthy home for their family. The apricot hue on the living room walls comes from a sunlit building she’d seen in Venice; Venetian-style hand-marbled paper covers the ceiling. The radiant blue of the entry hall is lifted from Cinderella’s ball gown. Embroidered fabrics from Mexican *huipils* (traditional tunics) sing of ornate, indigenous craft, while William Morris wallpapers and a trellised, English garden-inspired sunroom send in wild flourishes of nature. Furnishings can seem almost animate: pieces like a gregarious, oversize orange sofa in the living room and the fantastical custom daybed in the bay window. “I love that *Beauty and the Beast* quality, where furniture feels as if it might come alive,” she says.

The courtyard is pure New Orleans noblesse, from its wrought-iron balconies and sweeping staircase to its

PHOTOGRAPHS (BATHROOM AND BEDROOM) BY MELANIE ACEVEDO; STYLING BY MIERET TEN HAVE; CLOSET, VERNER STRAUDE.



Colefax and Fowler's Bowood pattern adorns walls, upholstery, and shams in the guest room. Side table, Woodard

OPPOSITE: A 1973 Reis & Manwaring serigraph hangs in Summer and Josh's son's room. Side table, Henredon

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"I'm an escapist; I love the idea of creating imaginative worlds that spark a childlike sense of joy." —SUMMER THORNTON



checkerboard floor. Not that the Big Easy is easy to transport a thousand miles north. To create the courtyard's black and white floor, stone was sourced from quarries in the coldest parts of northern China and Europe, then cut two inches thick to withstand Chicago's brutal winters.

Improving the connection between interior and exterior spaces was key. The overgrown backside of the house structure was demolished to allow for the construction of French doors, a balcony, and new fireplaces inside and out. (Summer jokes that while other women get jewelry for their birthdays, she gets fireplaces.) The ground-level garden room was tiled with a thinner version of the black and white stone used outdoors and set flush with the courtyard to create "a party room with great indoor-outdoor flow," says Summer. Tufted daybeds allow the space to double as an extra guest room. The trellised walls, meanwhile, are "my ode to *The Decorator*—legends like Bunny Mellon, Parish Hadley," she says.



▲ Find more of Summer's projects in her just-released book, **Wonderland: Adventures in Decorating** (Rizzoli, 2022).

For all her dreaminess, Summer has a set designer's instinct for quick-change versatility. The silver-leaf Gracie wallpaper in the dining room, for example, features fruit trees in a luscious spectrum of colors, the better to accommodate shifting seasonal palettes. And in place of artwork, she hung brackets that display a rotating assortment of objets d'art.

And yet, beneath the enchantment, the couple are quick to admit the reality that goes with any major renovation. Surely the stress multiplies when the husband and wife double as the design firm? Says Josh, "I admit I'm not a very good client."

"We're both horrible," Summer says, laughing.

"We're passionate," admits Josh. "But we're good at leveraging our different strengths. We know how to stay in our own sandboxes."

And that's a happily-ever-after as exalted as any castle in the clouds. After all, says Summer, "we want to be building houses together for a long time." ◆