

# BUT SERIOUSLY

In Chicago, Summer Thornton's irreverent approach to decor often makes her an outlier. But with her gutsy redo of a Gold Coast prewar, the boundary-pushing designer has more than proven her mettle.

BY CATHERINE HONG PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS LOOF STYLED BY MIEKE TEN HAVE

In the living room of a Chicago apartment designed by Summer Thornton in a 1929 building by Rosario Candela, the custom sofa (left) in a Savel mohair is back to back with a Baker settee. The English Regency-style games table is from 1stDibs, the wallcovering is by de Gournay, and the pair of pendants is by the Urban Electric Co. For details, see Resources.



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**ELL, THAT'S A WILD CARD!** exclaimed a friend of the owners of this

Chicago prewar apartment when he heard they had hired Summer Thornton to oversee their renovation. Fortunately, Thornton isn't someone who's easily offended. In fact, the interior designer took the remark as a compliment. "It's the truth," she says cheerfully. "In a city where designers tend to be either super traditional or extreme modernists, I've never really fit in."

She half-seriously describes her approach as "cultured irreverence." A largely self-taught designer, the central Illinois native established her firm in 2007 when she was just 24, after assisting local decorators and working for the Osborne & Little showroom in Chicago. Thornton's interiors embrace traditional forms and craftsmanship, but with a modern maximalist's celebration of color, pattern, and whimsy. "I'm always right on the line of good taste—or a few steps over," she jokes. "My favorite projects are ones that start with an architecturally perfect shell, which gives me the freedom to push the envelope."

This apartment is in one of the city's most coveted co-ops—a 1929 limestone high-rise that was the sole Chicago project of the legendary New York City architect Rosario Candela. With its impeccable pedigree and unspoiled views of Lake Michigan, the two-bedroom space fit the bill for the owners, a couple who had sent four of their five children off to college and were ready to return from the suburbs to city living.

Making the task easier for Thornton was the fact that the couple had already enlisted Chicago architect Joan Craig for the renovation. Craig had previously masterminded seven renovations in the landmark building and designed the co-op's gym. With that experience, she and her team knew how to adapt the space for contemporary life. They created better flow between the public rooms, coaxed more light and lake views into the apartment's darker regions, and nearly doubled the size of the kitchen. "The building is cream of the crop," says Craig. "So everything we do there is with respect for the architecture."

Thornton also had a history in the building. A year earlier, she had transformed one of the units with an eye-popping Matisse-and-Miró-inspired palette, pairing cerulean blues with ruby reds. These clients had seen that space, thanks to a tip-off by the building manager. It made a big impression. "At our meeting, the wife told me she also loved color—but it turned out she had a very different palette in mind," says Thornton. Hers was inspired by the



**ABOVE:** In the foyer, the Giovanni Garibaldi table is vintage, the stainless steel and brass mirror is custom, the pendant is by the Urban Electric Co., and the striped wallcovering is by Pierre Frey. The ceiling is sheathed in a Gucci floral. **LEFT:** Thornton in the living room. A chair from Hickory Chair pulls up to a vintage desk by Karl Springer.



The library's walnut desk is by Lawson-Fenning, the vintage Ward Bennett chairs are in a Lee Jofa fabric, the window shade is in a Dessin Fournir textile, and the walls are painted in Benjamin Moore's Jack Pine.



The custom dining table is surrounded by Century Furniture chairs, the rug is by Holland & Sherry, the vintage chandelier is Italian, and the wallcovering is by Studio BK.

Irish coastline: jewel-like shades of aqua, teal, jade, and celadon. She had even already picked out her dream stove, a five-foot-wide La Cornue range in a vivid blue, which she dubbed “the Ferrari” for its looks and firepower.

And so the fun began. “Once we had the palette, I immediately thought of Kiso Mountains,” Thornton says. “It’s a wallpaper I’ve been obsessed with for years.” The sweepingly dramatic paper by de Gournay—a depiction of rolling green mountains cascading with cherry blossoms—would anchor the apartment in the colors, she says. In the living room, she paired the pattern with a lacquered, cloud-like white ceiling that reflects both the greens and pinks of the wallpaper as well as the blue of Lake Michigan outside the adjoining windows. It wasn’t even “too hard” to get the homeowners on board with the bold wallcovering, she reports. “The husband was fine with the colors as long as the public rooms felt formal enough,” she says. Keeping this in mind, Thornton balanced the room’s flights of fancy (including the pair of ’70s chrome giraffe sculptures, which she found at a local vintage store) with substantial, comfortably scaled sofas and armchairs covered in tactile fabrics like velvet, mohair, and leather.

Balance is, of course, one of those things interior designers love to talk about—solids as a foil to patterns,

matte finishes mitigating shine, old as a counterpoint to new. It’s just that Thornton’s idea of balance is one where the scale remains jauntily askew. In the entry foyer, for example, the eyeball-crossing combination of floral Gucci wallpaper on the ceiling and Pierre Frey stripes on the walls outweighs the classicism of the polished terrazzo floor and graceful 1940s center hall table. True again in the den, where glossy green walls leave one with the powerful sensation of floating in a swimming pool. Then there’s what Thornton deemed the trickiest space of all: the primary bedroom suite. “It has the worst light in the apartment, and the bedroom is surrounded by built-in cabinetry, which I worried would feel like you were sleeping in a closet,” she explains.

But then she was struck by inspiration. Using a cinnamon silk damask wallcovering, she went whole hog with a fanciful look inspired by Venetian palazzi. Matching woodwork, a walnut and brass poster bed, and fleshy, peach-pink cashmere curtains add up to a result that is a mood. “It’s so romantic and sexy,” she says.

To be sure, the bedroom is an unexpected turn from the home’s cool scheme of peacock blue and green. But the owners love that it feels like a total departure. It’s a wild card, from the wild-card pick herself. ■

The kitchen’s range and hood are by La Cornue, the custom cabinets are in cerused oak, and the stools are by Soane Britain. The lights over the island are by Roman and Williams Guild.





**ABOVE:** A Gucci wallcovering depicting herons in the powder room, where the vanity is of Calacatta Violette marble and the sconces are by the Urban Electric Co. **RIGHT:** Sheathed in a de Gournay damask, the primary bedroom features a custom Dennis Miller New York bed, a Julian Chichester vanity, and a painting by Alex Katz.



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SUMMER THORNTON

