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With a little help from the virtual world, a Calgary designer discovers her own personal style

TEXT **MALWINA GUDOWSKA** PHOTOGRAPHY **TRACEY AYTON**

With its promise of instant gratification and endless possibilities, the Internet can be both a source of inspiration and the cause of overwhelming angst. But when one finds the happy medium between the two extremes, that's when things start to fall into place, or so learned interior designer Sarah Swanson not long ago.

"There is so much out there – so much inspiration for people who are designing, creating their own thing – that I think it's really easy to get caught up with not knowing what your style is and trying to be too many things," says the Calgary-based designer and blogger.

After a five-year stint working as a manager for home decor giant Pottery Barn, Swanson left the job a few years ago to spend more time with her two young daughters, now four and five. >





CYBER-STYLE SAVVY Swanson (below) tapped into the Internet's wealth of inspiration to pin down her own style: classic, with a twist.

drawn to the most.

"Through my blogging, I was also figuring out what my style is," she says.

Almost a year ago, Swanson launched her eponymous design business and now works with clients as far away as Florida and Utah, most of the work done via email and with the resource of shopping links. With one click, her client has the design board and Swanson's product recommendations. But the immediacy of this process is a far cry from how her own abode came to be.

Built three years ago, the 1,500-square-foot house Swanson shares with her husband and two daughters started out "really builder-basic," she says. "[It had] good bones for us to work off, and in the last couple of years, we've really just added our personality to the space."

After continuously moving things around, adding, subtracting, rearranging furniture and changing up details around the home to the point where she was driving herself crazy, in the last six months Swanson has finally started to feel settled. Call it a slow home movement perhaps?

"I've never been one that goes out and buys one room at a time from one store," says Swanson. "Everything that we have has sort of evolved."

The house hasn't changed structurally at all over the years but the interiors have slowly transformed into a home that perfectly reveals Swanson's classic-with-a-twist esthetic.

Since this was the couple's second custom-built home, they were cautious not to repeat the same mistakes they made the first time. "You pay a lot to upgrade where you can do a lot of it on your own, a lot better, which was a good



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A lifelong lover of interior design, Swanson initially launched her blog, Flourish Design & Style, two years ago so she'd have an outlet for those random design-inspired thoughts – to talk about a sofa she saw, for example – that she no longer had the opportunity to share with her colleagues on a day-to-day basis.

Her network grew, and spending more time on the web, page after page, she'd come across umpteen ideas of the point of inspiration overload. Swanson stepped back, and then began to carefully curate the ideas and images that she was





learning experience,” says Swanson, who stuck with a basic design package and then upgraded the elements on her own.

The original lighting for example, was all replaced with more modern but affordable finds. Initially, Swanson wanted to replace the backsplash in the kitchen but before she could tackle the project, she replaced the kitchen sink and installed a new faucet. With the sink’s new black hue, the entire look of the kitchen changed and the original backsplash perfectly complements the rest of the space.

Swanson’s slow and steady trial-and-error method, and her willingness to try something new has, so far, worked to her advantage. After experimenting with a variety of designs on the



ROOM TO GROW The kids’ playroom in the basement is a bold departure from the sedate palette seen in the rest of the home. The bedrooms are relatively neutral with hits of personality coming from artwork and accent pillows.

home’s small and awkward-shaped entryway, Swanson decided to go out on a limb and try panelling. “It looked

fantastic,” she says. “And it naturally kept moving around the house, and over a few months, we did room by room and put all the panelling up everywhere.” The design element is something that she can’t imagine ever changing now.

With a new business and two young daughters, Swanson’s need for calm and serenity in her home resulted in a neutral cream, white and black palette. Although she’s often tried to incorporate colour into the palette, she immediately takes it right back out. The only bright tone that comes across in the home is green. “I love its freshness,” she says.

That purity also extends to natural elements and organic pieces like bamboo blinds, rustic furniture, reclaimed wood pieces and linen accents that offer a textured layering element. In the living room and dining area, for example, the eye is drawn to a variety of places where Swanson has created simple vignettes – a skill she mastered while working in retail.

“So much of what I do and how I decorate comes from merchandising,” says Swanson. “I need things to be visually appealing to my eye otherwise I am not settled with it.”

While there are those who measure twice and cut once, Swanson rarely measures at all. Shopping for clients or just for pleasure, she ends up picking up pieces that aren’t meant for a specific room or place, but in the end, each item turns out to be serendipitously made-to-measure (“fluke pieces,” she calls them).

That was the case with the living room armoire that perfectly fits against an awkward-sized wall. There’s also the side-of-the-road find turned conversation piece, a former wood filing cabinet that now sits in the entryway and serves as a visual anchor for the small area. The square dining room table was a piece from the previous home, but it works just as well in this space. Swanson paired it with nail-head trimmed black leather chairs for a subtle masculine touch.

Upstairs, the girls’ bedrooms and the master suite are all decorated simply, with just a few added touches like children’s drawings on the walls, frames filled with magazine cutouts that appealed to Swanson, and prints designed by fellow bloggers. Downstairs, the finished basement is also a modern and simple space, where Swanson’s husband, Kevin, a goalie trainer, can watch hockey downstairs while the girls entertain themselves in the play area.

Although Swanson says she’s not nearly as do-it-yourself skilled as some of the women behind the design blogs she follows, she enjoys undertaking projects that quickly change up the look of a room or area. Long-term projects include updating the bathrooms while current projects include spray-painting the entryway mirror gold, and shopping for a new fridge.

“It’s amazing how just switching up an appliance or adding a new piece can change the entire look of a room,” says Swanson, who settled as she says she is, clearly hasn’t stopped looking for ways to change and improve her home. After all, an endless world of design inspiration is only a click away. ■

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