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Artful Experiment

Barbara Hawthorn strikes a balance between work and play in her own home "laboratory"

By Sharon Jaffe Dan

Photography by Geoffrey Hodgdon

Tucked into a quiet wooded neighborhood in McLean, Barbara Hawthorn's home has evolved with her career over the past 26 years. She first laid eyes on the light-filled contemporary when she was planning a move from

Berkeley, California. The self-avowed "California girl" knew the colonials so prevalent in the area were not for her and bought the secluded property on the spot.

Hawthorn carved out an office in a third-floor bedroom for her burgeoning interior-design business. Her business (and family) grew. When her son James was big enough to move upstairs, Hawthorn converted his nursery into a larger office. Today Hawthorn has three employees and several dedicated workspaces in her home, including a newly completed fabric library. "Before I knew it, about a third of my living space has become office, but it's not obvious," she says.

Outfitted in neutral shades with "punches of color," classic furnishings and a lifetime's worth of art and collectibles, Hawthorn's home performs its double duties with style. Whether James, now a college freshman, decides to come home for the weekend with a handful of friends or Hawthorn conducts a design presentation, her home meets the challenge.



Hawthorn frequently meets clients in her light and airy living room. It displays some of the "treasures" she has collected from past show houses as well as the work of local artists, including an abstract painting by Elizabeth Byrd and sculptures by Elizabeth Freire.





The split-level design lends itself well to the separation of work and personal spaces. Set one step down from the main entrance, her living room is washed in white with abstract art making a bold color statement.

"The impact of placement, symmetry, repetition, the use of color as a focal point can create a wonderful sense of drama but need not be a budget-buster," she says.

The room shows off many of the "little treasures" Hawthorn has used in past design show houses that she couldn't bear to part with, like a decorative silk ball ottoman and a faux-fur throw. On the landing that leads upstairs, a recamier she created for the 2001 NSO Decorator's Show House displays a reversible throw of her design that doubles as a pillow when rolled.

Hawthorn proudly points out that the sectional sofa in her living room has been there since the '70s.

Hawthorn's family room (above) integrates Italian sofas, Lucite and glass with antique prayer rugs, an antique Biedermeier chair and Peruvian and African artifacts. Hawthorn (opposite, standing) recently completed a fabric library, where she studies plans with her staff (from left to right): Heather Haas, Denise Maksimowitz and Glynnis Vance.

She attributes the timeless quality of her furnishings to a few simple principles. "Just go for good lines and form and proportion," she says.

Over the years, furnishings and accessories have shifted with new acquisitions. "One danger of this business is that you go into places and fall in love with things." As a result, she says, "My space has become a working laboratory, integrating modern furnishings and antiques and neutral colors punched up by accents." Case in point: her family room, where Italian sofas, Lucite and glass intermingle with antique prayer rugs, an antique Biedermeier chair and Peruvian and African artifacts.

Hawthorn often invites clients to meet at her home early in the design process. "To some extent, I started using my space more in the last couple of years as people are more interested in transitional and eclectic style," she says. "My home is modest—it's not one of those grand homes—but it lets people see what you can do. The impact of placement, symmetry, repetition, the use of color as a focal point can create a wonderful sense of drama but need not be a budget-buster."

Artwork takes center stage throughout Hawthorn's home. She displays a wide range of art in her home, from abstract paintings to an 18th-century engraving. "Art is my comfort food," she says. "Unfortunately, I'm running out of wall space." Hawthorn encourages her clients to start collections of their own and she avidly supports local artists. "Having a collection in your own home makes things so much more special."

Hawthorn has designed plenty of shelving and drawer space throughout her personal and work spaces. Generous proportions and clean lines marry form and function. "I'm the kind of person who hates clutter," she explains, which is why she decided to create a dedicated fabric library on her lower level that organizes her thousands of samples. "I call it my playroom," she

says. The new space features state-of-the-art low-voltage halogen lighting, a generous drafting table and copious stainless-steel drawers where fabrics are stored by color. The *pièce de résistance*: Plynyl flooring, a woven vinyl surface that is easy on the feet and bounces back when a client's china sample goes flying off the table. (Literally.) With its metallic look and geometric circle pattern, it conveys a sense of clean, industrial cool.

Now that the fabric library is done, Hawthorn has her eye on a few other innovations. She plans to reupholster the living room sofas in a dressier, more sophisticated fabric—white, of course. She is also going to install an electronic window treatment by Vimco in the living room that will afford privacy but let in the light. The end result will be something like a "shoji screen—beautiful but very functional."

"I tell clients not to be afraid of experimenting," Hawthorn says. From the look she's achieved in her own eclectic home, this designer has beautifully mastered the art of experimentation. ♦

A native Washingtonian, Geoffrey Hodgdon of Geoffrey Hodgdon Photography has been a professional photographer for more than 10 years.

