

DESIGN FOR LIVING

Artist Sandy Tarr matches her design philosophy with the fading grandeur of Shadyside houses and creates renovations that are as inviting as they are beautiful

Many Shadyside shopkeepers know neighbor Sandy Tarr on sight. Dressed in her typical dungarees, baggy old sweater, and mud-splattered work boots, she pops in and out of their shops throughout the day, stopping for coffee, breaking for lunch, or picking up donuts for her work crew. "I ran into one of the merchants at the ballet," she laughs, "and he did a double take. He said he didn't recognize me in girl clothes."

When Tarr moved here in 1989 she left behind the cosmopolitan design scene in New York, where elegant "girl clothes" were *de rigueur*. But while the uniform and setting may have changed, Tarr continues to exhibit her flair for style and sophistication. Dubbed the "visionary of Howe Street" by *Victoria Magazine* for her ability to see past boarded windows and dented aluminum siding, artist Sandy Tarr buys decrepit, borderline condemned houses and strips them to their craggy bones. With a flair for combining the best of both centuries, Tarr creates homes that are as charming as their Victorian histories with the



The artist in her living room. She emphasizes light and windows to create spaciousness.

sensibility of modern life.

All five houses—the kind you've always dreamed of—have their foundations dug deep into Shadyside's Howe Street, within easy walking distance of each other. Here, Tarr takes pleasure in her own form of neighborhood beautification. The homes she has transformed called out to her in a mystical sense, she says, making her choice inevitable. "I look at hundreds of houses in a year. Something has to speak to me. It has to have good spirits. I have to have good vibes about it. A window can stop my heart. Or the way the light flows from front to back."

Once work begins, Tarr spends lots of time on the site. "I keep running around saying 'isn't this beautiful?' 'this is gorgeous!' and the workmen look at me like I'm crazy because what they see is a pile of trash. But I'm looking at a staircase that I love and want to build a house around."

A native of Pittsburgh, Tarr graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in the '60s with a major in painting and design. "I went to New York thinking I could just paint, but I wasn't much

by Sally Webb

photography by Richard Kelly



Before and after: the eyesore on the left had its red siding peeled to reveal intricate woodwork designs. Lengthening the first floor windows and adding a basement garage and porch completed the exterior transformation of this Victorian.

for cold water flats," she says, laughing. "And I was told my paintings were too pretty. It was at a time when a lot of people were doing garbage dumps, lots of black, and lots of white. I was hung up on cobalt violet."

With textile training from the Fashion Institute of Technology, she applied what she knew from painting and took it into product development, designing curtains, bedspreads, and draperies. Highly successful, Tarr twice won the prestigious Tommy Award for home furnishing prints, joining the ranks of Diane Von

Furstenberg and Oscar de la Renta.

But once her children were grown and gone, Tarr found herself homesick for Pittsburgh after a separation of well more than 20 years. Upon her return, with no local textile industry in which to ply her trade, she found another medium—houses—and started her own business, S. Tarr Designs. She works out the designs, finds the pieces, and directs the army of carpenters, electricians, glaziers, and plumbers who descend upon each building.

Moving from canvas to construction site seemed a natural transition for Tarr. "It's all about color and shape and space," she

Everything Old Is New Again

A recent visit to Cleveland's Ohio Design Centre—the most comprehensive resource for designer professionals between New York and Detroit—clued us in to the latest trends to hit the home furnishings market.

Interior fashion frequently mirrors the political and economic flow of the times. Remember '60s earth tones and natural fibers? The yuppie opulence of the Reagan years was not very different from the early Modern treatment that sported cold and pristine chrome and glass. In today's world of environmental concerns and stressful economy, interior trends lean toward warmth and comfort. The home becomes a safe enclave where the troubles of the world are held at bay.

Today's colors are taken from nature—deep eggplant purple, hot magenta, brilliant golds, radiant oranges, and soft ruby and wine-colored reds. You'll see lots of green with shades that range from airy seafoam to jade, juniper, and night forest. Secondary blues like blue smoke, blue spruce, and aquamarine

are purified from their natural sources. Unusual combinations of colors are hitting the market as well, marrying unique and different shades—like reds with yellows or blues with oranges—into strong fashion statements.

Changes this year are made easier than ever with the return of slipcovers, demonstrating the environmental idea that we are no longer a throwaway society. And the fabrics are wonderful whether you're updating an old favorite or buying new. Lots of texture that takes you back to your grandmother's house where you first felt that coarse, nubby upholstery under your hand. Damasks are updated in a contemporary version with textured, geometric shapes. Look for lush chenilles, radiant tapestries, and the new silk-like rayons. Patterned fabrics are equally natural, with jungle prints of both animals and plants taking the forefront. The most sophisticated are handpainted and screened.

Suites of perfectly matching furniture have given way to combinations of styles and cultures.

Sentiment runs deep in pulling your rooms together; at last you have the chance to show off that heirloom from Great Aunt Bessie. Other pieces making a showing this year include Chesterfield sofas and club chairs from the 1930s silver screen, *trompe l'oeul* (fool the eye) hutches, handcrafted pieces that combine raw industrial metals (like wrought iron, steel, and bronze) with exotic, non-endangered woods, and huge gilded mirrors. Details include piping, tassels, dressmaker trims, gold leaf, and faux finishes.

But before you make any extreme changes, consider the wise words of David Goldberg, designer of New York's Club 54, who says, "I don't believe in trends. I believe in taste. You have to listen to your heart and not have an interior designer dictate to you. The first point of design when man started decorating the walls of his cave was aesthetics, and it still holds true. First you explore what you like and what you can live with."

—S.W.

says. "When I got into home furnishings, it wasn't just a print or a bedspread, it was the whole concept. It was a room. So this is a continuation of that; a bigger and broader thing." It is Tarr's belief that when you study design, you should be able to design a doorknob, a swatch of fabric, a piece of furniture, or, ultimately, a house.

"Now granted, before I knock down a wall, I call my architect or engineer because it has to work," she says. "But a painting has to work too. If your canvas isn't primed properly, the paint isn't going to stay on very long. If your stretchers aren't stretched properly, they're going to warp. Everything has to work as far as making it beautiful."

Tarr's philosophy is to stick to the integrity and authenticity of the house, be it Victorian, Georgian, or Federal, but she adds the touches that life in the '90s demands. She lightens the dark wood and opens walls with added windows, brightening gloomy corners and musty hallways. Big, shining white bathrooms are a

must, as well as walk-in closets for the master bedrooms.

She researches period pieces like window boxes, molding, finely carved doors, gingerbread porches, brick patterned sidewalks, and once spent two entire days in Nantucket photographing nothing but fences. She catalogues all of it, plus information from history books and the National Trust. "If I buy a house that is 1880, I'll research that period, although I'm more married to a look and a feeling than the exact light fixture. I'm more inclined to put in very small recess lights and one wonderful chandelier as a focal point.

She hunts for pieces from the same period as the house she is renovating. "Very often it's such a good fit, I have the feeling that it was ripped off of the house I'm working on, sold to one person who sold it to another, and I'm coming and buying it back for the house it originally belonged to."

At times the search ends magically, with the perfect item dropped into her path. The latest house, for example, had

"Very often it's such a good fit, I have the feeling that it was ripped off of the house I'm working on, sold to one person who sold it to another, and I'm coming and buying it back for the house it originally belonged to."



A graceful arch (top left), created from scratch, replaced a narrow door and opened up the living room to the hallway. The circular staircase (top right) was like “the grain of sand in an oyster,” says Tarr; the impetus from which work began. The original ran only through the first and second floors, but Tarr matched the railing and balusters to include a run from basement to attic. The carved mantelpiece (bottom left) is a found treasure. Originally set into a corner, the fireplace was moved to a side wall so that the flow of the room would not be compromised. Tarr plans to stain the delicately carved frieze of the kitchen cabinets (bottom center) maple and glaze the doors the same color as the house exterior—“Bermuda blue.” The sunny breakfast room (bottom right) off the kitchen is an addition that throws light from the rear garden all the way to the front door.

windows with the original indoor shutters that Tarr loves to strip down with just a bit of white paint showing in the cracks. “But I decided to elongate the windows on the first floor because I like the real tall, thin windows. I moved the shutters to the windows on the second floor and was thinking how I would love to find old shutters for those downstairs windows. I needed about 110 inches.

“So I went out onto the street and a man walked up to me and asked, ‘Are you Sandy Tarr?’ He said he just moved into the house next door and had a basement full of shutters he bought from an old church and he couldn’t use them. Would I like to take a look at them? Now this is scary, really scary. They were the right height and everything.”

But that’s the pretty side, the fun side of the work. Replacing

entire plumbing systems, electrical wiring, tearing out walls, even moving fireplaces, can create unforeseen disasters. “Every one comes with its own set of problems that you can’t known at the onset,” she admits. “There are times it gets really hairy.” Part of the renovation involves fitting the houses with basement garages. On one job, two-thirds of the foundation had been removed and the contractor neglected to put supports in the basement. Tarr arrived at the job site to see a house with no walls on the front and none on the side. “It was like looking into a doll’s house,” she says. “All the rooms with all my new plaster and all my new wiring were ripped out. There it was—old bricks in a pile.”

Financially, her business is based on the risk that her investment will pay off. In a trendy neighborhood like Shadyside, even the dilapidated “gut jobs” can sell for as much \$100,000 to \$250,000. Her investment, including the original price, ranges from \$200,000 to \$300,000. The latest project required an investment of more than \$400,000, and should sell for at least \$500,000.

The first Shadyside house Tarr renovated, an 1890s Eastlake Victorian, was kept as her own since the fit, as she says, was so perfect that she couldn’t give it up. “I loved the location; it was reminiscent of Manhattan, being able to just fall out and pick up a newspaper, get a frozen yogurt, or a glass of wine. And I loved the rooms. All of them were perfectly square, 15 by 15. There was something symmetrical and geometrically pleasing about the house.” She found it ironic as well that all the furniture she had collected over the years was scaled exactly to the rooms. “There was space for everything,” she



Searching For Your Own Period Treasures

Sandy Tarr's yearly hunts for the bits and pieces that give her renovated homes that carefully detailed look take her to villages in eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey, antiquing through Connecticut, and bumping along the back roads of Massachusetts. It's possible, however, to make a few good finds without the Triptik and gas allowance. Tarr offers her recommendations:

- Old Post Office Place in Blawnox at 340 Freeport Road houses a half-dozen vendors in a vacated post office. Architect Don Montgomery's shop, The Building Arts, 828-6876, offers beautiful wood-framed windows, both wooden and marble mantelpieces, metal fence work, and doors for interior and exterior use.
- The Canonsburg Antique Mall at

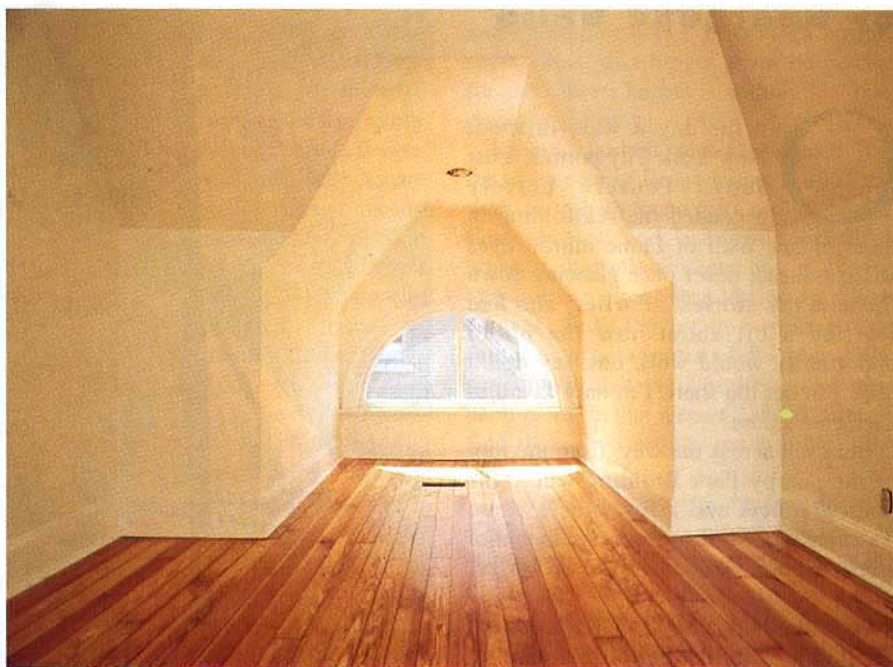
143 Adams Ave., 745-1333, rents space to 32 dealers. You can find exquisite chandeliers, stained glass windows, mantels, and other finishing touches. Worth the drive just to window shop.

— Pressed for time? The easiest of all is ordering through the **Renovator's Supply** catalogue. Call 1-800-659-2211 for your personal copy. —S.W.

says. "It just said this is the right place for you to be."

That house Tarr used as collateral for the next. But each house somehow, for a little while, becomes hers as well. Another neighborhood real estate developer was driving by one day and caught her planting impatiens and ivy in the window boxes of the house she was working on. He stopped, shook his head and told

The next fantasy on line is a three-unit house on Denniston; Shadyside wins her attention again. Although the tenants haven't moved out just yet, the design process is underway—back to a single family Georgetown home, four bedrooms, three-and-a-half baths, with her signature breakfast room and sitting room off the master bedroom.



This stained glass window (left) is one of two that add jeweled brilliance to the master bath. The top half is the original. Tarr pulled a motif out and had the bottom made to match. The geometric angles found in this alcove (right) reflect Tarr's love of attic space. The original pine floor was patched where needed from the first floor's planking.

her, "You better realize this is not for you. You're not going to make any money if you keep thinking it's for you."

"Every house I do, I think it's for me," admits Tarr. "And I put my heart and soul into it. And when it leaves, I only like it if someone nice buys it. It's like giving away the litter."

"That's why I put a studio in every one; I keep thinking something is going to happen so I can keep this one. I have this grand fantasy that some wonderful man is going to come along, buy it and ask me to join him for life. That hasn't happened yet, but the studio goes in just in case one of my fantasies comes true."

"It needs a lot of curb appeal help," she says, speaking as kindly as she can of the latest runt of the litter. "It has the potential for good light, it has good room sizes, high ceilings, a good possibility for a staircase, and a decent backyard."

"Of course, it's really ugly now...." □

Senior Editor Sally Webb knows firsthand the pleasure of a crowbar digging deep into plaster and lath. Her turn-of-the-century North Side home could use a few visionary tips to guide her through the trials and triumphs of renovation.