



The designer's Westport
cottage is a serene study
in white and neutrals

diane KARMEN



top: The cottage received a redesigned entrance after Karmen moved in. **above left:** The exterior of the sunroom is painted in Benjamin Moore's Raccoon Fur. **above right:** The mudroom features a seating area and new cabinetry. **opposite:** Window boxes display Karmen's favorite color combination of black and white. "I love the look of white flowers with boxwoods and chartreuse," she says, "and I saw those black petunias at Oliver's Nurseries. My husband wasn't so sure, but I knew they'd look amazing with the white window boxes. I had to have them."



above: In the powder room, a painting by Claudia Mengel is a beautiful touch, and a concrete sink is a clean-lined element. **below:** In the family room, a vintage acrylic lamp resting on the bar belonged to Karmen's husband's grandmother, who lived to the age of 102. "I always loved the lamp, and when she died, her family gave it to me along with the vintage acrylic coffee table in my bedroom."

How do you design for clients versus yourself?

I feel that how a person lives is a really important part of approaching projects, and I don't impose my personal style on them. My clients run the gamut from very traditional to very modern, and I have my own design business and do large design projects for Lillian August. Speaking for my home, I like white and neutrals, I want it to feel serene, and I like organic elements and textures and pops of color from art and books. I think good art is an important part of finishing a project. My home is a little bit modern and a little bit traditional, and I like to have pieces of collected items mixed in. It's a 1940s cottage, so I'm working with the architecture as well. It's quirky, but I like quirky.

Was it "love at first sight" for this house?

We've been here almost twenty years, and at the time, we were moving from a 1700s farmhouse on three acres in Rhode Island. We were desperate to find a place to live, and we wanted to be in Westport. We had spent the whole day looking and were really discouraged, but then we saw this house. The realtor said, "It's in a great



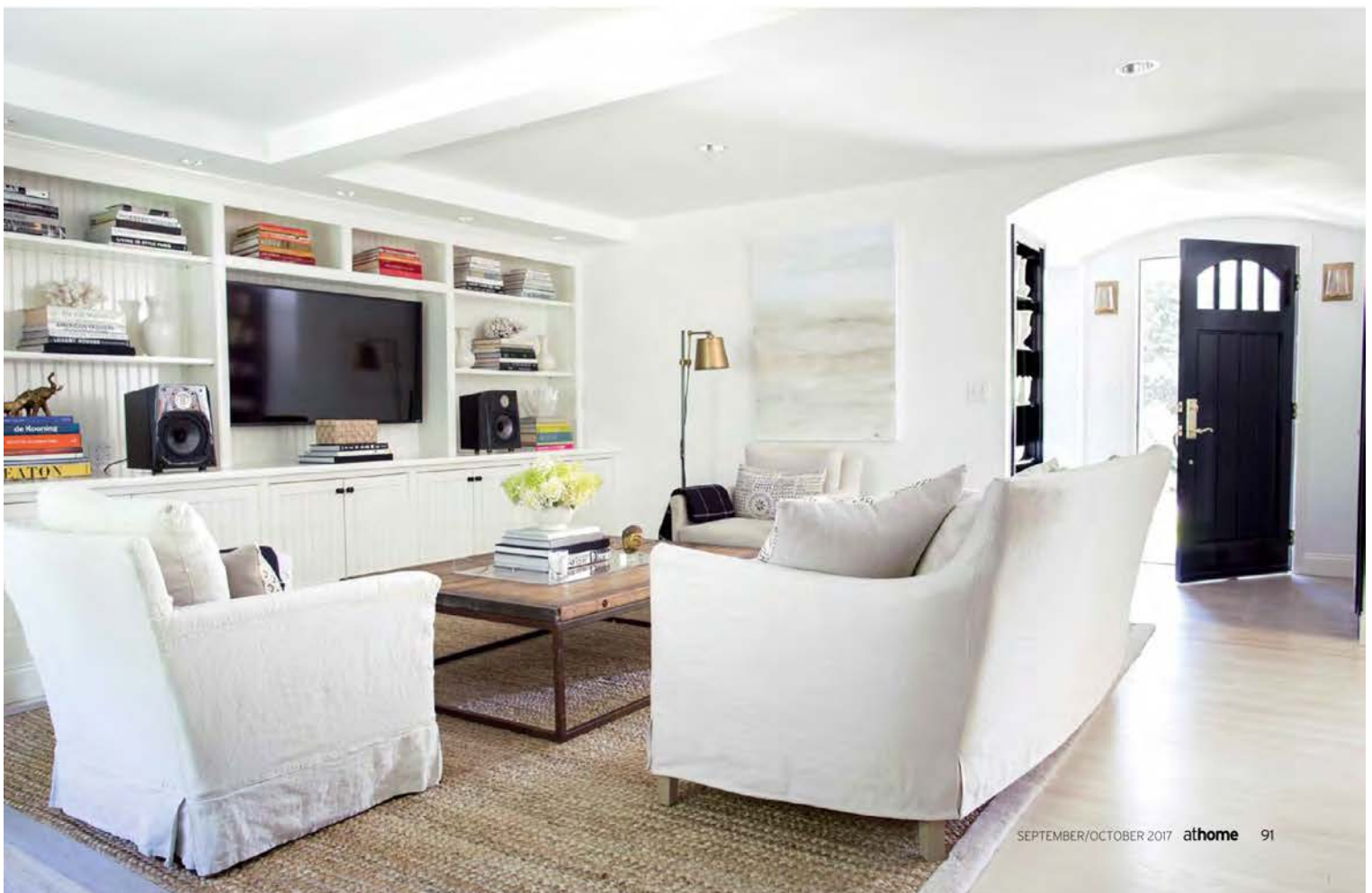
neighborhood, but it's a strange house. You can't really tell what the front is." I said, "I want to see it." We came here, and I could see the potential, what I had to work with and what could be fixed. We basically bought it on the spot. It didn't matter to me what it looked like on the outside—it was in a good location, it was the right size, and it was the right price. The owners had just put work into it, which wasn't really my cup of tea, but I knew what I could do with it.

What did you do first?

We lived here for a few months, and then my good friend Gregory Laramie, who is an architect, came up with a brilliant yet simple design for the kitchen, mudroom, patio, stone wall and front façade. It remains modern and fresh, even after all of these years, and it's the heart of our home and living space. Before, when you came in the front door, you entered right into the family room and our kitchen table, which was an awkward design. We ended up adding 112 square feet in the front, and though it's not a huge kitchen, it's very functional. We added the mudroom, connected the



above left: Built-ins host a collection of books that includes art and design tomes. "My husband was an English major, so there are some Shakespeare books in there, too."
below: Chairs from Lee Industries bookend a sofa by Verellen, and a Susan Fellich painting complements the neutral palette. Most of the furnishings, except for antiques and collected pieces, were purchased through Lillian August.



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below: Karmen's office can be glimpsed from the family room. The gold starburst mirror on the wall was purchased fifteen years ago at Marché aux Puces in Paris. "It's very meaningful to me because I went to France, picked it out and had to figure out how to get it home."
opposite: The home's original dining room was repurposed as the office. Artwork is by Claudia Mengel.







left: After moving in, Karmen added square footage to the front of the kitchen to expand its footprint. "I love the light in here. This is where we congregate, drink coffee and hang out with friends. It's crisp and white, and I like the architectural elements. I can look out onto the patio and see our flowers." above: A coffee bar is ready for morning pick-me-ups. below: The home's original red oak floors were recently stripped and bleached to add lightness throughout the entire house. opposite: A side door offers easy access to the outdoor patio when entertaining.

garage to the house and put the patio in the front of the house, which is where our property is. There were also closets lining the family room, which made it feel like a big hallway, so we took them out and put in those built-ins. The floors were red oak, and I refinished them at one point. Over the years, I would paint things, get new pillows, always refreshing things.

Any recent updates?

Last year, I renovated and refreshed the entire first floor. I gutted the first-floor guest bedroom and bathroom, bleached all the floors, gutted the powder room and mudroom, put new tile in the entryway and powder room, replaced all of the interior doors and hardware, and painted the interiors white. In the kitchen, I refaced the cabinet doors, built a new island and coffee bar, installed new countertops on the island, added a seating









The kitchen's most recent renovation included a new countertop on the island, the addition of a seating area and the replacement of upper cabinetry with open shelving.

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How did you land on your neutral color palette?

I'm in a phase right now where I'm obsessed with black and white. It's funny because when I redid the kitchen the first time when we bought the house, it was white with black granite countertops, and it transcended time. Before I did the most recent renovation, people would say, "I don't understand why you're redoing the kitchen!" It was a very classic design, so it had aged well. I've also always liked black-framed windows. In the sunroom, they're combined with white walls, and that combination brings me joy. It just feels good, and I want to feel that way throughout my whole house. Not every white in here is a bright white; I mix the whites with natural fibers, linens and neutrals.

The walls in the dining room have great texture.

This is the older part of the house, and the walls in here were original plaster and in bad shape. I asked Deux

The spacious dining room, housed in the home's former living room, features a decorative plaster wall finish by Deux Femmes Decorative Art and Design. Painting is by Claudia Mengel. **opposite:** Black-framed windows in the sunroom draw the eye to the greenery outside.









Although sited in the front of the property, the patio is concealed from the road by strategic landscaping. "The trees have grown a lot, and they've created a nice nook for us," Karmen says. "That was really important because we're out here all the time."

opposite: With unbeatable views, heated floors and a TV, the sunroom is a favorite spot in the house. The lamp and upholstery are by Verellen. "I really like their pieces—the style, the fabrics, the way they're constructed."





Femmes Decorative Art and Design to make the walls look like gray concrete. They did a decorative plaster finish, and I love how it came out. I'm a minimalist, and I don't like to embellish every single room. We talked about doing something on the walls in the office, but to me, this was like the jewelry in this one room, and I was done.

What can you tell me about the artwork in this room?

My friend Claudia Mengel is a wonderful artist. I asked her to do something for the dining room, and she said she had the perfect piece—she just knew. The painting in the office is by Claudia as well, and there's another one of her pieces in the powder room that she gave me as a gift.

Tell me about the desk in your office.

That desk is one of the oldest things in my home. Our neighbors in Rhode Island had this beautifully renovated barn, and they had this big table sitting out front. I loved it, and they said I could have it. I don't know how old it is, and it's kind of falling apart. I tried to use it as a dining room table, but it's not a very functional piece. Even though I haven't been able to really use it, I've carried it with me everywhere. I had ordered a desk for my office that was on back-order, so I put the table in here in the meantime, and then I really liked it. With all of the white and some of the modern elements, it was nice to include something with

age and wood and character. I'm not a collector, but if a piece looks good and makes me happy, I buy it.

Did the sunroom get a facelift?

A few years ago when our kids went off to college, we redid the sunroom. It had sliding windows, and since all the seals were broken, they were foggy. The room had electric baseboard heat, but it was sub-zero in the winter and super-hot in the summer. Although our kids loved to hang out there with their friends, it just wasn't that functional of a space. I tried to make it the best that I could, but finally my husband said, "Let's redo this." He wanted a place in the winter where he could feel like he was outside. We put in heated floors and a TV, and it's become another great space in the house. My husband is in there all the time—if he's inside, he's in there. The black-framed windows are modern and larger-paned, and they recede into the landscape and bring the outside in.

Any landscaping projects?

The side of the house that had the landscaping was terrible. Since most of our property is in the front, we hired Oliver's Nurseries about seven years ago to redesign and install a new landscape design, and we created a privacy screen around our property with trees. My husband loves to garden, so since the initial installation, he's been maintaining and improving the landscaping. I used to be heavily into gardening, but

above: In the first-floor en-suite guest room, a Lee Industries bed is dressed in Belgian linen. The bathroom countertop, shower niche and sills are black granite repurposed from the kitchen after its renovation. **opposite:** The macramé piece above the bed was custom-made for Karmen by Justine Shaw at Boundless Love Studio.



"I'm not a purist. I go
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The master suite continues the neutral theme upstairs with a Lee Industries bed in Belgian linen from Libeco and a painting by Susan Fellich above it. The vintage acrylic coffee table inherited from Karmen's husband's grandmother is a treasured piece. **opposite:** Outside the light-filled master bath, the dressing area gets a hit of pattern from Schumacher's Queen of Spain wallpaper.



when I was working a lot, he got really into it. I always say I art direct him [laughs], but he's pretty good on his own! We're a great team.

Did the master bedroom undergo any changes?

I did my master suite about ten years ago because we had a horrible bathroom and closet. There was attic space over the garage we could use, but I was conflicted because we would lose storage space. We ultimately decided to push into the attic and create our master bathroom and closets, and I use those spaces every single day. I've never regretted it.

What's your most recent purchase or addition?

My friend's daughter makes macramé pieces, and she custom-made one for me for the guest bedroom. I wanted it in all-natural tones, so that was the last thing I bought. In the master bedroom, the Schumacher Queen of Spain wallpaper I put in our dressing area was probably the last thing I did.

I actually noticed you don't do a lot of wallpaper.

I love wallpaper and use it a lot when I design, but personally, wallpaper is too permanent for me. I put wallpaper in the powder room when I first did it, and it just wasn't right. It was bothering me, and I kept trying to think of ways to make it right. I finally decided it needed to come down, and I had the space painted a high-gloss white from Fine Paints of Europe.

Do you follow any design rules?

No, I'm not a purist. I go by total instinct. I like when there's one thing that seems a little off in a room. I like when there are things that are a reflection of you. If I came into your home and completely renovated and styled it, there need to be things that are personal to you. I like to throw in something old, something a little out of place. My own house has always been an evolution.

Did you ever consider moving?

When we bought this house, we were coming from a larger house and a larger property. My kids were six and eight at the time, and I thought this would be a temporary place and that we would eventually want a house with more privacy. But the longer I lived here, the more I liked it. I can walk into town, everyone in our neighborhood is respectful of each other, and I don't feel like I don't have privacy. I love this little spot. When the kids were growing up, I would think, "I wish I had just one more room," and it felt a little small. But now, I think it's perfect.



How does it feel to come home every day?

It's funny because we actually talk about that. We recently went on a trip to Italy, and when we came home, we walked through the door and said, "Oh, we love our house." It's the way I want it, it feels really good and I love coming home to it. There's always a project that I could do, but it's the way I like it now. More isn't always more.

RESOURCES

Interior design: Diane Karmen, Westport; 203-247-0998;

dianekarmen.com

Cabinetmaker: Nick Zerzan, Zerzan Woodworking, Norwalk;

203-247-3797

Tile and plumbing trim: Mary-Beth Oliver, Karen Berkemeyer

Home, Westport; 203-454-0032; karenberkemeyershome.com

Concrete sink: Concrete Encounter, Bridgeport;

203-659-4765; concreteencounter.com

Marble: La Pietra Marble, Brookfield; 203-819-7983;

lapietramarble.com

Contractor: Eric Salvesen, Sterling Associates, Newtown;

203-426-0021; sterlingassociatesllc.com