





ELEGANT MANOR

*Interior designer Jon Schlagenhaft and partner
Curt Stern create beauty where once stood mediocrity*

The classic transformation of an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan may be something for the realm of children's stories, but it can also happen in the adult world of design. That's what veteran interior designer Jon Schlagenhaft and his partner, Curt Stern, learned when they acquired an eight-room, 2,200 square-foot, L-shaped country ranch in River Hills, Wisconsin. Their metamorphosis involved dramatically renovating an awkward existing space into an elegant dream home ➤

Their initial quest for the proper house with ample property, unfortunately, turned out to be not such an easy affair to execute. Instead, they were granted only part of their wish: a charm-free architectural atrocity from the vantage of a trained interior designer squatting on a roomy six acres.

Schlagenhaft and Stern found themselves faced with the daunting task of creating a canvas that would serve as the ideal backdrop to the country home's intended interior, one that would emphasize recognizable classic elements jazzed up by a funky collection of contemporary art, vivid patterns and wildly vibrant colors.

Built by noted Milwaukee architect William F. Thalman in the 1950s, the house had undergone a number of renovations over the years, resulting in a style that Schlagenhaft refers to as "pseudo-American colonial with a tacky 1950s exterior." The outside was covered with horizontal orangey-pink Tennessee stone and vertical olive green siding, mirroring the dissonance of design within. An unharmonious combination of a Cyprus wood ceiling, a bright red brick fireplace, and a built-in bar with crumpling bi-fold doors hampered the living room. The dining room, decorated with white walls and baby blue woodwork, was not much better. "It was ugly," Schlagenhaft, an interior designer for more than 30 years, says bluntly. "It was very dated and just needed to be redone."

Thankfully, the pair could see beyond the surface and into the home's potential. "We didn't really care about the style," says Stern, managing partner at Jon Schlagenhaft Design, Ltd. "Being in the design business you can easily look past what's in front of you and just look at the bare bones. It had really good bones."

Schlagenhaft also had a plan. "I wanted to create something that looked like it had a sense of age. Something that was classical and simple," the crafty designer says, noting his affinity for symmetry and what he calls "outside the box traditionalism."

Sequestering themselves in a single room of the house, the couple embarked on a general construction renovation that took almost two years to complete. They attached another wing to their ranch, sculpting the L-shape into a U, which realigned the space and provided symmetry. The new outline created not only a central focus, but also a master bedroom and courtyard in the back and called for the addition of all new French doors, vertical windows, floors, doors, moldings, and fireplaces in the process. In total, only one wall escaped without alteration. "In hindsight, I probably should have torn the house down," Schlagenhaft admits.

The residence's outdated stone and siding were replaced by a pure white neo-classic exterior, complete with a center portico that included four columns and a pediment. More distinct architectural details came in the form of matching pilasters on the corners of the house, while stately red brick and manicured hedges provided the finishing, formal touches.

Yet, their work was not complete—the entire interior remained unfinished. But Stern had his own strategy to get his partner motivated to complete the renovations quickly. "There's an old saying that cobbler's children don't have any shoes. I devised a way of getting our house done really fast by planning a holiday party for family, friends and clients—around 300 people," he explains, adding that the key was to include clients on the guest list. "So Jon went to town, and I finally got my shoes."

With only nine months to turn their post-construction shell into a dream house for the party, the designer went with what he knows best: color. "We live in a climate where it's gray for eight months of the year. It's either snowing or raining. When I'm inside, I like to be around all sorts of wonderful color. It really affects my mood," Schlagenhaft explains. For the living room, which relies on Northern exposure for lighting, he chose a warm yellow for the walls. Now the room glows with a buttery hue.

But adding color is a delicate process. "It's really critical when you're working with color to balance it," Schlagenhaft says. His own family room is an example of this approach: the designer pairs sumptuous camel-colored leather walls with a rich chocolate and sable tiger pelt carpet. The clincher: matching armchairs in parrot green cut velvet, which serve to balance the intense, dark hues. "If those chairs were any less bright, they'd be completely obliterated by everything else in the room," he explains. "They really need to be strong to hold up to the background."

So it seems that Schlagenhaft and Stern's awkward little duckling has blossomed into a graceful 5,400 square-foot, 12-room swan ■ *Jon Schlagenhaft Design, 10134 North Port Washington Road, Mequon, WI 262.240.4090; 291 East Deerpath Road, Lake Forest, IL 847.482.1313*



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