

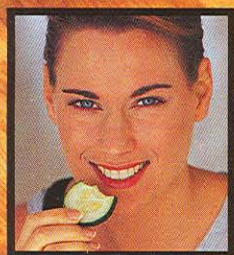
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A Little Italy with a Lot of Style

Inspired by the villas of Portofino and Venice, John and Vicki Crew's home is a blend of Old-World elegance and modern livability.

BY KAREN MUNCY





CONVERSATION PIECES: The cozy, book-lined family room features cabinetry designed by the owners and overstuffed armchairs covered in luxurious floral cut velvet. The tasseled Fortuny lamp—a Soho gallery find—is from Venice. Hand-carved panels above the fireplace conceal a TV.

Photography by IRA MONTGOMERY
Floral Design by RICHARD BOHONSKY



PARTNERS IN DESIGN: Vicki and John Crew delight in the Tuscan ambience of their dream home.

THE EL DORADO SCREECHED TO A stop as the woman craned her neck to view the crowning finial atop the third-story dormer. She gave the new house a thorough going-over, from the gently pitched tile roof to the front door framed with a leaded-glass Palladian arch, then rolled down the car window to speak to the owner watering just-installed shrubbery.

"You look like you've got a little bit of Tuscany here," she said appreciatively.

For a Texas native of Scotch-Irish ancestry, it was the nicest compliment John Crew could have received. Recounting the story, he laughs and says, "I'm an Italian wannabe. I love anything Italian—architecture, cars, Murano glass." Add wife Vicki to that list; she is a descendant of turn-of-the-century Sicilian immigrants. When the couple decided it was time to build the home of their dreams, "We both wanted something Italian," says Vicki, owner of Vicki Crew Interior Design. The villas of Portofino, Lake Como, and the Veneto area were their inspiration; Dallas architect Richard Drummond Davis made it reality.

"Georgian architecture is just Italian with red brick," chuckles Davis, one of the first architects to bring the former style to "tear-down" lots in the Park Cities and North Dallas. A longtime student of clas-

The first-floor rooms flow into one another, utilizing the same floor tiles and crown moulding throughout to unify the spaces and make the house seem larger.



HIGH LIGHTS: In the entry hall, the groins of intersecting vaults are dramatized by artful lighting. A bombé marquetrie chest with bronze mounts makes a striking focal point, its rich ornamentation contrasting with the simple columns and Italian tile flooring.

ical European architecture, he worked with literally hundreds of his own slides in designing the Crews' residence. His attention to detail is evident in the columns that separate the entry hall and living room, in the exterior paint work and finials, and in the authentic barrel clay tile used for the roof.

But that was phase two of this design process. The Crews did the interiors first, carefully charting "how we wanted to live, where we wanted to sit, how we planned to entertain," explains John, an investment banker. So the architecture accommodates the living spaces, not vice versa.

Some of the couple's requirements were quite specific. For instance, says Vicki, "We wanted four chairs around the fireplace, because you can never comfortably seat more than two people on a sofa—no matter how large it is. We wanted a grouping where four people could sit and talk for hours." That happens frequently with the quartet of oversized easy chairs, plushly upholstered in art deco-style patterned velvet. After John refused to give up his favorite big chair, Vicki simply had three copies made, artfully defusing the most common husband-wife decorating argument.

Actually, it was the only element that came anywhere close to causing a disagreement. The Crews were completely in sync about every other design decision. Other must-haves: A square dining room with rounded corners to accommodate a large round table "for conversation." A long, gallery-like entrance hall separated from the living room by a row of pale stucco arches that flows into a vaulted ceiling—an effect both dramatic and inviting. And a hiding place for the TV. "We wanted the casual living area to look like a library, not a TV room," says Vicki. Tucked above the fireplace, the TV niche is camouflaged by two artfully carved panels on hidden hinges.

Innovative storage also distinguishes the master bath. "They both wanted a sculptural architectural feature in the center that was also a storage unit," says Davis. The display cabinet is fashioned with slender

rectangular columns "like pilasters" supporting round, open glass shelves for towels and other necessities.

"The attic was an accident," Vicki says. To incorporate a band of decorative stenciling essential to the Italian motif, the house façade extends to two-and-a-half stories, yielding an L-shaped room with a gable window. "It replaced our original idea of a wine cellar and smoking room." However, with its own cigar-smoke filter, the room fulfills the latter concept. The ceiling lines are draped with cream canvas, self-tied to create a tent effect. Housing John's collection of hunting gear, it's definitely a "guy" kind of retreat.

Despite the house's grandly European style, its location is pure small-town America, within walking distance of a grocery store, ice cream parlor, and movie theater. And by design, it is a gathering place for their daughter and her friends: A curving tile-and-stucco stairway leads from the rear courtyard to a '50s-themed game room complete with TV, VCR, sound system, and soda fountain. An adjacent bedroom and shower make it an ideal place for slumber parties.

Awash in flowers and trailing vines, the courtyard "is probably the most charming area," says Vicki. It's also a valuable extension of living and entertainment space.



ITALIAN ACCENTS: In the formal living room, candlesticks from Florence and a Murano glass vase reflect the Crews' travels to Italy. Colors are subtle, from the Westgate silk draperies to the Aubusson rug.



GOOD TASTE: Sleek granite counters and rustic pickled cabinetry straddle the home's casual/elegant contrasts. The adjoining breakfast nook juxtaposes floral linen draperies, sisal rug, polychrome chandelier, and a Baker table draped with a cloth hand-crocheted by Vicki's mother.

"We can seat 18 out there for dinner parties," she adds.

Throughout the first floor, the absence of a cased opening allows rooms to flow into each other, utilizing the same floor tiles and crown molding to unify the spaces and make the house seem larger.

The tile flooring and stucco walls create a "grand country" environment, but the formal living and dining rooms live up to their titles with Empire furniture and Fortuny-inspired fabrics.

The sunny kitchen is more relaxed, linked by an open archway to the bay-windowed breakfast room. Countertops are granite, woodwork is pickled for a rustic look, lace curtains dapple the morning light, and large ceramic bowls and platters crowd the tops of cabinets.

With its commercial range and spacious work island, the kitchen is a very personal

Awash in flowers and trailing vines, the courtyard is a charming and valuable extension of living and entertainment space.

reflection of the Crews' shared hobby: cooking. "When we entertain, we do all the cooking ourselves," John confesses, arranging plates of osso buco and garlic-studded spinach for a casual lunch. "It's such an expression of hospitality," adds Vicki, as she puts finishing touches on tiramisu. To get the arrangement of appliances and work space just right, "we drew in chalk on the floors where everything would go," John says.

Construction took the better part of a year, and the experience has confirmed the couple's beliefs about how to approach such a project: "Don't decorate after you build,"

says Vicki, whose father is a builder. "Involve your architect and designer in planning your home."

"Spend time and money up front with your architect," says John. "It will save you money in the long run. The more specific you and the

architect can be about everything—right down to the type of screws you want in the cabinetry—the better the result will be."

After three years in the house, the Crews are still delighted with what their design partnership has wrought. "I got absolutely everything I wanted except a larger garage," Vicki laughs. "We're both very passionate about this house."

For such grand Italian style, "passionate" is definitely the right word. **D**

Karen Muncy is a Dallas writer who specializes in home and design.



PLACE IN THE SUN:
Dripping with vines and blossoms, the courtyard is an irresistible setting for outdoor dining or quiet breakfasts. Blue-tinted poured concrete is latticed with the same Italian tile used inside the house.