

PORTLAND'S HOME GARDEN AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

# PORTRAIT OF PORTLAND

**SPECIAL**  
GARDEN ISSUE

INSPIRATIONAL  
DESIGNER KITCHENS!

At home with designer  
**KATHY NIEMI**

**CHIC COLOR TRENDS**

**76** pages of  
STYLISH INTERIOR  
**DESIGN**



WRITTEN BY DONNA PIZZI PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG KOZAWA

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU MARRY PORTLAND INTERIOR DESIGNER KATHY NIEMI OF KAROL NIEMI ASSOCIATES WITH GARY GIBBS, AN INTEL FACILITIES MANAGER? YOU GET A 1920S MEDITERRANEAN STYLE HOUSE WITH VINTAGE DETAILING, ELECTRIC COLORS, AND A KALEIDOSCOPIIC VIEW OF PORTLAND, ALL MIXED WITH A TWIST OF LIME!

# COLOR THEORY

The Niemi sisters – Kathy and Karol – must have grown up surrounded by color decks, artwork, and the word “Travel” blinking in neon outside their crib windows. Both women thrive on bold colors, graduated from the University of Oregon, love to travel, and began their careers at ZGF in the 1970s. Kathy migrated to BOORA Architects, and during an economic slow down in 1979, was loaned out to the then newbie design firm - Karol Niemi Associates - and never turned back. Nearly thirty years later, the women are still creating beauty together on the same team.

In 1990, the Niemi-Gibbs team was drawn to a 1926 home on Alameda Ridge that needed work. The ridge was formed 13 - 15,000 years ago when Glacial Lake Missoula collapsed and flooded Idaho, Washington and Oregon. As 400’ deep flood waters eddied around Portland’s Rocky Butte, depositing silt, gravel and boulders around the volcanic cinder cone, a 100-150’ high bar now known as Alameda Ridge was formed. It remained uninhabited until the turn of the century, when electric street cars brought wealthy city dwellers eastward. The ridge meanders through Northeast Portland, breaking up the street grid and providing homes on its south side with elevated views of the city.

The Alameda Ridge home’s lack of period molding, rotted windows on the south side, and general neglect gave the Niemi-Gibbs a clean slate from which to launch a series of renovations. “Clearly, there was lots of work to be done,” admits Kathy, “but we always knew we would just pick away at it, bit by bit.” They established a vision to keep things on track, while keeping both their budget and a proper sequence of construction in mind.

Among the highest priorities on the master plan was a direct connection between the kitchen and the large back yard with its wonderful ridge views. Dining al fresco involved carrying food from the kitchen through the house and out the basement door. Other items on the want list included a master bath, improved closet space, built-ins for storage, and an updated kitchen.



The living room, whose unseen extension is at left, is warmed by its renovated fireplace. A pair of custom sofas done in Rodolph fabric face off against a Thonet tubular chair done in Kravet by Michael Weiss. "I purchased the two chairs new right out of college, now they would be considered vintage! They've been reupholstered three or four times," says Kathy. The Barbara Barry metal and beveled glass coffee table designed for Baker sits atop a Room & Board carpet. A John Van Drael piece looks three-dimensional on the lit mantel. ✦ Located off of the entry stairs, the powder room features a fluted cabinet front. Ron Wagner did the special silver leaf finishes on the cabinet and ceiling. Finding the beveled mirror after choosing the cabinetry was a happy accident. At right, hangs a multimedia on paper piece by Jack Portland. The flooring is Black Galaxy tiles, matching the granite slab countertop. Deco period influenced sconces are by Boyd Lighting. A Carlo Moretti vase overflows with tulips.



Black ebonized paneling on the refrigerator eliminates the traditional stainless steel appliances that the Niemi-Gibbs wanted to avoid. An unseen black Viking range and hood are at left. The pendant lights are a reproduction 1920s Paul Henningsen design by Louis Poulsen. Chartreuse leather counter stools from Kasala in Seattle add a dash of color to the warm Mediterranean palette. Animals populate the kitchen in the form of art by William Crook and Mose Tolliver.

Outdoor Crossville frost proof porcelain tile gives the upper deck a 1920s Art Deco feel. Tables from Pier One can be left out in the rain without worry. A pair of Design Within Reach planters feature flax and river rock. ✦ Black high gloss lacquer laminate cabinetry makes the master bathroom sparkle with drama. Deco wall sconces by Boyd Lighting set off matching mirrors by Katayama, which reflect artwork by Mary Barnes. A Glen Lewis Clevenger acrylic hangs by the Ron Rezak window sconces. The area carpet purchased at Azzurro on NE Fremont harmonizes with the fabric in the vintage tubular chair by Jab and Kravet.



“Gary’s philosophy on remodeling is to start from the top down,” says Kathy, “then if anything leaks or happens upstairs, it won’t destroy any new work below.”

Work started on the 2nd floor in 1996, with the couple sealing off a section of the living room, and showering in a temporary plywood contraption in the basement. The upstairs was gutted down to the studs and rafters, and walls were moved to create an office, guest bed and bath, and master suite. A master bath was fashioned atop the 10’x 20’ roof over the kitchen, adding 200 sq. ft. to the original 2,600 sq. ft. home. Having survived the upstairs renovation, the couple stepped outside in 1999, to create a pergola on the foundation of what had been an orchid hot house originally built in the 1950s. The pergola serves as an outside room that is screened from the summer sun by wisteria foliage.

Work on design solutions to provide access from the house to the backyard proceeded in earnest in 2001. Kathy’s brother-in-law, architect Dennis Batke, provided an elegant solution to expand the house out toward the view. Batke’s design extended both kitchen and living room out 6’, and connected them via the new sun room, which he pushed out

12’ from the central core of the house. His design finished off the roof above the extensions with a tiled upper deck accessed from the master bedroom. “Gary and I were trying to work within the original footprint of the house,” says Kathy, “the design Dennis worked out provided all the desires we had listed. That’s why you hire professionals!”

After experiencing life in a bubble during the 2nd floor work, the Niemi-Gibbs knew they had to move out for the main floor renovation. In 2002, they purchased a house a half block away and remodeled it before they moved in. “It was the existing pink appliances in the kitchen that convinced us we needed to remodel,” says Gary. After they moved back to Alameda, the second house was again remodeled; this time to accommodate Kathy’s mother.

The extensive, two-year downstairs renovation went down to the studs and blew out the south side of the house. To pay homage to the 1920s architecture, Kathy added traditional, two-part molding, 6” baseboards, and casing around the windows and doors. A new kitchen, whose remodel was not constrained by having to match non-existent woodwork or period features, was also configured.

Three arched openings are reiterated in the downstairs remodel. The dining room located to the left of the entry leads to the kitchen. A Navajo blanket from the 1880s becomes a focal point. Purchased in Scottsdale, Arizona, five years ago, its atypical, transitional period Germantown, eyedazzler style, ironically reflects the colors found in the Donghia Italian glass chandelier lampshades. A marquetry chest by William Switzer is the perfect base for a Hilton McConnico striped shade table lamp discovered during a 1989 trip to Paris. More Jack Portland artwork hangs at right, opposing the Rift Cut Oak with Java Black Satin Finish table from Bolier & Company, through J.D. Madison.



“We weren’t always true to the period,” says Kathy. “We prefer to renovate not restore and the Mediterranean style easily accommodates a décor inspired by patterns, ceramics, and other ethnic influences from our travels.”

The new kitchen remodel personifies the Mediterranean feel with its 16x16 limestone floor with black galaxy granite accents, which carries through to the adjacent sun room. There was one structural given in the kitchen: the central load bearing column, which marks the spot where the house originally ended, and anchors the south end of the island, while providing a telephone niche. Kathy added creamy Botticino Classico marble stripes into the Black Galaxy granite kitchen island to define the eating area. “I didn’t want the island to look like a monolith. The stripes help break up the expanse of stone,” she explains. The kitchen custom cabinetry done in “Anigre,” an African hardwood with black stained details, gives off a warm brandy hue that completes the welcoming embrace the couple wished to achieve.



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SOURCES Main Floor Stone & Porcelain Tile Fabricator:  
Campbell's Tile Concepts; Kitchen Porcelain Tile & Lime-  
stone: United Tile; Dining Room Table: JD Madison, Bolier  
& Company; Master Bath Faucets: Jado

Tiny lights bedeck the stained treated wood beams of the columned pergola adorned with white blossomed wisteria planted in 1999. Vintage iron furniture dots the landscape, mixing with Summer Classics Black outdoor wicker done in Osborne & Little and Pindler fabrics. Shears found at Ikea blow in the wind. ✦ Red Orange trumpet vines cover the entrance to the new Garden House, which is transformed into a bar area during summer party months. A bone and mother of pearl framed mirror from Wisteria sparkles in the evening sun. Kathy had Stan Hanson Finishers paint the simple Pier One altar table garden green, and married it with a pair of wicker Pier One stools for extra seating. ✦ Kathy and Gary (standing) host neighbors at a casual evening soiree, which has become an annual tradition.

For a couple who loves their home, family, neighbors, and friends, a fireplace was an essential element to completing the whole. Kathy coupled deep brown "Café Noir" with black gloss for the painted mantel, along with a black and brown marble stone fireplace surround and hearth. Siberian Oak from the entry was used to match the original living room floor to the new 6' addition, while new oak replaced the old in the entry.

The south-facing Sun Room joins living room to kitchen, and has become the favored spot to enjoy a drink before dinner, early morning coffee, or a late night snack before the television. Its tasty garden green walls, relaxing McGuire "Butterfly" wicker chairs, and cushy sofa make it a hit for all.

The final piece of the remodeling puzzle was completed in 2005, when the landscaping and renovation of the exterior gardens was completed. A multi-faceted "Garden House" replaced a dilapidated tin shed. The house has a separate back half for tools and garden supplies, and a front half, which is transformed during the summer months into a bar for outdoor parties. In winter, it doubles as storage for outdoor furnishings.

During the summer of 2006, the Niemi-Gibbs celebrated the completion of their remodeling cycles with a grand party for all who participated in the home's transformation. It was, quite literally, a wonderful feeling of closure to a 15-year odyssey.

"Taking time to work out a long term plan at the start kept us on track," says Kathy, who dubs their home, "A Happy House that reflects the way we like to live our lives."





## SHOPTALK | Kathy Niemi

**Q: WHAT'S A FAVORITE DECORATING TIP YOU SHARE WITH CLIENTS?**

**KATHY:** "I tell clients who want to refresh their look they don't have to get rid of everything they own; they should keep things they love. Furnishings, accessories, and art should reflect the personality and history of the owner. Tired furniture can be refurbished and put together in new ways. Everything does not have to be showroom perfect – it needs to fit their story."

**Q: IS IT HARD AS A PROFESSIONAL INTERIOR DESIGNER TO REMODEL YOUR OWN HOME?**

**KATHY:** It's more complex when you're designing for yourself, because as a designer you know of so many wonderful options that are available. But that's what also makes it interesting; you can be free to try things out on yourself where you might not want to experiment on a client.

**Q: ARE YOU AN INVETERATE "JUNKER?"**

**KATHY:** Yes, I love to refurbish junk store "finds". The vintage chair in the master bathroom was rescued from a junk store and refurbished with leftover fabrics from personal projects. I picked up the smoking stand in the 1980s, and had Yolo Paint refinish it. The vintage tubular chairs on the upper deck are upholstered with leftover Brunswick & Fils, Osborne & Little, and Maharam fabrics. It's a great way to make use of textiles from your own projects. Otherwise, what do you do with them besides make more pillows?

**Q: CAN YOU GIVE US A QUICK RUN-DOWN OF THE BEST WAY TO TACKLE A REMODEL WITH THE HELP OF PROFESSIONALS?**

**KATHY:** First thing to do is start with a plan, no matter the size or complexity of the project. If the project is really complicated, break it down into smaller parts so as not to get overwhelmed. However, it's crucial to tackle things in the right order, otherwise you might end up complicating the project even further by having to back-track or undo earlier work.

Next, remember to mix things up, whether its finishes, furniture styles, woods or fabrics. They must all work together, of course, but don't feel everything should or must match. I also recommend selecting items that you like and not to worry about what others like, or even what the latest trends are. It's your space and it should reflect your personality.

Third, if you select polished or black surfaces, do so because you love them, because they will take more upkeep – think of driving a black car!

Finally, communicate your likes, dislikes and budgets to your architect, designer, and/or contractor. No one can read minds. Illustrate your ideas with pictures gathered from magazines or books. As I tell my clients, "Every picture tells a story." >>



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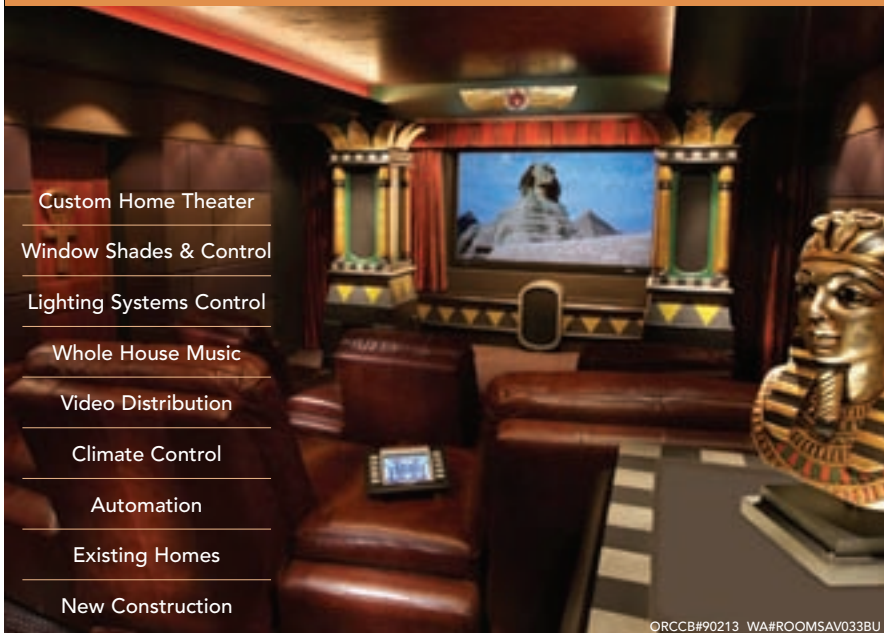
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DESIGN: KATHY NIEMI



Q: WHAT ARE YOUR THREE MUST HAVES?

KATHY: My first must have would have to be color and pattern. I personally like a more saturated and contrasting color palette. Clients tend to like color and pattern to a degree, but it's a degree that they are more comfortable with doing. My second must have would be eclecticism. With a project, you don't have to follow one single style or mindset. You can make decisions based on what is best for the project and best for the client. Finally, my third must have would be comfort. This is a very important aspect. I believe that if a space isn't visually and physically comfortable to the client, it won't be used and enjoyed.

Q: HOW HAS YOUR AESTHETIC EVOLVED?

KATHY: I do more visual layering; which can involve color, finishes, accessories or furniture. Visual layering adds depth to the space, and provides unexpected combinations or minettes. It's about seeing beyond what's just in front of you. However, you have to know when to stop so that it doesn't get overwhelming!

Q: WHAT IS THE LAST PLACE THAT MADE YOU THINK, I WISH I'D DONE THAT?

KATHY: Recently, my husband and I took a trip down to San Francisco and went to the Redwood Room bar at the Clift Hotel. The Clift hotel is an old hotel that has been re-born, and the Redwood Room bar is a very memorable space. It has a historical nature, but it's also very eclectic, modern and elegant at the same time. I more so appreciate it than wish that I'd done it.

Q: WHAT IS THE MOST ESSENTIAL PART OF ANY SPACE YOU DESIGN?

KATHY: Ultimately it needs to reflect the client's personality and identity. Whether it's a residential or corporate space, I need to bring out the client's personality and identity in the design.