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IT'S PERSONAL

When it comes to her home and those of her clients, designer Cari Giannoulis taps into memories, ensuring the stories behind them continue to be told.

By Lisa Shames / Portrait by Maria Ponce Berre / Hair and makeup by Gaby Raguso



As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. But in the Lincoln Park home of Cari Giannoulis, the same can be said of the light fixture in the dining room, the rock-filled shadow boxes in the upstairs hallway, the living area's collection of colorful worry beads and the gold-accented sconces hanging next to them. Even the iconic Woodstock photo hanging above the fireplace in the sitting room is much more than it seems. "There's nothing in here that doesn't have a story or isn't placed because it has a special meaning in our lives," says Giannoulis. "Everything has a memory attached to it."

That's an ethos Giannoulis follows not only for her own home, which she shares with her husband and three children, but for those of her design clients as well. Her aesthetic of understated sophistication that stays clear of the "T" word (trends) has earned her plenty of fans, both when she worked with a partner at Lewis Giannoulis Interiors and now on her own at her eponymous company (cariannoulis.com), which she launched in 2018. Giannoulis' résumé includes ground-up build-outs and extensive renovations ranging from suburban estates and downtown Chicago penthouses to vacation homes here and abroad.



Mirre: "I loved that it was different in shape. I thought it was super-unique. It's the hard and soft combination coming together. I loved the pairing of the traditional bench with the more modern mirror. That juxtaposition between traditional and modern sets up the tone for the rest of the house."
Photo by Dustin Hallock



Cari's backyard: "This is reminiscent of Greece for me. We completely tore up that background. It looks nothing like it did before. With our children, it so needed AstroTurf to play on. There's an entire lighting system. At nighttime, it's very Zen. Lighting is very important to me. There's a tree there that we as a family picked out together. It's green in the summer and has red berries in the winter. Every season is something different. This is my ode to bringing Greece back to Chicago. There's a grilling area, an herb garden, a fireplace. There are a lot of Greek olive oil urns that I turned into planters. During the times when it's nice here, we spend a lot of time out there."

Photo by Eric Hausman

Fitting for someone whose company philosophy is based, more or less, on telling stories, Giannoulas' own narrative is quite the tale. After graduating from Boston University, she packed her car and drove cross-country to Los Angeles. She went from not knowing a soul to working at Universal Pictures, eventually becoming senior VP of marketing for motion pictures. She also was part of Danny DeVito's Jersey Records, which included working with the Sex Pistols. But when her college friendship turned romantic, followed shortly after by a proposal, Giannoulas moved to Chicago, where her husband-to-be had deep roots.

It was when building their first home that Giannoulas made a life-changing decision, although she didn't know it at the time. Unhappy with the designer they had hired, she opted to do it herself. Mistakes were made, she admits, but she learned a lot along the way. Once she finished their Gold Coast home in 2010, the referrals from friends started coming in—and haven't stopped since. "I had always been doing creative [work] for other companies, but I was always following someone else's direction and inserting myself a little bit along the way. This was my full creative expression," says Giannoulas. "It wasn't something I had set out to do, but in the process of doing it, I found myself."

Giannoulas' creativity hit home again when she and her husband decided their growing family needed bigger digs. Although the three-story townhouse in Lincoln Park was new construction, she saw it as an opportunity to further tell her story—"I was born in Jersey, raised in Florida, went to school in Boston and 'grew up' in L.A.," she says—as well as the Greek heritage of her husband and the developing tale of her family. Plenty of renovations have occurred since they moved in in 2014, but Giannoulas still considers the property "an evolving work in progress, as I'm sure is the same with any designer in her own home," she says.

On the ground floor is where you'll find the aforementioned dining room light fixture made out of an antique Moroccan water pot, which made the move from their previous home even though its heavy weight required additional ceiling bracing. In the sitting room hangs the Woodstock print "Hugging Couple" by Burk Uzzle. Giannoulas, a self-confessed hippie at heart who's had a lifelong fascination with the music festival, obtained a rare print after calling the famous photographer's studio and, by chance, ended up having an intense conversation with Uzzle himself. "He gave me the whole story about being there," she says. "It was definitely a moment for me."



"The barstools are actually mimicked after ones I saw in Paris and took a picture of. I never turn off my design eye. It's always on. My husband says it's like a hamster on the wheel that never gets off. I think I've always just been that way, but it wasn't always obvious to me beyond my own homes."
Photos by Eric Hausman



"This was my third project. The family wanted to portray a glamorous farmhouse. With four children, this house had to be incredibly functional. We did a lot of custom furniture. She was very much into subtle color. She wanted it to be glamorous, but it needed to operate as family home with kids. It was a balancing act. We had a lot of requirements for this house, but it ended up being perfect. There's some mixing of vintage. The table is vintage, the navy chairs are custom-designed. They were based on two different vintage chairs that I put together to create one."



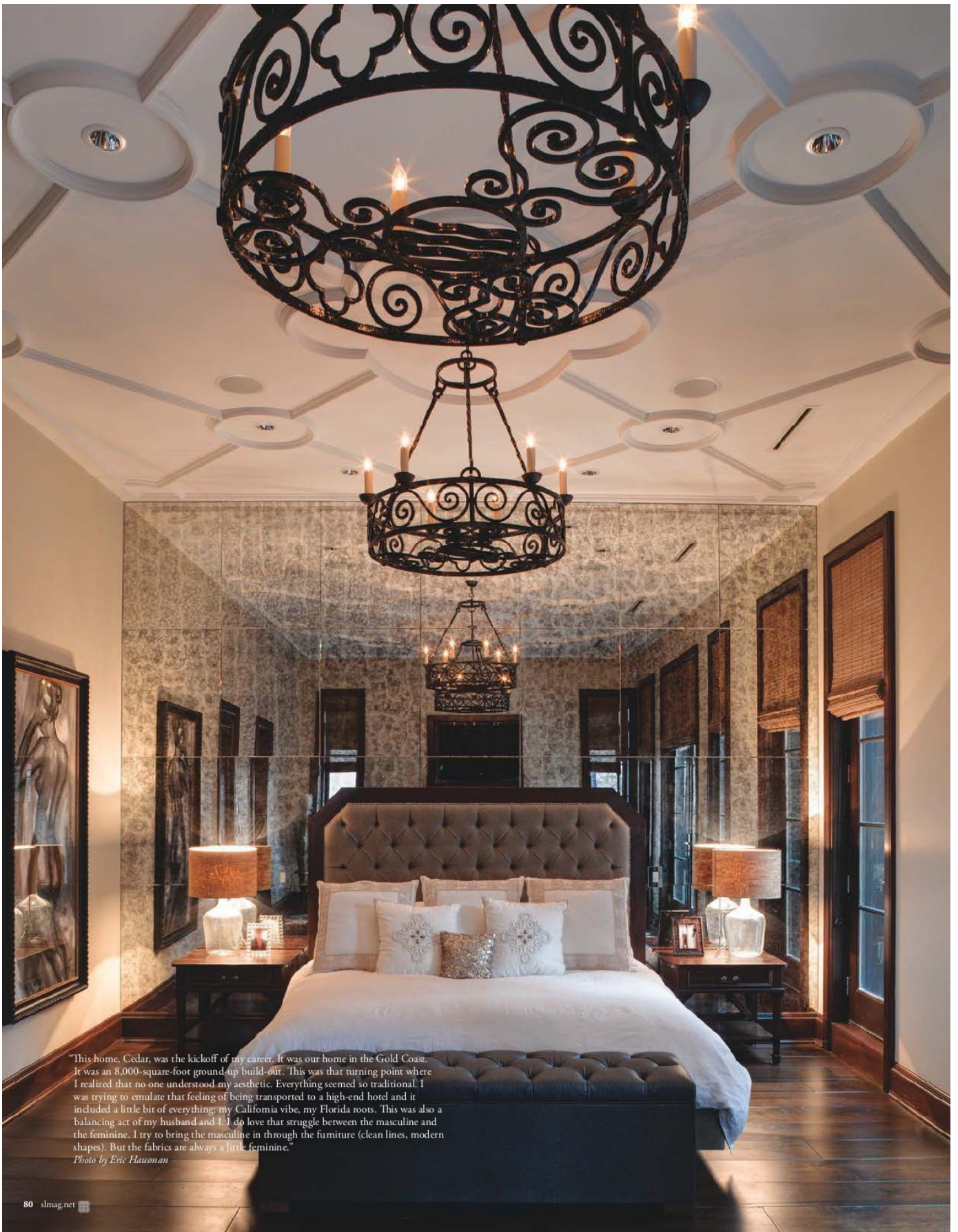
Photo by Eric Hausman



"My closet is a combination of my husband and myself. The light fixture nods back to the natural materials used throughout the house and also to bring that contrast of light and dark. My husband is a huge fan of the '80s. The studs on the island are my nod to him. There are certain rooms to me that can be dark and moody and give an undisciplined, funky vibe while still feeling very refined and sophisticated. Everything here has a place. It's fun to get dressed. It's a little bit more rock 'n' roll and references my days in the music industry."
Photo by Isabel Perna



"This is with my client who was the chief creative officer of Ogilvy Mather. An incredibly intelligent and creative man. I was given full creative license on this project. This room had to double as his office and music room. He always knew he wanted white for the walls, but I gave him super white, which gave the space more of a pop."
Photos by Eric Hausman



"This home, Cedar, was the kickoff of my career. It was our home in the Gold Coast. It was an 8,000-square-foot ground-up build-out. This was that turning point where I realized that no one understood my aesthetic. Everything seemed so traditional. I was trying to emulate that feeling of being transported to a high-end hotel and it included a little bit of everything: my California vibe, my Florida roots. This was also a balancing act of my husband and I. I do love that struggle between the masculine and the feminine. I try to bring the masculine in through the furniture (clean lines, modern shapes). But the fabrics are always a little feminine."

Photo by Eric Hausman



Not far away, the expansive kitchen/living area is bathed in natural light, both from the windows overlooking the lush Greek-inspired outdoor area and the partial skylight overhead. On one wall, the strands of worry beads—some gifted, others purchased on her numerous trips to the Greek Islands—hang side by side on a long brass rail.

Throughout the home, marble in various hues and styles plays an important role, whether as a fireplace mantle, in the powder room and master bathroom, or in the kitchen as a backsplash and countertop. “Every piece of marble is so different and evokes this feeling of history and warmth,” says Giannoulas, who tends to gravitate toward natural materials as fitting her time spent outdoors in L.A., Florida and more recently Crete, where her family spends their summers. Marble’s chameleonlike ability to be both traditional and modern appeals to her passion for pairing the two genres, a style she calls “moditional.”

Functionality is also a signature of Giannoulas’ design work, both for her own home—check out the drawers-within-drawers in the master bathroom—and her clients. Another is creating spaces in which people actually want to hang out. “It feels very curated and put together, but at the same time, you feel OK putting your feet up on the sofa,” she says of one of her design tenets. “My clients always say my homes feel so approachable, and to me, that’s such a compliment.”

For Giannoulas, design is an intuitive process that she doesn’t overthink. “I have a very guttural and emotional reaction to things when it comes to selecting pieces,” she says. “I have this feeling that if you find something and you love it, there will always be a home for it.”

And that’s a similar sentiment when it comes to placing items. “For the most part, once I find a piece for a home and it feels like it belongs there, I try not to mess with it,” she says. “It’s an energy thing for me.”

When it comes to the clients she works with, Giannoulas likes to keep the experience lighthearted while still addressing expectations on both sides. “I’ve become the greatest of friends with all my clients. It’s a blessing you get to hire a designer to decorate your home, so why not make it fun?” she says. “I’m so grateful they let me tell their stories.” 📌