



PENNY SOUTHAM



A Dance of spaces

BY FRANCIE HEALY

Ask her what she does for “down time”, and there’s a pause. “Down time?” she repeats, as if she’s never considered it. “When?”

Registered interior designer Penny Southam is the Principal of Southam Design, Inc., Ottawa, as well as the founder and partner of Studio S Interiors.

She admits she’s “turbo-charged” from the time her feet hit the floor in the morning to the moment she kicks off her shoes at the end of the day, has a nice glass of wine, and makes dinner for her children.

This is not a complaint. No way. This is pure joy speaking – joy in her work, confidence in her own talent, delight in her endless energy.

But Penny Southam, ARIDO, IDC (Association of Registered Interior Designers of Ontario; Interior Designers of Canada) knows how and when to draw the line. Her kids are that line.

“I’m very strict about quality time with them,” she says. Her clients know they must meet with her during the day from Monday to Friday, with rare exceptions.

But if her work day ends, her mind doesn’t.

“I get my best creative ideas when I’m sleeping,” she says.

This must be what happens when you have the brain of both scientist and artist, the two elements working in concert with one another.

Anyone who has seen her work knows Penny’s award-winning spaces are the inspirations of an artist. But she’s more than an artist. She’s also a scientist. In fact, that was her first choice of career when she was a top student at Concordia in Montreal, where she studied biology and neuropsychology. She was going to become a veterinarian.



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One New Year's Eve she was at a party with some of her relatives in Sundance, Utah, at the home of actor William Devane. The party was attended, not surprisingly, by a number of Hollywood actors, including Robert Redford ("in his sheepskin coat and cowboy hat"). She was so enchanted by the creative environment that it became a turning point in her life.

"I was used to being around science people with pocket protectors," she laughs. "I thought, do I really want to be a vet? Of all the courses I took at Concordia, I really only liked one anyway." It was time to give up the dream she had had since she was six years old. She wanted more.

Next stop was acting school in New York City. To many people, that very idea might seem daunting. But not to Penny.

"I have always known that whatever I put my mind to I would succeed at," she says. "I'd make it happen."

So she attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in NYC, and she was really good at it.

"But the thing with acting," she says, "is that you can be fabulous, but it's a matter of being at the right place at the right time." She acted and "did the waitressing thing" in New York City... and knew she definitely did not want to be a waitress the rest of her life.

What, she asked herself, would combine the creativity of acting with a science education? Her answer was interior design.

She took a few interior design courses to test her interest and enjoyed it so much that she returned to Montreal to study. Once she graduated, she decided she'd like to work in Europe. So she went to Slovenia to work for an architect; but civil war broke out and she returned. Upon her return, she moved to Ottawa.

Interior design is an "exact fit", she says. It demands the detailed and left-brained activity of things like knowledge of the building code, construction details, and floor plans; on the other hand, it empowers her to create beautiful spaces, "a world for people to act out the lives they live or work in".

Her style is contemporary and unique, with fresh, clean lines. She likes texture and the challenge of asymmetrical balance, which she admits can be tricky.

"Asymmetrical design has to be 'just so,'" she explains. "And if



ance. It's an eye thing. A 'feel' thing. You have to play with it."

She adds although she likes a contemporary look, it's not "cold contemporary". It's more "transitional – a fusion of modern lines with classic elements". She loves light, unique detail and the use of glass in design.

Southam Design, Inc. (www.southamdesign.com) includes, besides herself, two designers – Lesley Marrocco and Karla Spuldaro – and office manager Rosanna Spezanno.

The firm's aim is always "to have the ideal client," she says, "people who are already in line with our philosophy." She says it took her awhile to get to that stage, but it's well worth it, because such clients really appreciate the work they do: "It makes for great synergy."

Penny used to draw floor plans by hand until 2000, when she took a course in AutoCad, and now that's all she uses, but she still likes to sketch out ideas in front of clients.

When she's designing with AutoCad, she likes "to listen to funky lounge kind of music," she says. "My hand just moves to the groove and I get into it. It's like a dance. It's fun."

Southam Design projects are as different in scope as they are unique. At any one time it's a retirement home in Orleans (the "fifth or sixth" they've done, says Penny). Or it's a custom home. An office. A hair salon.

"It's always changing," she says. "Every day is different – every project, every client, completely different."

The firm has won more than 30 awards in categories ranging from custom home design, additions and renovations, kitchen and bath design. It has been featured in newspapers and magazines, and Penny has been interviewed on TV and radio. She is also a celebrity speaker at home shows.

Perhaps it's her acting talent that allows her to be able to "read" people so well. It's a valuable skill when it comes to understanding clients' wishes.

"I know when they're excited," she says. "And I know when

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they're not. I know when I've got it right and I know when I have to work harder. And I love that sparkle of excitement in their eyes."

Her creativity also extends to an unusual ability to see, in her mind's eye, a plan, an idea, almost instantly once she understands what clients want to achieve. Before the idea is on paper (or computer screen), she knows what it's going to be.

Born in Montreal, raised there and in New York, Los Angeles and Hawaii, and starting a career as a model with the Ford Modelling Agency in New York City when she was only 15, Penny comes from a long line of clever professionals (whose legacy was Southam Press among other things) – people who fully expect success. Doing things exceedingly well is part of her DNA. It's apparent in her children – daughter Kaleigh, 12, and son Morgan, 8. Kaleigh is showing signs of exceptional musical talent, and Morgan is already "a builder": their mother's art and science continues.

Penny makes no bones about the fact that she is an over-achiever. "I always have been and never will stop being," she says. And there's another element to her makeup. She sees both its strengths and pitfalls.

A winner of "40 over Forty", when she was interviewed as a can-

didate, she was asked to name her greatest strength and weakness. She answered with one word for both: perfectionism.

"Perfectionism can kill you and it can make you great," she says, "especially in interior design, because as a perfectionist you have to know when to stop. Sometimes it's hard because the ideas keep flowing."

Not only a model and actress, Penny has also been a TV star of note. She was part of the show "Design U" on HGTV and then "All for Nothing", which ran for three seasons and ended up on the Oprah network. She and co-host Paul Rushforth would guide homeowners in a competition to raise the value of their homes while spending the least amount of money possible. The show was enormously popular and nominated for a Gemini award. Re-runs continue throughout North America.

It was all part of the fun of her work.

"I'm known for thinking outside the box, pushing the envelope," she says. "I dislike boring. If someone says I can't do it, I say, just watch me."

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