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# Play Stationed!

Stripes, flowers and big color? Two childhood friends mix more than business and pleasure to create a pattern-popping ode to family living

By Meghan McEwen | Photography by Nathan Beckner and Bob Coscarelli

Like so many design-related professions, architecture comes with its own set of esoteric lingo. So when Julie Fisher, one half of fc Studio Inc., the architecture firm she shares with Rachel Crowl, talks about her most recent project—a single-family gut job in Ravenswood—there’s a lot of jargon-dropping about grade and volume and negative space. But if you’re thinking that translates to images of a staid and metered environment ruled by stark white walls and 90-degree angles, think again. One look around this color-bright, light-filled home with cherry blossoms climbing up one wall and acid-green penny tiles lining another, and you know this is all about personalities at their biggest.

The easy explanation is that the architect/homeowner relationship—preceded by a 30-plus-year childhood friendship dating back to elementary school in Evanston—trumps any jargon barrier with a running conversation about everything from bathroom fixtures to toddler meltdowns. “When you know a

person so well, you can cut through the BS,” says Fisher, whose all-in-one talent ranges from blueprints to picture-perfect vignettes. “It’s so rare to have this kind of confidence and openness. This is the most fun I’ve ever had working on a project.”

But like the effortlessly sleek home Fisher and Crowl helped single mom and software sales maven Mary James gut, design and decorate, the story is much more layered and complex. In fact, initially worried about mixing friendship and business, Fisher didn’t want to work with James. “She talked me into it,” says Fisher. “She basically said, ‘I’m not doing this unless you do it with me.’” And Fisher understood the significance of that ultimatum. Three years ago, James unexpectedly lost her husband, the father of her two children—and instead of simply moving, she was determined to make a symbolic gesture. “I wanted to do something monumental for the whole family—to create a home,” says James. “And Julie is the most talented person I know.”

**INTO THE WOODS**  
 LEFT: A garage clad in cedar siding is dressed up with an American-ledge-stone planter and two Atlantis sconces by Hinkley.  
 RIGHT: Fisher, James and daughter Gabrielle in a hallway floored with ebony-stained oak leading to the casual seating area off the kitchen. The artwork over the stairs is by Lora Fosberg.





So together, Fisher and James started the nearly yearlong search for the perfect property. "I rejected a place for her that she loved," says Fisher. "I know how she lives. I know what their day-to-day activities are." Fisher helped James focus on the priorities: a big yard for her two kids (ages 5 and 7), an urban feel (enter the shockingly quiet El tracks running just above the garage), proximity to the kids' school, and enough rooms upstairs for an office and all the bedrooms.

After digging out the basement, laying a new foundation and putting on a new roof, Fisher and James realized they were down to the nitty-gritty—a part of the process that ushered in an unexpected healing effect for James. A distracting series of in-the-details decision-making also resulted in the kind of fun only two childhood girlfriends can have. Perfect example: Poring over wallpaper swatches at Workroom became a side-splitting affair they both later describe as "orgasmic."

"It's about looking at life, you know," says James. "It's just wallpaper."

"It's not the most serious thing," Fisher chimes in, with the familiar cadence of people accustomed to finishing each other's sentences.

"But people are so afraid. It's really rare to work with someone who's so open and fun."

"If you can't enjoy yourself, what's the point?" asks James, who clearly means what she says. Her fearless sense of style turns up in glam mirrored tables and a bold art collection, while an equally telling laid-back vibe manifests itself in lived-in sofas, raw wooden tables and an open, clean-lined floor plan that feels as much like a kid-friendly playground as it does a grown-up temple to smart, modernist architecture. "I wanted it to feel organic—clean and comfortable without being too precious," says James. "You don't want to live in this modern Mecca where no one can touch anything."

"And let's be honest: She has a dog and two kids," adds Fisher. "There's reality, too"

Beyond statement-making wallpaper in almost every room, accessories like an antique leather stretcher, picked up at an antique shop in Georgia, add a layer of interest. The collection of art and sculpture from Indonesia and Australia pays homage to family trips taken around the world. James' husband was from South Africa, and glimpses of his culture pop up in colorful

OPPOSITE PAGE: A dark-brown mohair Gabrielle sofa by Mitchell Gold and a glass-and-steel coffee table designed by Denise Macy of Winnetka anchor the sitting room. Floral wallpaper from Workroom echoes the leafy yard outside.

BELOW, FROM LEFT: A bunk bed from Room and Board and bedding from Workroom punch up James' son's room; in James' office, a vintage desk from Workroom contrasts with a modern Louis Ghost armchair designed by Philippe Starck.





above, top: The fc Studio-designed kitchen, with cabinets by McDuffy Design Group, features a pendant light by Modiss above a Parsons island with stainless-steel counter by Avenue Metal.  
 above: A powder room off the first-floor landing is tiled in Erin Adams' Circles collection for Ann Sacks.  
 opposite page: In the Asian-inspired master bedroom, black-and-white florals add "a touch of femininity without being too girly-girl," says Fisher.

landscapes, beaded dolls and textiles.

An even closer look reveals another set of details at work here. Less meaningful, but highly pragmatic, they're the kind of particulars only an architect would think about: partial swinging shower doors in the tricked-out, space-efficient bathrooms; aluminum edges along corners; and formal entry spaces. ("You always enter at grade and change levels," says Fisher.) Designated areas for family living come in the form of a mud room, a laundry room, and a downstairs playroom with a separate walk-in game and toy closet. But it's all cleverly hidden, just like the front coat closet—one of Fisher and Crowl's signature "volumes" wrapped in luxurious sisal wall covering.

The space-utilizing layout is a key theme

throughout, says Fisher. "You have to ask yourself: 'How much space do you need?' For city living, there are always things you have to scrutinize. When you start to steal inches, it matters. It's like a puzzle," she says.

Unlike a puzzle, however, the end result was an evolving question mark from the onset. The single most valuable piece of advice Fisher gave to her friend during the process, especially when agonizing over details like finishes: "I said, 'I'm not here to tell you the right decision. I'm here to ask you how it makes you feel.'" And after only a year of living in her brick-and-mortar tribute, James' answer turns up exactly what she was looking for: "There's a sense of serenity here," she says. "Even with all the clean lines and color, there's a softness. It's a peaceful place. That's the most important thing." ■

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