

Designers: Finding the balance

Diplomacy, family and trends with staying power define this veteran

BY PATRICK LANGSTON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN



Light and airy is the key to the Richcraft Majestic model in Kanata.

Photograph by: Handout photo, Ottawa Citizen

You're an interior designer, delighted with how your latest project has come together. It's got presence; it's tasteful; it's contemporary without being slavishly trendy. Then your client insists on hanging, right where you can't avoid seeing it, a painting that's near and dear to him but is also staggeringly ugly. What do you do?

"You have to be very diplomatic," says veteran Ottawa-area designer Linda Nolan-Leeming. "But people are paying me hard-earned dollars, so I will always tell them the truth. It's funny how often they end up agreeing with me."

The 62-year-old Nolan-Leeming, who owns Linda Nolan Interiors (lindanolaninteriors.com) and is as quietly well-groomed as the spaces she creates, seems unfazed by any design conundrum thrown her way. But then she's been designing everything from builders' model homes to commercial space for more than 35 years.

"Minto, Campeau, now I do Richcraft's models — I can drive through almost any part of Ottawa and see builders I've designed for."

And while she may have also fashioned the interiors of major renovations and high-end new homes for private clients, she's equally content staging a home for sale or spending an hour with the owner of a small condo who simply wants professional advice on a kitchen or living room.

She was also part of a huge volunteer team on the Habitat Gift Home. That ambitious project saw an older \$500,000 home that had been donated to Habitat for Humanity transformed into a showpiece that was sold for \$900,000, with the proceeds going to the construction of homes for the working poor in Ottawa.

Not yet sold on her creds? Nolan-Leeming has worked on leading-edge projects such as the Currents condo tower by Windmill Development Group in Wellington West. With the Great Canadian Theatre Company ensconced at its base, the Currents achieved LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum status.

She's also done commercial work for the Ottawa Senators and others and was for a time a design columnist with the Citizen.

A thoroughly seasoned designer, Nolan-Leeming remains consistent in her approach to what works well.

"Major changes in design trends last about a decade, so I go for natural materials like granite and walnut floors that will never be dated," she says.

"People now are cocooning more than ever, so I love the big linear fireplaces that are a focal point of a room and the open concepts that are everywhere and that bring light into a room."

Nolan-Leeming doesn't ignore trends, but does tame them so they'll have some staying power. She used tangerine, the "it" colour of 2012, in a Richcraft model at Kanata Lakes, for example, but toned it down to make it earthier and less in the moment.

As she explains this, her voice takes on a confidential tone that draws you in and creates a sense of unassailable authority. You can imagine clients nodding in agreement to her every suggestion.

Our conversation is twice interrupted by the ring of her cellphone. Apologizing profusely for the intrusion, Nolan-Leeming is soon using that same calming but firm tone as she instructs a contractor on just what she expects: "We want to make sure there's room for the king-sized bed in there . . . Yes, yes, that's perfect."

Nolan-Leeming didn't set out to be a designer. She wanted to become an artist but, after "starving" in Europe and then Western Canada as a would-be painter, landed a job on the drafting board of an architectural firm in the early 1970s. Within two years, she'd started her own design firm in Ottawa.

She and design "just clicked," she says. She also wanted to run a business and by the early 1980s was serving as president of the Ottawa-Carleton Home Builders' Association, the precursor to the Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association. "I was the first woman in Canada on the board of a home builders' association," she recalls proudly.

Nolan-Leeming quickly built her design business into a going concern. She had five designers on staff and spent much of her time travelling as she landed jobs with Toronto builders. But it eventually lost its allure and when she married Norm Leeming and her daughter, Allison, now 18, was born, she cut back radically.

"My family is my priority and my business has adapted to my family. My husband and I have these date nights where we go for dinner and a movie. My daughter is my best friend."

Not that her working life has become a piece of cake.

"I love the action, being on the move, going from site to site. I think if you're not a type A personality in this business, you should just be sitting at a drafting board."

Along with discovering the pleasures of family life, Nolan-Leeming learned about environmental sensitivities when her daughter was young.

The two became seriously ill after living in a series of houses plagued with off-gassing carpets and other then-standard components. As her reactions intensified, Nolan-Leeming lost 30 pounds and had to quit work for a time. Her daughter couldn't go to school.

Since figuring out the problem and making the necessary lifestyle changes that led to recovery for her and Allison, Nolan-Leeming has become a serious advocate of green building.

In fact, she and her husband are currently downsizing and their new home — a reno in Manotick — is being outfitted with formaldehyde- and PVC-free components. Fortunately, as she points out, the building industry is slowly greening and components such as non-off-gassing cabinetry are now readily available.

Her new home will also be highly energy efficient.

"We're going to be living there for a long, long time and I like the idea of having a smaller footprint."

However, Nolan-Leeming has no intention of retiring. "I'm having too much fun."

That fun is thanks to her clients.

"As a designer, you see how far you can bring people out of their comfort zone and give them something (new). We all function better and are happier in an environment that feeds our spirit. It's about making us feel good.

"With clients, sometimes I have to ask: 'Why don't you go in that room very often? Maybe it's the light level or the scale of the furniture makes you feel like the walls are closing in.' "

And sometimes she has to ask if you're sure about that painting.

Linda Nolan-Leeming conducts a free seminar on the elements of good design at Shepherd's in the Ottawa Trainyards June 12. For details, call 613-789-7400 or visit shepherdsfashions.com/instore.html.

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