

midwest

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Home



something

Old,

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New

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Local Bounty for Your Thanksgiving Table

Minneapolis riverfront gives form to a 'completely different' home

BY ALECIA STEVENS | PHOTOS BY ALEX STEINBERG

The stories are familiar. We reach midlife and watch our children head off to colleges in faraway places or to other adventures that launch them on lives on their own. They return home to mark the customary passages of the year with backpacks, suitcases, and bags of dirty laundry, along with entertaining tales of tentative adulthood. But something has changed. Home is not what it once was. Literally.

Mom and dad have downsized and moved to a loft or condo. They are reinventing themselves for the next stage of their lives, and the kids are sleeping in guest rooms, on sofa beds in the media room, and sometimes on a blow-up mattress, if they are lucky enough to find a quiet corner.

This life stage was Karen Sternal's impetus for initiating a dramatic change. She and husband Bill Lahr had raised their two children in a quietly tasteful, traditional home in Kenwood while he built his company, Midwest Auto Parts, and she pursued interests and volunteer work in politics, the arts, and education. After the children had launched, the couple considered getting away for winters, but Karen worried about maintaining a large, single-family home from a distance. And, more to the point, the time was ripe for a real change.

"I had the perfect traditional home; I wasn't interested in finding a smaller similar home," she says. "I wanted something completely different if we were going to make this move." In 1999, Sternal found what she had been seeking: a unit in the Washburn Lofts, a reconfigured nineteenth-century flour mill that was part of the resurrection of the Mississippi riverfront and the reinvention of its historic architecture.

"Bill did not like change," Sternal recalls. "I knew I would drag him kicking and screaming. But, when I could show him that this was truly living with the history of Minneapolis, he warmed up. And he loved it in the end."

Ready for a new stage in life, Karen Sternal and her husband Bill Lahr moved from a traditional Kenwood home to a true loft in a reconfigured nineteenth-century flour mill.





reInvented life





OPPOSITE PAGE A painting of the Stone Arch Bridge that hangs in the entryway portends the view of the real thing from the windows of the main room. THIS PAGE, LEFT Interior designer Carol Belz balances the rich tomato red of the windowless reading room with a splash of the same color on this chaise in another corner of the loft. BELOW Gilt-framed paintings and vibrant area rugs offer delightful contrast to the exposed brick and concrete of the old building.



It seemed only fitting: Bill Lahr had been collecting late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century oil paintings of Minnesota bodies of water for several years. Today, one of those paintings greets visitors entering the loft. "The art collection, framed in this beautiful traditional way, was to be central to the space," says designer Carol Belz, part of the team that designed the loft. "I love the way you first see the [painting of the] bridge in the entry, move through to the main area and look out, and there is the real thing below you, the Stone Arch Bridge. It is as if the painting invites you in."

Belz, who had worked on the couple's Kenwood home, credits Sternal as being a creative and progressive force second to none. "She brings out the best in me," says Belz. "And with the incredibly fine talent of Paul Madson as architect, it became an inspired and dynamic project. Paul and Karen understood the qualities of a 'true loft,' and he had an amazing sense of who she is and what she wanted."

No one was going to pretend this was anything other than an old building with concrete floors, exposed brick, and a big open space. The only actual rooms with doors are a small guest room and a womb-like windowless reading/TV room—the single place to get away from the volume of space that defines the main area. These are the rooms where the children now sleep when they return home.

Inspired by images she had seen in magazines and in New York—and firmly committed to a "less is more" approach to the new space—Sternal came to meetings with Madson and Belz laden with files and ideas. She did not want to commit permanent space to an owners' bedroom and closet, so they began to imagine walls that moved in and out to create a bedroom only when it was needed. Ultimately, their collaborative effort—inspired by a desire to include some edgy, new ideas—resulted in a sliding steel and faux rice paper shoji screen. For a second wall, they wanted something less monolithic. They created a soft "wall" of fabric

that would be pulled back when not in use. A Murphy bed hides away in an elegant custom cabinet. Sternal applied her "less is more" midlife mantra to the main closet space as well. She stores her clothing in a movable wardrobe less than 72 inches wide.

Interior spaces invited the use of color, Belz believed. "It is a concrete loft," she says. "But we all need softness and comfort, so I decided to add blocks of color and texture in a refined, simple way." Her use of red is noticeable. Belz understands counterpoint like a composer; she places a tomato red chaise in one corner of the loft and in the opposite corner, unseen from the chaise, she paints the windowless reading room the same hue. For the dining chairs, she chose that delicious color seen in budding leaves for a few weeks in early May. It tempers the impact of the icy skyline in winter.

To contrast the clean, fresh lines of the upholstery, Belz introduced a few well-edited Asian antiques. One piece is used as an entry closet, a charming and artistic choice. The eclectic collection of rugs is purposeful. Sternal transported prized Persians from her previous

home. They are treated as art on the floor, used sparingly and given plenty of breathing room. Plush, modern rugs add textural contrast.

Washburn Lofts began as a visionary's dream to restore life to the city and the river, a kind of public transformation. Sternal saw the vision early and forged ahead, sensing that this project would be a bridge to a new stage of her own life. It has proven to be all that and more.

In the end, her beloved husband passed away from a terminal illness after just a year and a half of loft living. And architect Paul Madson died in a tragic accident during the project. Heartbreaking events, to be sure, and yet the spirits of both men are present in the space. Madson's gifts are underlined with each draw of the drape or slide of the wall. And Bill Lahr's love of the water, tangible in every piece of his gilt-framed art hanging on these concrete walls, is reinforced by the view from windows that overlook the Stone Arch Bridge. **MH**

ALECIA STEVENS IS A MINNEAPOLIS INTERIOR DESIGNER AND FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO *MIDWEST HOME*.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RESOURCES FEATURED IN THIS STORY, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 167.

