

WESTERN ART & Architecture

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CONCEPTUAL DESIGN

Erika Jennings taps into her clients' emotions to create thematic homes and spaces that reflect their lifestyles and passions

WRITTEN BY Eliza Cross

Not every adolescent girl can appreciate the intricacies of a well-designed laundry room, but Erika Jennings discovered her calling at an early age. "I always loved homes, even as a child," says Jennings, owner of Carole Sisson Designs in Big Sky, Montana. "At the age of 12, I remember being at a friend's house and really feeling moved by their laundry room. It might sound crazy, but the room was to die for!"

Jennings credits her mother for inspiring her early love of homes. "My mother created the best nests for us," she says. "I was lucky to experience some fantastic homes growing up. I always knew I wanted to do something creative, and when I was introduced to the design program in the college of architecture at the University of Nebraska, I knew that was my path."

After getting her bachelor of science degree, Jennings



came to Big Sky and was quickly hired by a design firm as an assistant before moving to Carole Sisson Designs in 2002.

"Carole had the market cornered on the pulse of interior design, and it was fun to learn from her about the prime fabrics, the top companies and who's the best," Jennings says. "Everything she designs has class and elegance."

In 2006, Sisson made the decision to retire and sold the company to Jennings. "I kept the established name because Carole has such a strong reputation and business following," Jennings explains. "Carole and her husband, Gary, are still my advisors and confidants, and they've supported me wholeheartedly."

Jennings decided to centralize operations in Big Sky, and the company's showroom is in a new building that she





Opposite page, from top: Erika Jennings, owner of Carole Sisson Designs. Photo: Eye In the Sky Photography. | In the dining room of the *Koselig Hus*, an eight-sided custom table by Epoch West Furniture is surrounded by comfortable chairs from TCS Designs. The chandelier was custom-crafted by Julian Iron Originals. **This page:** Facing a large stone hearth, the leather sofa is accented with cushions covered in striped fabric from Clarence House. The coffee table is by Western Heritage, and all of the upholstered chairs were custom-made by Crossley's Furniture. Photos: Karl Neumann Photography

Create a Relaxing Retreat

Whether you're designing a second home or refreshing your primary residence, Erika Jennings offers these tips ...

1. Create a true relaxation zone by choosing elements that are a complete departure from normal, everyday life.
2. Embrace regional design style, materials and talent, as well as unique ways to use typical mountain materials. For instance, instead of a classic log railing, insert glass into a log frame or paint the log orange for more punch.
3. For a second home, rethink the bunkroom. Day beds are more versatile, they can double as a sofa or seating area. We also use slide-out trundles that hide nicely under a regular bed.
4. Pull out the stops and purchase top-of-the-line linens and bathrobes. You'll feel like you're staying in a nice hotel, and your guests will love you.
5. Layers of light are very important to create the right scene and mood. Use several different light sources in each room; install dimmers to provide different levels of illumination.
6. Create a "secret" space for children. Utilize space behind a closet or behind a faux wall or bookcase to make the space seem hidden. Use huge floor pillows, chalkboard paint on the walls and cubbies for toys.
7. Bring the outside in! Use window treatments and shades that warm the home and provide privacy without overpowering those large windows that highlight views.
8. Remember the mudroom is the most important area of your home in an active household. Dedicate an area for outerwear and gear to eliminate clutter. Try lockers or cubbys. Don't forget a place to sit and strap on those ski boots and fishing waders!
9. Create a four-season outdoor space. Bring the "inside out" with comfortable furniture that's as cozy as the living room; we use high-performance outdoor fabrics that don't have that scratchy, waterproof texture. An outdoor fireplace or heater allows you to enjoy the space even when it's chilly. Sink a hot tub into a bed of stone so the mechanical components are hidden.



designed to look older with rustic beams and a faux tin roof over the kitchen. The space features a large central design area with a perimeter showroom space where she and her staff work with clients, many of them second homeowners.

Jennings' interiors often blend rustic ambience and casual elegance with warm colors and lush textures. "I don't have a signature style," she says. "I want people to feel at home, comfortable and relaxed in their environment. I try to tap into the emotions of each client, and it's important to me to get to know people on a personal level first. I love to tour or see photos of their primary residence. Figuring out every little in and out of someone's lifestyle and how they use their home is key; that makes the most successful relationship."

The firm focuses primarily on residential work, where Jennings' architectural design education informs her interiors. "When I studied commercial design in college, I was introduced to the process of creating concepts," she says. "Although the practice isn't as common with residential design, I believe that creating a theme gives the design backbone and clarity."

"For example, if your primary feeling is 'fresh and clean,' we run with that in the colors we choose, the surfaces we specify, the lighting and even the way the cabinets function. 'Bringing the outside in' might dictate organic shapes and natural materials, while 'cozy' evokes soft,



Jennings' interiors often blend rustic ambience and casual elegance with warm colors and lush textures.

Opposite page: Jennings combined rustic elements in the Headwaters Camp living room, from a vintage-look sofa table trimmed with spur hardware to a tree stump side table and a lamp topped with a mica shade. The rug is a reproduction of a Navajo design. Photo: Audrey Hall Photography **This page, clockwise from top:** The kitchen was designed for easy entertaining and features tooled leather stools flanking a granite countertop. Goose Bay Glass created the custom pendant lights overhead and the backsplash tile is by Ann Sacks Tile & Stone. | The *Koselig Hus* master suite features stunning views from every angle. A plush red duvet covers a bed with a custom striped upholstered headboard by Salzberg Designs. The cowhide chaise is a custom piece from Crossley's Furniture. | A hammered copper pedestal sink takes center stage in the rustic powder room. Sconces were crafted by Collin Design. Photos: Karl Neumann Photography

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touchable fabrics and textures, and rooms that give you the sense of being enveloped.”

Jennings begins the design process by giving her clients a half-dozen images to view, to see what moves them. “I learn as much from the things they don’t like as the things they do,” she says. As she hones in on their individuality and style, she’ll next typically pick one room and design it top to bottom, pulling out all the stops to see how they react.

“Either I hit the nail on the head and it evolves from there, or we’ll go back to the drawing board, literally, until we get it right. With second homes, we sometimes have initial face time and then work together a lot via Internet or phone. I send them design packages with samples, because I believe it’s important for them to be able to touch and see the products.”

Judy and Mark Shelstad worked with Jennings to design their vacation home in Big Sky. “We wanted a home where we could have visitors, enjoy the country, have fun, entertain and relax,” says Judy Shelstad. The log-and-timber home has an open floor plan and spectacular views of the Spanish Peaks.

“Erika was involved from the ground up, and since we live in Chicago we relied on her extensively. She and the builder were in constant communication, and we talked quite a bit on the phone. Erika sent us packages with different concepts and samples that we could pick and choose from. She even sent us bathroom tiles, and being able to see and touch them made a big difference. Her touches are evident everywhere, from the cabinetry in the kitchen to the flooring, wall colors, lighting and outdoor living spaces.”

And what about the all-important laundry room? Jennings not only made sure it had a great view of Lone Peak, plenty of cabinets and an oversize sink, but she also suggested locating it with access to the outdoor hot tub so the towels can be warming in the dryer while the couple takes a soak. “It’s definitely a luxurious laundry room,” Shelstad says. ■

Eliza Cross (www.elizacross.com) is a Senior Contributing Editor for *Western Art & Architecture* and the author of five books, including the award-winning *Family Home of the New West* (Cooper Square Publishing). A member of the Authors Guild and American Society of Journalists and Authors, she has written more than 250 articles for a variety of national and regional publications.