

THE NEW LOOK OF **wood**

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RECLAIMED

Interior design by
ELEANOR CUMMINGS

Interview by
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ANTIQUÉ
TIMBERS,
SELECTED
ONE BY
ONE—
CAN THIS
HOUSTON
HOUSE
REALLY
BE NEW?

Designer Eleanor Cummings used reclaimed wood, stone, and brick from Houston antiques dealer Chateau Domingue to give the interiors an authentic old-farmhouse look. The front doors are 1850s Italian oak. OPPOSITE. In the study, Cummings had 10-foot-tall French shutters retrofitted to the windows and put on a metal track so they would slide open and closed, like curtains.





LEFT: Cummings started with the Oushak rug in the living room: "All the colors in the room came out of that rug. I didn't want to perfectly match all of them, so I threw in one or two off-kilter colors, like the caramel on the settee. That makes a room look less contrived and controlled." Rug from Carol Piper Rugs. Chairs are covered in Jane Churchill's Madura. TOP: The hallway between the entry and the living room. ABOVE: An antique French chair is framed by curtains in Rogers & Goffigon's Pirouette silk.

The dining room wall color was inspired by a terra-cotta hotel room in Provence. A graceful rusted-iron chandelier is a perfect match for the very narrow 18th-century Italian table. The settee is one of the few painted-wood pieces in the house—"and it's the prettiest painted wood you've ever seen," Cummings says. OPPOSITE: The only new wood in the house is the cedar planking on the porch ceiling, which resists damage from Houston's high humidity.





RIGHT: The warm tones of reclaimed wood and stone give the kitchen a cozy, inviting feeling. "The poplar cabinets have the most lustrous chamois color, and great grain," Cummings says. To make the Viking refrigerators look more in sync with the rustic elements, Cummings had them covered with zinc. TOP: She turned an Italian window grille into a hanging pot rack. "But when we put the pots on it, it seemed gimmicky. So we've kept it as kind of an art installation." ABOVE: A bar is part of the family room.



HELEN THOMPSON: Are we really in Houston? I feel as if I've stepped into another time, another place. It's so soulful and romantic, like some centuries-old farmhouse in Tuscany.

ELEANOR CUMMINGS: That's the aesthetic—rustic Italian. But it's a brand-new house. That almost defies belief.

That's because just about everything in here—the wood, the stone, the furniture—is old, old, old.

Pretty unusual in a city that's all about the bold and the new.

Very. A couple in their 30s live here with their three children, and what's even more unusual is that he was the one who drove the design.

Was this his dream house?

It was his obsession. His parents took him to Italy when he was a boy, and it made a big impression on him. He always knew he was going to build an Italian house and he had the wherewithal to do it in a realistic way, as it would have been done in Italy. Otherwise, it could have veered off into the oh-so-bad.

I guess that powder room mirror is a tip-off that a man might have driven the design.

He saw that window grille and had to have it, and he got the idea of retrofitting it into a mirror. I told him no woman wants to put on her lipstick looking through a grille, but I didn't win the argument. I do love the way it looks, but you'd better have a compact with you.

Did you have to import all this wood and stone from Italy?

No. We have a great resource here, Chateau Domingue, a huge warehouse and gardens full of reclaimed architectural materials. We couldn't have done it otherwise.

What appeals to you about old wood?

It has a patina and character that new woods will never have. The wormholes, the fading, the water damage give it a beauty that can't be re-created with new wood, no matter how hard you try. And I have. That sense of history and mystery—where it's been, how it was used, who walked on the floors—is really intriguing to me.

How did you manage to keep the house from feeling dark and heavy?

The walls and most of the ceilings are plaster, which has such a wonderful luminosity. We gave it what's called a diamond finish, meaning it has movement. It goes from being totally flat to having a glassy sheen, depending on the light. You can't get that with Sheetrock and paint.



Is it tricky to get the color right?

Getting color right is a work in progress, always. We'd go to the plasterer's studio and say, 'This is what we want.' They'd make up a sample and put it on boards. Mixing plaster and tints is like cooking—you have to keep adding and subtracting. It's not a computer formula. And sometimes when you put it on the walls, it dries in a way you didn't expect. That grayish blue-green in the living room took three tries.

Still, you have an extraordinary way with color. It's so soft and subtle.

I had an aunt who did restorations in Savan-

nah. She told me that it's better to mix your own paint—you'll get a color no one else has. Paint out of cans tends to go a little sweet here, because the light is so bright. One of my friends says, 'Always throw brown in your paint in Texas so it doesn't look chipper.' This is how I describe it to painters: 'It needs to be dirtied up.' Farrow & Ball paints have that 'dirty' quality. They're softer, not in-your-face colors.

Your fabrics are subdued, too.

Mostly I used linens and linen velvets. I don't like anything with sheen, except silk. But that's a quiet sheen. Sometimes 100 percent linens have a little sheen, so I'll just flip them over and use the other side. I hate to keep saying 'dirtied up,' but there's more handsomeness to fabrics that are flat.

Isn't velvet a little out-of-whack in this climate?

Not cut velvet. It doesn't feel hot or look hot. It feels and looks crisp. It's sort of a masculinized version of velvet, and certainly no longer seen as grandma-ish. When I say 'velvet,' clients go, 'Whoa, it's so formal,' but it's such a hardy material. It's the kiddest-proof fabric you can use—dirt just falls off it.

The one place where you had to figure out how to blend old and new was the kitchen. How did you do it?

In an unorthodox way. With zinc. The coolest thing in this kitchen are the zinc-clad refrigerators. An incredible craftsman named James Dawson figured out how to wrap the doors so they would shut. Every time I go in there I think, 'These are the most beautiful things I've ever seen.'

Aren't there drawbacks to zinc?

It's porous, like marble. It stains. The first night out my client got lemon on the countertops. It was inevitable. But she said, 'You know, I kind of like the way that looks.' And it does look really good. All the stains are meshing together, and the surface is taking on a mellowness now that it's fading. I love that it has a used quality to it. It doesn't look precious. It has patina, like all the old wood in this house.

PRODUCED BY DORETTA SPERDUTO

ABOVE: "The blue shutters in the master bath are one of the few painted surfaces in this entire house," Cummings says. "But it's the original paint." BainUltra Tub. Chandelier from Watkins Culver Antiques. OPPOSITE: The powder room mirror is behind an antique Italian window grille: "Not what you'd expect, but everybody loves it. And I love all those dings and splotches on the old stone sink. Makes it even more beautiful." Sink from Chateau Domingue.



Wood beams and antique Parefeuille tile are juxtaposed on the ceiling in the master bedroom. "This ceiling is so powerful, I had to scale everything back and keep it simple," Cummings says. "We tried a painting over the bed, but it felt like an intruder." Bedding by Leontine Linens. OPPOSITE: The stairway railing is hand-forged iron by Peck & Company metalsmiths. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

