



TOP SHELF The built-in shelving in the living room of designer Laura Umansky's updated 1930s French traditional is filled with art, books and bits of conversation-starting family memorabilia.

HISTORY CLASS

In-demand designer Laura Umansky heads home to a landmark house rich in history and—thanks to her smart update—whimsy and warmth.

By Chris Kelly
Photography by Julie Soefer

“When I first saw the house, it was covered in ivy, and the front double doors were old, weathered wood, painted green,” says interior designer Laura Umansky of the Southgate residence, just a few blocks from Rice, that would become her home. While some might’ve been deterred by the signs of age and disrepair, Umansky, known professionally as Laura U, knew this was a house with great bones—*historic* bones, in fact. It was designed by local architect Claude Hooton in the 1930s and designated as a City Historic Landmark in 2013.

As soon as the sale closed, Umansky got busy and pulled down all of the ivy to reveal the French-inspired, one-story, white-stucco house underneath but kept the front doors. “I love the doors just as they are,” says the petite redhead. “I didn’t even want to repaint that faded green or replace the old doorknobs.”

It’s here, behind the character-rich doors, on a street shaded by enormous oaks, that Umansky, 38, lives with her husband, Mike, 39, CEO of his wife’s Laura U Interior Design firm; their adorable twin daughters Liv and Ryan, 3; plus a teeny chihuahua named Large.



IN SHAPE From left: Retro green front doors open to an octagonal foyer painted black; the hallway to Umansky's twin daughters' playroom features a graphic painting by Houston's Ray Phillips, an anniversary gift from the designer to her husband.



The happy family moved in three years ago after an eight-month renovation that included nearly doubling the size of the home to 2,400 square feet.

The challenge was to make these additions without disturbing the integrity of Hooton's masterpiece. Umansky succeeded on that score and also, not surprisingly, in bringing her personal style to the house, which she describes as a mix of "vintage and collectibles."

Those well-worn green front doors open to a dramatic octagonal foyer with black walls trimmed in white, and a brass art deco light fixture in the vaulted ceiling. The light-brown hardwood flooring is original to the home and runs throughout, including the new additions, as Umansky meticulously matched it to create an authentic and seamless effect.

The foyer opens to an airy living room with soft white walls, one of which features long windows and French doors, with views of a simply landscaped, park-like backyard. On this same wall hang two abstract paintings

by Houston artist Mel Dewees—canvases painted beige with bold, thin slashes of colors. There's also a framed piece in shades of black and gray that resembles a collage but is actually a vintage scarf. "I like to do things that are a little unexpected," says Laura.

Another case in point is the wall behind the fireplace, which is a series of empty, built-in shadow boxes painted burnt orange on the inside and trimmed in white—a pop of color added in a nontraditional way. There are white floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with art objects, books, family photos and Umansky memorabilia on another wall.

There's also a comfy green-gray sofa from Ladco atop a large and luxurious black rug by Stark. This is a low-maintenance, family-friendly space, designed with two small children and a frisky dog in mind. It all pulls together with warmth and moments of surprise—as does the nearby kitchen, which Laura calls her favorite room. "I don't cook," she says with

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STICK 'EM UP! A cheeky black-and-white mug shot of a granny in a Christmas sweater hangs in a dining-room corner.



GOOD NIGHT

The master boasts posh fabrics and a rich palette of neutrals.



« Among the ethereal scenes of landscapes and portraits is an enlarged black-and-white police mug shot of an elderly woman wearing a defiant look and a festive Christmas sweater. “I had to have it,” Laura says. »



EASY BEING GREEN

The kitchen's ceiling and the front door of the house, designated by the city as a historic landmark a few years ago, are painted different shades of green.

...CONTINUED a laugh, “but I’m very good at heating up. And we go out to eat a lot!”

Still, the kitchen is where the Umansky family, like most families, usually gravitates—where here a stunning cathedral ceiling painted “sea salt green,” as Laura puts it, is showcased with a chandelier covered in ribbons of glass beads. One of Umansky’s most prized possessions, an antique butcher block she found in nearby antiquing capital Round Top, stands in one corner; the warmth of wood echoes in dark walnut countertops and, of course, the floors.

On a kitchen wall hangs an amateur artist’s primitive painting of the gigantic pecan sculpture that sits in front of the courthouse in Seguin, Texas, where Laura grew up. It’s inscribed, “Seguin, Home of the World’s Largest Pecan.” She chuckles as she explains how she came across the piece at a charity auction. “And I actually got into a bidding war over it!”

The nearby dining room is a fascinating mix of glamour and whimsy. As in the foyer, the walls are black with white trim, and they serve as the backdrop for the couple’s impressive collection of framed black-and-white photographs. Among the ethereal scenes of landscapes and portraits is an enlarged black-and-white police mug shot of an elderly woman wearing a defiant look and a festive Christmas sweater. “I had to have it,” Laura says. “I don’t know who she is, but I was told that she was suspected of robbery!”

The round glass-topped dining room table is supported by a grouping of wooden logs arranged as if to be a bonfire. A brass midcentury chandelier by Curtis Jere with interlocking sections that form a geometric cluster dangles above. “We had to have it replated and rewired,” the designer explains. “To me, that’s part of the joy of buying vintage. You get to bring something beautiful back to life.” ■