

ANDRA BIRKERTS STANDS beside an abstract painting she made in the 1970s. Behind her, a night landscape is by Michigan artist Sarah Innes. To bring Modern flair to the Arts and Crafts-style house Birkerts and her husband, Harris Footer, bought five years ago, the interior designer hung a pendant light by Marset above the stairwell.



# Andra Birkerts's Site-Specific Style

Her rooms are a magical mix of vision and architectural discipline

*Well-considered, finely crafted interiors for coastal and historic homes.*



**taste**

Artful Interiors  
& Design

jamestown, rhode island    tastedesigninc.com    401.423.3639



HELIOS DESIGN GROUP

www.heliosdesigngroup.com | 617.522.4850

## HOUSE GUEST

Looking back, it seems inevitable that Andra Birkerts would find a career in design. Her father is architect Gunnar Birkerts, a disciple of building and furniture icon Eero Saarinen and a noted Modernist practitioner in his own right. “Every weekend, we’d drive around to building sites,” Birkerts recalls of her childhood days in suburban Detroit. “I’d hang around my dad’s office and he would explain things. That’s how my first level of education happened.”

Her penchant for interior design emerged early: “I would rearrange my room every Sunday,” says the principal of Andra Birkerts Design in Wellesley, Massachusetts. “And when my parents were away, I would paint one of the bathrooms a different color.” By high school, however, she had turned her focus to painting. At the University of Michigan, she studied art history and earned a bachelor of fine arts degree. As a postgrad, she got wind that Nova Scotia College of Art & Design in Halifax was, she says, “the hot art school. It was a very unusual place with very progressive art and politics. There, painting with a brush was considered uncool.” So she moved to site-specific art. “The idea was to make people hyper-aware of the space they were in.”

All of this was good she thought as she earned her master’s degree in painting, “but,” she asked, “is it based in reality?” She didn’t know it then, but what she had learned and experienced was forming the foundation of her design oeuvre. The career gods must have been guiding her when she left Halifax headed for New York and stopped in Boston to visit her brother. She ended up reconnecting with an old friend who was working at Arrowstreet Architecture & Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts (the firm is now located in Boston), where Birkerts took a job as an office helper.

“There were people there from MIT with an artisan approach to solutions,” she says. Soon the firm’s architects, such as the late Rosemary Grimshaw, James Batchelor, and John R. Myer, who was dean of the School of Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, began to





**BIRKERTS ARRANGES HER** collections of model houses in ever-changing collage tableaux that combine objects, art, and found pieces. From top to bottom: "type" houses from a variety of sources; a house, found in Amsterdam, in front of a stone-and-type collage by Michigan artist Glen Michaels; and a series of chalk buildings by New York artist Matt Austin.

notice Birkerts's design skills and became her mentors. "Jack Myer pulled me into some of his projects — I worked on the color schemes for the Massachusetts State Archives Building, for example. And Jim Batchelor always steered me in the direction of my talents. Sometimes with leaps of faith," she says with a laugh.

Eventually Grimshaw started her own firm, Linea 5 Inc., and asked Birkerts to join as a founding partner in charge of the interiors department. "It was a lot more responsibility," says Birkerts, "and I really had to work out my methods."



**Give your dining table new life with Trefler's special offer!**  
 Commission Trefler's to restore your table before July 1st, 2015 and receive:  
 Free pick up and delivery within Route 495  
 12% discount & 1 buffing on a full strip & refinish  
 Please visit [www.trefler.com](http://www.trefler.com) for more details.



## TREFLER'S

THE FINE ART OF RESTORING YOUR  
 FAVORITE THINGS

- WOOD & FURNITURE
- PORCELAIN & CERAMICS
- GLASS & CRYSTAL
- BOOKS
- SILVER & OTHER METALS
- PAINTINGS & FRAMES
- FINE ART COLLECTIBLES

Visit our studio in Newton, MA for free advice & estimates

29 TOWER ROAD NEWTON, MA • [TREFLER.COM](http://TREFLER.COM) • (617) 966-3388



available at



1-401-541-7480 • [www.rbcorp.com](http://www.rbcorp.com)



PHOTO BY BOB CANDILLO

*magazine  
or touchscreen*

GREAT DESIGN  
IS ALWAYS AT  
YOUR FINGERTIPS.

FREE ON  
YOUR IPAD,  
IPHONE,  
OR ANDROID

DESIGN  
NEW ENGLAND

designnewengland.com

HOUSE GUEST



BIRKERTS RELAXES in her living room with Ziggy, the family's Irish terrier.

With Linea 5 for five years, she married Harris Footer and “immediately got pregnant,” she says, “so I left to raise my son, Owen [now 25].” Daughter Olivia, now 21, followed. “I started to get word-of-mouth calls and doing work on my own. The work was steady enough to make it a real business.”

In the late 1990s, she moved her office from her home to a space in the center of Wellesley — and hired someone to help with the growing demands of the business. “That was mind-boggling,” she says with a chuckle, noting she has now expanded to a five-person staff, including her husband, who brought his experience in business and finance to the table. “Someone once told me,” she says, “to do what you do best and get someone to do the rest.”

What Birkerts does best is design rooms that are sophisticated yet playful, clean and modern yet warm and inviting. “Growing up in a house with an open plan and everything built-in means that part of me is always looking for coziness,” she says. “And there should always be an unexpected surprise, a magical element in every project.”

Her own house, also in Wellesley, is a 1920s Arts and Crafts style that she and Footer bought five years ago. “We were ‘downsizing,’” she says, “but after living there five years, we decided to expand. It will just solve so many problems and make the house work better for us.” They are adding a master suite in a Modern wing.

AWARD WINNING  
DESIGN | CONSTRUCTION | REMODELING

houzz

GARYSTRECK.COM  
617-512-0347

“**G**rowing up in a house with an open plan and everything built-in means that part of me is always looking for coziness. And there should always be an unexpected surprise, a magical element in every project.”

When it is finished, the exterior of the house will be a traditional/contemporary mix, just like the interiors Birkerts favors.

“There is no style that I make happen again and again,” she says. “It relates back to the site-specific art. Every house has a secret layer of interest, and my job is finding a way to reveal it. It is like a puzzle to find out who are the people who live here. What are they like? And then to create an amazing stew of solutions that will all add up to more than the sum of its parts.”

Some people are reluctant to take risks, she says, and there is a certain element of psychology to coaxing them out of their safe zone. “But they usually have some level of fantasy,” she says, “and you need to scope out how far they are willing to bend. What I love to hear a client say is ‘I would have never thought to do that.’”



Andra Birkerts's design work can be seen on our blog [designnewengland.com/blog](http://designnewengland.com/blog) and in our July/August 2011 and 2014 issues at [designnewengland.com](http://designnewengland.com). Andra Birkerts Design, Wellesley, MA, 781-235-7073; [andradesign.com](http://andradesign.com).

## CREATING OUTDOOR LIFESTYLES



**VIOLA**  
ASSOCIATES, Inc.  
SPRINKLERS • POOLS • LIGHTING  
CERTIFIED SERVICE DEPARTMENT

TOP 50 US POOL & SPA BUILDERS

508-771-3457 • [ViolaAssociates.com](http://ViolaAssociates.com)



Contemporary, *Traditional* or TRANSITIONAL  
Custom Framing and Restoration • The Largest Selection of Fine Art in New England

**J. TODD GALLERIES**  
[www.jtodd.com](http://www.jtodd.com)

572 Washington Street • Wellesley, MA 781-237-3434