



Interior designer Laura Urban and her husband, Brian, moved to the Cape eight years ago. Laura found this East Sandwich house and made it a showcase for her decorating ideas.



Unique Urban Setting for a Cottage

Interior designer creates sense of an English
seaside home in Sandwich

By Terry Ward Libby / Photography by Steve Vierra

"HEAVEN IS A LITTLE CLOSER IN A HOUSE BY THE SEA." SO READS THE PHRASE PAINTED IN DECORATIVE BLACK SCRIPT HIGH ON A WALL IN DESIGNER LAURA URBAN'S KITCHEN. BENEATH IT, WIDE WINDOWS REVEAL A SPECTACULAR PANORAMA OF THE COASTLINE OF CAPE COD BAY AS IT STRETCHES NORTHWARD TOWARD MANOMET AND PLYMOUTH. THE URBAN HOME SITS ON A GENTLE BLUFF VERY NEAR A BAY BEACH IN EAST SANDWICH, AND DRAMATIC WHITE CAPS AND DUNES CAN BE SEEN FROM NEARLY EVERY ROOM.

Laura started her career in fashion design but soon sensed that interior design had a stronger creative attraction for her. She credits this to the influence of two dear aunts, one an artist and one an antique dealer, whose “artsy homes” she loved to visit as a girl. She first established her own interior design business while living in the Midwest but, when her husband, Brian Urban, CEO of a manufacturing firm, was offered a transfer to Cape Cod eight years ago, they were delighted to make the move. Laura grew up in suburban Boston, and the Urbans had vacationed on the Cape for many years with their young sons, Matt and Chad. Their goal was to find a Cape Cod home with a water view which Laura could decorate in her signature style and use as a base for her business, Urban Design Interiors.

They eventually found the perfect home in Sandwich, a 1990s house, which Laura saw immediately as “a basic palette” from which to work. “I wanted to create a cottage feel with touches of shingle style,” she says.

The cottage style is first established by the home’s exterior look. Laura placed her flower garden in front of the house, a choice reminiscent of English seaside cottages. She designed exterior shutters made of simple painted planks with starfish cutouts and braced with shutter dogs in the shape of seahorses. The effect is quaint and, says Laura, “the nautical touches are always best when done with subtlety.”

Inside the house, Laura reconfigured the central floor plan, opening up and brightening interior spaces by removing some walls and by installing more, and larger, windows. Features such as decorative moldings, chair rails, columns and custom-designed stained glass windows were installed throughout the interior to give the house added character and architectural interest.

In both the main entrance and in the back doorway, which leads to a large screened porch, Laura’s design replaced standard entryway doors with Dutch doors made from sturdy wood planks. When open at the top, they are another

means of admitting additional light and opening up vistas inside the house, while also enhancing the home’s cottage charm. Laura stresses the importance of such transitions in home design choices. Your design statement is strengthened, she says, when movement from the exterior into the interior, and, in turn, from room to room, reveals a continuum of consistent style and color choices.

Laura Urban brings sophistication to her East Sandwich home's cottage style.

In terms of décor, Laura has created a striking showcase for one of her favorite design strategies – the repeated use of myriad fabrics, furnishings and objects that all feature bold, mostly geometric, black and white patterns and effects. It is a style inspired by the work of the legendary decorator Elsie de Wolfe, an early twentieth-century socialite who, at the height of her fame, says Laura, was known as “the queen of style.”

“Elsie is credited with moving interior décor tastes away from the darkness and formality of Victorian times,” says Laura. “She was the first to popularize bright, colorful interiors and to mix elegance with whimsy.”

De Wolfe was famous for her use of chintz, animal-skin prints, stripes and trellis patterns. Her penchant for interiors done in distinctive black and white patterns was so much copied in her day, says Laura, that it inspired a Cole Porter song, “That Black and White Baby of Mine.”

Laura’s creative plan began when she

item in the room.

The overall look is softened because Laura’s choices in white tones actually occur in a range of whites, from pale ivory to toasty sand; and black and white prints in small, geometric patterns often come off as muted grays. Wood tones in side tables, a large, marble-topped coffee table, delicate mercury glass candlesticks on the fireplace mantel and a broad-leafed plant in an oversized urn add varied textures and dimensions to the room.

Laura admires the lighting fixtures and home décor items made by the MacKenzie-Childs company, especially those finished in black and white checks and stripes. They are found throughout the house and especially in the kitchen, which she has furnished with an amazing assortment of objects, both decorative and practical, again in black and white. The tile work of her kitchen floor repeats the harlequin pattern, which is continued on the painted plank floor of the expansive screened-in porch, which overlooks the bay.

Her office, base of operations for Urban Design Interiors, features spacious built-ins where she stores her many fabric samples and design portfolios. Here, the black and white motif is present but understated. The room is painted a warm, golden sand tone, giving the room a different feeling from other areas of the house, making it distinctive as a workspace yet soothing and relaxed as a place for client consultations.

An upstairs entertainment and family room has an even more dramatic ocean vista and opens onto a second story deck. Again, sand tones and repeated patterns of black and white dominate. A whimsical ottoman, topped with a round glass tabletop, has been put to use as a coffee table. Accent pillows are covered in black and white stripes and hound’s-tooth fabrics.

The theme continues in an inviting guest bedroom where the ocean view is seen through a window draped in lavish black and white toile de Jouy (an eighteenth-century French fabric design featuring scenes of figures in a landscape).

Bed linens, a bright white duvet and



A black and white harlequin-patterned fabric was the inspiration for a theme Laura Urban carried throughout the house.

discovered a fabric with a dramatic black and bright white harlequin diamond pattern. She covered a pair of wingback chairs with it, loved the result, and the rest flowed from there, she explains.

The chairs now make a bold statement in Laura’s living room. Placed between them is a handsome pedestal table topped with a harlequin-patterned candlestick holding a black and white dotted pillar candle and a family photo displayed inside a black and white striped picture frame. Between the chairs is a plump ottoman covered in black and white herringbone fabric. Behind the chairs is a window with draperies in yet another dotted pattern in black and white.

What is remarkable about the room is that, though the number of different patterns and prints are many, the overall effect feels orderly, composed and relaxed. Once the eye picks up on the game, however, there is a visual delight in discovering the particular beauty of each individual



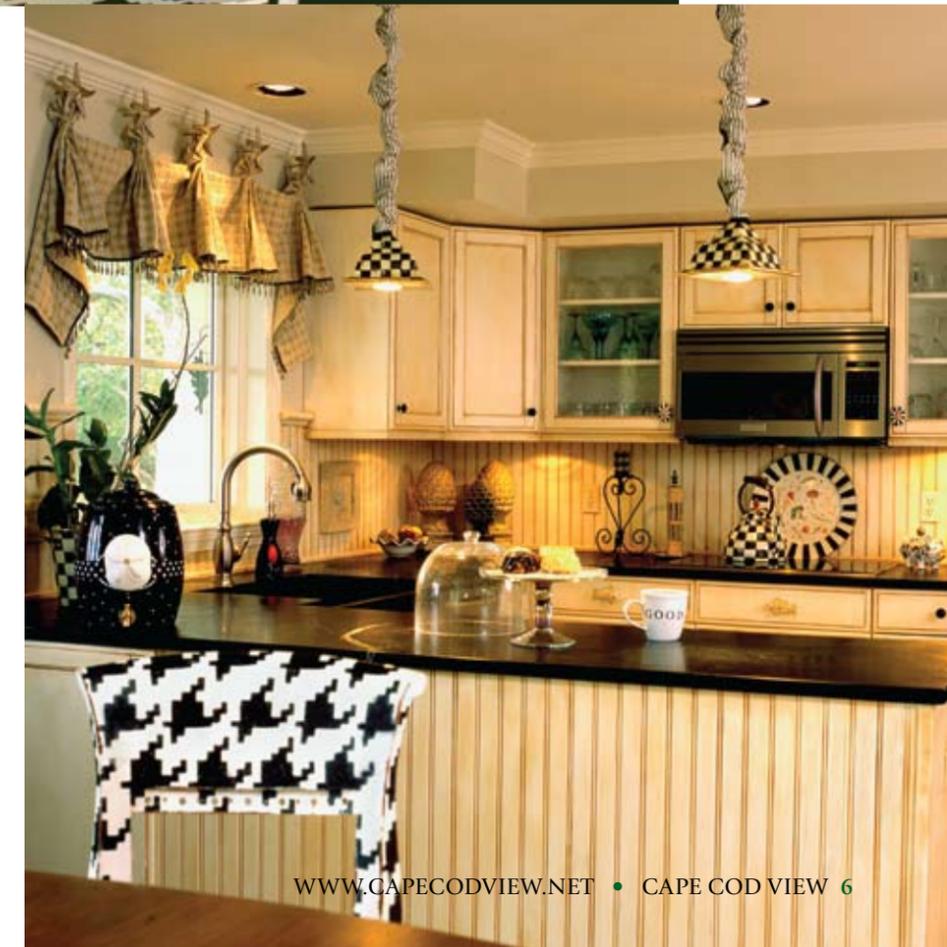
The black and white theme is replayed on the fabrics of these dining chairs.

The dining room is furnished in country French style.

matching pillow shams are outlined in a wide black stripe. A painting depicting a simple barnyard scene hangs above the bed in a weighty, gold gilt frame, an example of Laura's special eye for mixing the rustic with the elegant, one of the hallmarks of her style.

In her house by the sea, Laura has layered an artfully conceived mix of beautiful objects against a sophisticated backdrop of black and white. It is cottage style in its essence, but it's cottage style with opulence. She may have been inspired by the late, great Elsie de Wolfe, but Laura Urban has taken the basic black and white motif to new heights and made it a style all her own. ♦

Laura Urban finds the black and white checkerboard pattern of many of the home décor items, such as the lighting fixtures and teakettle by MacKenzie-Childs company, are captivating accents.



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