



Design

“When friends go through my projects, they’re always seeing something new that they hadn’t noticed before because there’s so much to take in.” — Jefferey Roberts » PG24

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Waste not, want not

WHEN DESIGNING A HOME, JEFFERY ROBERTS FINDS WAYS TO REUSE MATERIALS AND INCORPORATE RECLAIMED ITEMS. **BY MARTY PRIMEAU**



Wherever Jeffery Roberts travels, he searches out flea markets, thrift stores and salvage yards.

It's where he finds his best stuff.

"I'm a real advocate of reusing materials," said the designer/builder/artist who divides his time between Grand Rapids and Chicago as owner of Jeffery Roberts Homes and Jeffery Roberts Designs. "I always add a day or two to any trip. If I'm driving, I rent a van. If I fly, I figure out how to ship things."



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— Jeffery Roberts

That passion for reclaimed items is evident in Roberts' renovation of the Steketee mansion overlooking Reeds Lake.

The home's oak floors are timbers from an old barn in Zeeland. One fireplace surround features bricks from a street in South Bend, Ind. Lumber from a demolished school was used to build the outdoor arbor. A sofa in the living room was purchased in an estate sale and upholstered in new fabric. And slabs of old slate and granite are used as table tops in the family room.

"I like the idea of finding new life for discarded items," he said. "It's a great challenge."

Roberts, who grew up in West Michigan, started his career as head designer at Interiors by Town & Country in Allendale, where he handled commercial and residential projects.

Jeffery Roberts often uses reclaimed wood in his projects, including a table made of timber from a Zeeland farm. Bricks from a street in South Bend, Ind., were used to build the fireplace surround in the dining room of the Steketee mansion overlooking Reeds Lake.



Knotty hickory gives this kitchen a French country look. Below, Roberts purchased men's dress shirts at a thrift store and sewed them together to make a quilt for a bedroom in the 2010 Symphony Showhouse.

"But I got bored with that," he said. "I needed to expand my horizons, so I checked into other options."

He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, switching his major from interior design to fashion. After graduating, he and two partners opened a fashion design company and a lifestyle fashion and furnishings gallery in Chicago. For a decade, his clothing label sold in boutiques around the world.

"By the end of the 1990s, I knew it was time to get back to interior design," he said. "Fashion is a difficult industry to continue to make money and not have the commercial side take over."

With projects in Chicago and Grand Rapids, Roberts goes back and forth, maintaining a residence in each city. His urban Chicago dwelling is a loft in a large rehabilitated factory building that he describes as "modern eclectic." His East Grand Rapids home is a traditional English cottage with lots of character.

"I'd say those are the two genres I really like working in," Roberts said. "I've done several different flavors or styles in interior design, but I tend to gravitate to period work — English, French and Italian. I like to do the research and seek out pieces that deal with the period I'm trying to replicate."

That was the appeal of the Steketee remodel, he said. Owners Kathy and Dennis Jones moved to Grand Rapids after 12 years in Europe and wanted to create a French country farmhouse. They hired Roberts while still living overseas.

"This house had been vacant for five years and hadn't been updated since 1950," said Roberts, who worked with the couple to incorporate their antiques, artwork and collectibles into the renovation.

"I approach each project as an artist," he said. "My goal is to see things that aren't there and push clients beyond their comfort zones. And most tell me they're happy I did."

For the Joneses, it was wallpaper.

"We didn't intend to have any," said Kathy Jones, sitting in her wallpapered kitchen and describing the various rooms that now have papered walls. "But it really adds the right touch."

Another creative project for Roberts was decorating rooms in the 2010 Symphony Showhouse. Roberts tackled the old gardener's apartment, adding several quirky touches to make the space unique.

Like covering the bathroom mirror frame with old bottle caps. Or lining a bedroom wall with black-and-white photos of military and sport groups. And one of the most talked about creations — a bedspread he sewed from men's dress shirts purchased at thrift stores.

"I do tend to like rooms to be full, with a lot going on," he said. "When friends go through my projects, they're always seeing something new that they hadn't noticed before because there's so much to take in."

Roberts also pays attention to detail. At the Steketee house, he suggested a plan to keep trash cans out of sight.

"I built a chicken coup," he said with a chuckle. "It fits right in with the French country theme. The trash collectors just drive up and open the doors."

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