

Small is the new big

By Marilyn Smulders

Photographs by Mike Dembeck

Funky handcrafted furniture mixes with treasured antiques from the Maritimes and beyond to create an eclectic, cozy atmosphere

IT'S FITTING THAT "HAND" IS SPELLED OUT IN RED CAPITAL LETTERS ON A STAINED-GLASS WINDOW over the back door of Sappho Griffin and Andrew Starzomski's home in Bedford, Nova Scotia. It's the surname of a former owner but it also speaks to what its current owners value—things handcrafted and mellowed by generations of use.

A perfect example is the "little people's cupboard," which stands in the sunlit front hall. Made by Ukrainian Mennonites and painted bright red and green—though it's now flaked and faded—the pretty cabinet would have added a dash of colour to a dark, low-ceilinged sod hut on the Saskatchewan prairie. Intended to display fancy dishes and other treasures, it now holds bird-watching paraphernalia, such as binoculars and guidebooks, where they're handy to identify the feathered friends who visit the crab apple tree just beyond the window.

Griffin admires the elegant lines, cheerful colours, sturdiness and sheer practicality of the cupboard. These are the aesthetics she brings to her own work as a furniture designer inspired by Canada's pioneer past. In the couple's charming circa-1890s home, furniture of her own design stands beside antiques from the Prairies, Quebec and the Maritimes. With their rubbed finishes and dashes of folk-art decoration, only a seasoned eye can tell the old from the new. But open them up and modern conveniences such as pocket doors that tuck out of the way, a pullout pivot for a TV and DVD shelves and drawers on smooth gliders give Griffin's work away.

"I'm very attracted to things made by hand—the unusual, the one-of-a-kind," says Griffin, whose furniture is also on display in HenHouse, the shop she co-owns with Denise Coulter in Halifax's funky Hydrostone neighborhood. As she talks, her fingers caress the wood of the 200-year-old cupboard, tracing its grooves and notches. No doubt their two-year-old daughter Hannah has added a few nicks

RIGHT: Come over and sit a spell. An antique pine table and a built-in bench loaded with pillows sewn from vintage fabrics outfit the breakfast nook. An old industrial ice-cube tray gets new life as a candle holder.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Taking advantage of the late afternoon light—and her daughter Hannah's nap—Sappho Griffin curls up on a 1940s chesterfield rescued from a junk shop and recovered with fitted slipcovers.

The living room has the feel of going below deck on a wooden yacht, with bead-board paneling on the walls and ceiling.







LEFT: An antique linen cabinet from Saskatchewan provides a focal point in the upstairs hallway and displays Vintage McCoy pottery.

RIGHT: Whimsical touches are everywhere—in the kitchen it's the doggy sculpture made of recycled metal on a windowsill. A toolbox on the black concrete countertop gives the cook ready access to kitchen implements. Metal sculpture by Jean Pierre Schoss of Dog Bite Steel in Uxbridge, Ontario.

of her own. But that's okay too. "Some people are very particular about the pedigree of a piece but I'm more interested in design and character, how it speaks to me," she says. "The stories it tells. Oh, and how it functions too."

When the couple moved from the West to the East Coast five years ago, Griffin drew up plans for the kind of house she wanted. But there was no reason to build once Starzomski spotted the listing on the Internet for their two-storey, 1,500-square-foot house. (Small translates to cozy in real-estate lingo.) The centre-hall layout and glorious windows were on the wish list. The bountiful perennial garden and views of Halifax Harbour from second-storey windows were bonuses. Perched on the brow of a hill, the house is located in a neighbourhood of other century-old homes, towering trees and quiet lanes. "Sappho designed our dream house and it's actually very close to this," says Starzomski, a psychologist. "It's uncanny."

Inside, the house has the feeling of going below deck on a wooden yacht, with bead-board on the walls and ceilings. A light, neutral palette and the clean, straight lines of the wood paneling provide the backdrop for Griffin's easy-going style: mixing up old and new, the familiar and exotic.

In the living room, a solid 1940s chesterfield and two matching chairs in fitted muslin slipcovers are the ultimate in comfort, predating shabby chic by a few decades. They beckon you to bring your book—or watch the hockey game—while resting your legs on the coffee table; it's a cheerful piece made in India with squat, bulbous legs and carvings of fat daisies. Within view of the chesterfield is a large armoire of Griffin's own design. Carved with St. Andrew's cross, the double doors open to expose the television and stereo. A huge framed mirror set atop the fireplace mantle adds space in the room.

A small house doesn't necessarily require




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ABOVE: Old and new rub elbows in this 1890s Bedford home. In the breakfast nook, the pine harvest table has seen a few generations of hungry folk, while the island in the kitchen is one of Griffin's own designs. Pass-through drawers are accessible on both sides. Cork tile floor, Taylor Flooring. Lantern, Renovators Resource.

RIGHT: Splashes of colour—like the red paint on the coffee table—stand out against the neutral backdrop of the living room. TV armoire, Henhouse. Fitted slipcover on 1940s chair by Charlotte Roblee, Mahone Bay. Paint colour "Muslin," Benjamin Moore.

BELOW: It may look old but it isn't. Griffin gave the dish cupboard in the breakfast nook a distressed black finish and painted it with traditional folk-art motifs. The porcelain knobs are from India and available at Henhouse.



small furnishings. Each room has a bold focal point, from the towering black dish cupboard in the breakfast nook to the butcher block island and massive lantern that hangs over it in the kitchen. Upstairs, in the master bedroom, a lacy vintage screen from India catches the eye, tucked behind a restored cast iron bed. And yet there's still room for a large pine armoire and a quirky painted cupboard from Saskatchewan with lopsided drawers and mismatched handles. "Small definitely offers a decorating challenge," muses Griffin. "And I love big pieces. But if you set the stage with neutral walls, high ceilings and lots of light, it seems to work. We have a lot of furniture in this house but I still find it to feel spacious." ■



ABOVE: Griffin and husband Andrew Starzmoski fell in love with the house's simple central hall design, here adorned with Hannah's toys and a folk-art portrait of the late beloved Ella by B.C. artist Don Thompson. (Ella was the tail-wagging greeter at Henhouse.) The large window offers a view of the garden beyond.

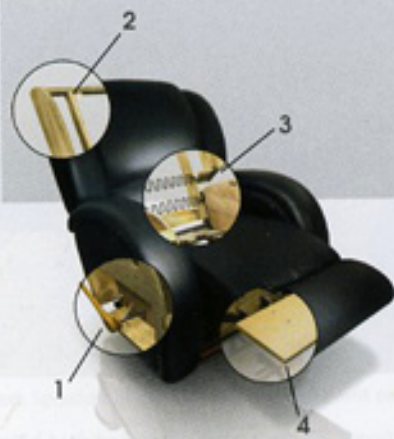
RIGHT: There's really nothing to do in the garden, which is lush with perennials and sheltered from the neighbours, except enjoy it by relaxing in a surprisingly comfortable bent willow chair.



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ABOVE: Sweet dreams are made of this: an antique cast-iron bed is book-ended by a pair of old tables; the left one from Nova Scotia's South Shore, the right one from Saskatchewan. The bed's lacy look is complemented by the 1960s wooden fretwork screen from India.



LEFT: Visitors are welcomed by the word "hand" etched in the faux stained-glass transom over the back door.

BELOW: Antiques aren't too precious for precious two-year-old Hannah. Her pretty bedroom is largely furnished with antiques, including the elegant chair that mom and daughter share; it used to sit at the Halifax Club. The pine cupboard with star motif is from Quebec; the pine table from Saskatchewan is of Doukhobor origin.

