

# HOME at LAST



Birmingham designer **Mary Evelyn McKee** adapts a 1950s rambling cottage to her family's style without disturbing its charming, modest spirit

BY LYDIA SOMERVILLE PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL MUNDY



An Empire daybed covered in Fortuny fabric makes a striking statement in the foyer. Floral design is by Wildflower Designs. OPPOSITE PAGE: Designer Mary Evelyn McKee



"I really didn't want to be a serial mover," says designer Mary Evelyn McKee

of the decision to move to a new house, just when they'd finally finished their old one. "But when we saw this house, we just had to have it." In fact, the McKees and their three sons had settled into their former house and were not planning on moving, until the day one of Mary Evelyn's friends called to tell her the house across the street had become available and insisted she come see it. The low-slung 1950s cottage had grown organically over the years and had all the quirks of an older house—narrow back stairways, bedrooms carved out under the eaves, and low ceilings. When Mary Evelyn and her husband, David, walked the grounds of the property, with its mature plantings, total privacy, and proximity to close friends, they could actually see themselves living there.

"I've always loved this street," she says of the peaceful drive in the Mountain Brook area of Birmingham. "When you turn onto the lane, your whole body relaxes." Of





"All of the furniture in this room was in my old house," says Mary Evelyn of the living room. "If you buy things with good proportions, they'll work anywhere." The walls are Gettysburg Gray by Benjamin Moore. OPPOSITE PAGE: A refectory table and an antique French campaign chair furnish a wide hallway the designer refers to as "the gallery."



**ABOVE:** A French *vaisselier*, known for its slim profile, holds serving pieces against one wall of the dining room. **RIGHT:** A butcher block countertop around the prep sink in the kitchen island contrasts with marble countertops. The library, where the McKees spend much of their time, extends off the kitchen.

the house, she says she was dedicated to maintaining its period charm. "It's really a Colonial cottage," says Mary Evelyn. "We wanted to preserve that."

Luckily, there wasn't much the designer wanted to change. The one area she felt comfortable treating to a makeover was the kitchen. She had installed Bulthaup kitchens in several clients' houses and loved the streamlined looks and impeccable functionality of the German line for her new house. The kitchen gives way to a sun-filled library, with walls of books punctuated by clerestory windows. Architect Hank Long worked with the McKees to expand this room and maximize its relationship to the pool outside. "I think one reason my modern kitchen works in this house," says Mary Evelyn, "is the proximity to the pool. In the morning, the sunlight reflecting off the water bounces in through the library and casts a wonderful, wavy light in the kitchen."

She used furniture and artwork that has followed her from house to house, re-covering where she needed to but essentially preserving the sunny neutrals that have become her signature palette. Artwork collected over the years has the appeal of the unfamiliar in its new surroundings. A painting by her grandmother hangs over the living room mantel,





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**ABOVE:** The designer upholstered the master bedroom walls and eaves with Udaipur by Peter Dunham. "The indigo color worked perfectly with the Fortuny on the bed," she says. **RIGHT:** "A profusion of pattern softens all those angles and blurs the edges of the room," says Mary Evelyn.



appearing to be the work of an important Impressionist, which of course she was, to Mary Evelyn.

The master bedroom achieves the perfect balance of cottage refinement. Upholstered walls and a bed covered in Fortuny fabric create the effect of a ship set to sail away in a textile lover's dream. "I wanted to keep the bed's existing fabric," says the designer. "The challenge was to find the right tone of indigo to work with it but that had that cottage feeling." A simple mantelpiece and pretty French chairs give the room graciousness without detracting from the snug effect.

Now that they are once again settled, could anything induce the McKees to move again? "Absolutely not," says Mary Evelyn. "We are really and truly home now." ♦

*For details, see Sourcebook, page 123.*

To see more interiors designed by Mary Evelyn McKee, visit [SouthernAccents.com](http://SouthernAccents.com).

