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homes&gardens

WRITTEN BY Amy Mulvihill

Breaking Rules in Washington

Facing page, designer Susan Bednar Long, a partner in Tocar Interior Design, which has an office in Washington. Photograph by Melissa Winslow. Right, a dining area designed by the firm, photograph courtesy of Tocar Interior Design. Below right, an office by Tocar, in a photograph provided by the firm.



“It’s Groundhog’s Day!” Susan Bednar Long said with a laugh one recent Sunday as she answered the door of her 19th-century farmhouse set on a hillside high above Route 47 in Washington.

The reference to “Groundhog Day,” the existential comedy from the early 90s starring Bill Murray as a TV weatherman stuck in a small Pennsylvania town repeating Groundhog Day over and over again, was appropriate.

It was the previous Sunday, exactly one week earlier, that this reporter had knocked on Ms. Bednar Long’s door, interrupting the quiet day she was spending with her husband, John Long.

At the time, Ms. Bednar Long appeared on the stairs of her home sporting comfy weekend clothes and a confused look. After a brief discussion, it became clear that she was not the one who mixed up the interview date.

It is to Ms. Bednar Long’s credit that she handled the situation with grace and good humor, and such an approach is, apparently, not unusual.

Indeed, it seems that grace and good humor are Ms. Bednar Long’s calling cards in her business dealings as the co-founder of Tocar, the Manhattan- and Washington-based interior design firm she runs with her friend and partner Christina Sullivan.

“We like to say we do design without drama,” related Ms. Bednar Long as she sat on a couch in her home office.

“It’s not that our rooms aren’t dramatic, but that our process is not,” she explained.



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designs," Ms. Bednar Long commented thoughtfully.

"I think that pairing creates a nice push-pull though," she acknowledged.

Whatever the specific combination, the duo's unique cocktail of urbane drama and sleek comfort proved to be a hit.

In 1998, a few months after finishing that first collaboration, Tocar was formed, with the pair naming the company for the Spanish verb meaning "to touch" or "to influence."

Their first job was redoing a multi-purpose room for a temple on the Upper East Side, before moving on to other jobs in Manhattan and, eventually, as their reputation grew, to jobs in Westchester and Fairfield counties,

Boston and Washington, D.C.

Now, with a stream of satisfied customers standing behind them, Ms. Bednar Long and Ms. Sullivan are reaping the benefits of their supremely light yet assured "touch" as Tocar's reputation is quickly ascending.

In the October issue of House Beautiful magazine, Tocar was named as one of the 25 top young design firms, with Ms. Bednar Long and Ms. Sullivan being hailed as "hot new stars."

Tocar projects have also been featured in magazines like House & Garden, Quest and Interior Design.

It certainly seems like Tocar's particular aesthetic has captured the design moment ▶ 42

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Ms. Bednar Long and Ms. Sullivan met while both were employees at Ralph Lauren Polo. Both were part of a team of designers who were charged with creating the look of the company's retail stores.

Eventually, both moved on to other positions—Ms. Sullivan to her own design company and Ms. Bednar Long to a position at Coach similar to the one she had held at Ralph Lauren.

They met up again a few years later when, unbeknownst to the other, each was asked to do design work on the Manhattan townhouse of Coach president and creative director Reed Krakoff.

"We were both like, 'What are you doing here?'" Ms. Bednar Long recalled with a laugh.

It would be easy to imagine the situation turning competitive, but Ms. Bednar Long said she and Ms. Sullivan simply laughed it off and got down to work. It was through that process, Ms. Bednar Long said, that they discovered how compatible their respective styles are.

"Both of us have a very clean, tailored yet warm and comfortable approach," Ms. Bednar Long noted.

But while the two women generally agree on the principal aspects of any design, Ms. Bednar Long said they differ enough about specifics to make their designs pop with unexpected juxtapositions.

"She is a little more modern than I am, as I tend to have a little more of a traditional influence in my

"You can do unconventional things and it's OK."



A sun room by Tocar Interior Design, photograph courtesy of the firm.

◀ 41 with its mixture of coolness and classicism.

"Aesthetically, I think we have a fresh eye. All the norms about how you're supposed to live, we haven't really grown up with," commented Ms. Bednar Long, a vivacious and charmingly self-deprecating 30-something who is currently eight months pregnant with her first child.

"Even the rules like you can't wear white after Labor Day are changing," she noted. "You can do unconventional things and it's OK. It will work because our personalities are both very creative and very practical."

As examples, Ms. Bednar Long offered an account of a Westchester couple that didn't have a dining room in their home, and felt no need to add one.

In its place, Ms. Bednar Long and Ms. Sullivan designed a billiard room, which Ms. Bednar Long said fit in perfectly with their more relaxed lifestyle.

Likewise, another couple, who had just moved to Greenwich from New York City, wanted to add some urban flare to their otherwise traditionally suburban home by adding a cool, hip media room.

"They had bought a very subur-

ban house—a beautiful house—but a suburban house, but they didn't want it to be a typical suburban room," she recalled. "They wanted something that was like 'Wow!'"

What the designers did was outfit the room in coolly neutral hues with bursts of drama like a zebra skin ottoman and streamlined lighting fixtures. A view of the finished room is available on Tocar's Web site, www.tocardesign.com.

"By the time we finished, that room was like something you'd find in a cool downtown loft," Ms. Bednar Long said.

With the opening of the company's Washington office, Ms. Bednar Long is confident that the Tocar look will find a home in the country just as she and her husband have.

"We love the combination of rural beauty and sophistication," she remarked, adding that she loves the plethora of artists and artisans that can be found in the area.

"It feels like there are a lot of people up here, both full-time residents and weekenders, doing interesting things," she noted.

Ms. Bednar Long said she often incorporates their work into her designs, and hopes to do so even more now that the company is working on its first Litchfield County dwelling in Lakeville.

"[My style] is more Connecticut country," Ms. Bednar Long, a New Canaan native, noted with a smile.

Tocar Interior Design can be reached in Connecticut at 860-868-9378 and in New York at 212-779-0037. ■



A breakfast area by Tocar Interior Design, photograph courtesy of the firm.