



# BREAKING GROUND

A designer found the perfect site for her new home. She knew right away how she wanted to live there.



INTERIOR DESIGN BY *Robin Rains*  
ARCHITECTURE BY *Jeffrey Dungan*

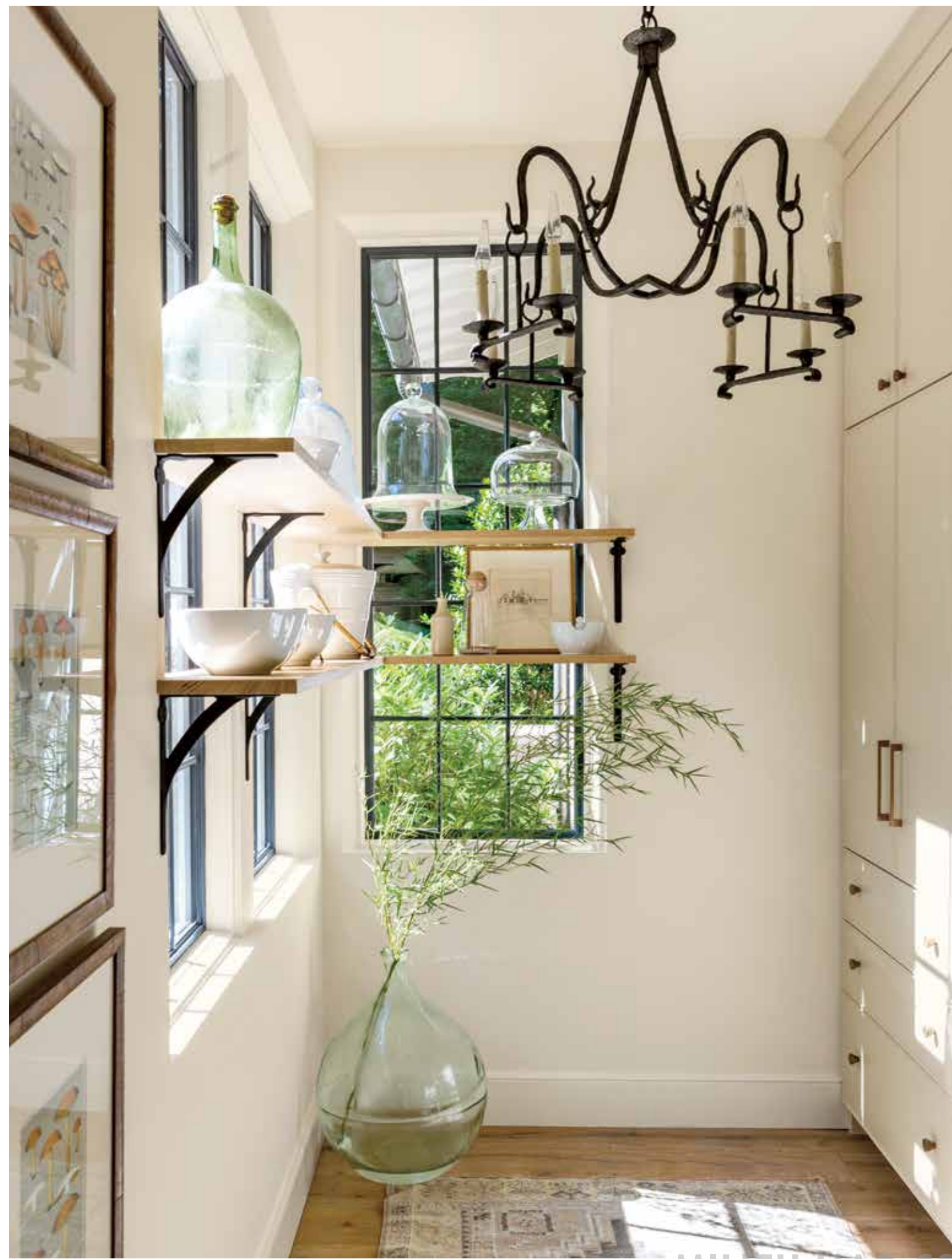
PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Leslee Mitchell*  
WRITTEN BY *David Masello*



Previous pages, left to right: Robin Rains's house in Nashville references European provincial styles, notably with its crescent-shaped entry steps, vintage oak door, and a limestone surround. The bricks are painted with Benjamin Moore's Edgecomb Gray. The foyer is accented with a French lantern and limestone urn. The French limestone flooring is from François & Co. Above: In the living room, Benjamin Moore's White Dove works as the backdrop against which her furnishings emerge, including a Verellen sofa, Lee Industries chair (foreground), and a painting by Caryl Killebrew. Opposite page: The dining area melds with the living room.



Rains wanted the hood in the kitchen to assume the presence of sculpture, while remaining practical. The range is La Cornue. The antique bricks were painted white. Brass-finished cabinetry hardware is from Ashley Norton. Right: Quarter-sawn oak shelves, held in place with Rejuvenation hardware, are set across windows in the butler's pantry. The chandelier is from Dennis & Leen.





Opposite: The gallery reflects Rains's penchant for mixing styles and eras. Elements include a circa-1900 English console, a nineteenth-century Oushak rug, an Art Deco pendant light, and a painting from 1962 by Gabriel Dauchot that Rains discovered in a French flea market. Below: Rains's favorite room, the screened porch, is painted, in part, with Benjamin Moore's Black Panther, against which is set a collection of arrowheads. The Lee Industries sectional is positioned atop French limestone flooring. The side chair against the wall is McGuire.



Opposite: The guest bath is painted with Benjamin Moore's soothing Classic Gray. The toilet is from Toto, the unlacquered brass faucets are Phylrich, and the stoneware washbasin is an antique. Other vintage pieces in the bathroom include a French mirror and a brass-and-iron glass sconce. This page: For the guest room, Rains designed a wooden headboard so that it would seamlessly meld with the wall. The bed is made with embroidered percale shams from Home Treasures; the coverlet is Matouk.

**HOUSES BEGIN, OF COURSE**, at their front doors. For interior designer Robin Rains, though, her house began *with* the front door. Prior to commissioning architect Jeff Dungan to design a new house for her in the Forest Hills neighborhood of Nashville, Rains was on one of her frequent buying trips to Europe. As she recalls, “I went to Belgium to look for a door and found this raw oak one, with a mail slot and its original hinges and hardware. It spoke to me immediately. It was the inspiration that forged me ahead with my design decisions, inside and outside.” Not long after, Rains was welcoming people through that door.

For many months, Rains looked for the right land on which to build a house, but it wasn’t until a friend, who owned a spread of undeveloped acres, contacted her with the suggestion that she could buy some of them for her home. “I swear, I cried when I saw the land,” she says of the locale that was nestled in the woods and situated at the end of a cul-de-sac. “I had always had a fondness for this property, and here it was available to me—the perfect place to build.”

As a seasoned designer, Rains was used to working with architects on other peoples’ houses, but not on her own. She knew that whatever she built would be a place she would want, as she states emphatically, “to live the rest of my life.” Even though she had never met the Birmingham, Alabama-based Dungan, she called him “cold turkey,” as she recalls, because she had read much about his reverence for land and how a house should be sited. “I discovered right away that Jeff and I shared the same design aesthetic and that he could create a home for me with a lasting emotional impact.”

She took Dungan to the vacant site, where they coursed what was then soggy, muddy ground, thick with tall weeds (and she lent him a pair of boots for their expedition). In the thick of a wooded area, Dungan suddenly stopped. As Rains recalls it, “He turned to me and said, ‘This is the spot.’ The moment we left, he drew the plan for my house on a napkin, which I still have.” Ground was soon broken.

“Simplicity to me is the ultimate expression of sophistication,” say Rains, a directive she heeds as much for her clients as she does for her own interiors. She kept trimwork and moldings to a minimum, established a neutral palette, and used her favorite “prosaic ancient materials”—brick, marble, limestone, and wood. “Simple materials look better with age. I prefer them to anything shiny and trendy.”

She is also a master at mixing eras and styles, with niches and hallways in the home defined by seemingly ad hoc assemblages of antiques and family heirlooms that ultimately assume a carefully curated look. Rains also understands the adaptability of spaces. For her butler’s pantry, she inserted shelving across the windows, for issues of privacy and practicality. “Deer and wild turkey come through the property, and I can peek between shelves to watch them,” she says.

In a fit of inspiration, she took a pen and drew onto a foyer wall a sinuous form she envisioned for a stair rail, as well as the shape the staircase should assume. In the kitchen, she had an artisan fashion a sloping plaster hood with the sweep of sculpture. In the living room, she transformed a niche into a room of its own, with bookshelves, leather chairs from a Paris flea market, and a painting of an idle rowboat. She considers this ancillary space “one of my favorite design moments in my home. Books are my therapy and I go there to read.”

For her most-used room in the house, though, the screened porch, she departed from neutral tones and painted a corner wall with Benjamin Moore’s Black Panther, a bold hue against which elements emerge, including framed arrowheads, collected generations ago by grandparents, as well as verdant green foliage brushing up against the screens. “Jeff designed an extra-long overhang there, so rain is kept away. When I’m in that room, I feel safe, nestled in the woods. It’s like sitting in a treehouse.”

Rains admits to something few designers might: Creating the interiors of one’s own home is more challenging than devising them for a client. With clients, she explains, a designer learns their habits, their aesthetic, then responds accordingly. But for one’s own home, the process involves asking hard questions—about what really matters, what elements inspire and bring comfort, and that ultimate, big existential question: *What makes you happy?* “Designing your own rooms,” she says with emphasis, “means doing some deep soul-searching.”

In completing her work on this project, Rains answered her questions with a sense of satisfaction. “I wanted to build and live in a house that I would be able to love for years and years. This is a place that can, and will, stand the test of time.” ■

Robin Rains is always “adding, subtracting, editing, and shifting things around. It’s a joy to do.”

*“I wanted a house with beautiful angles, character, a presence on the land, and quality craftsmanship.”*

*—Robin Rains*

