

CHICAGO

Help! My Partner and I Have Opposite Tastes in Decor

A designer shares tips on how to meld divergent sensibilities.

BY HEIDI MITCHELL
AUGUST 19, 2019, 12:14 PM



Interior designers often say that they are marriage counselors before they are decorators. “It’s true!” says Lauren Svenstrup, principal of Studio Sven in North Center. “I’ve never had clients who live together who care equally about the same thing — from budget to comfort. The key is finding out what’s most important to each party and incorporating that into the final design.”

Svenstrup followed that advice when she remodeled a condo with her new husband, Jim Fessler. “If he had his way, it would look like his old apartment — purely utilitarian,” she says. “He had a barstool next to his sofa since it was the right height for his drink.”

While function and budget guide Fessler, Svenstrup prizes an adventurous and artistic style. Knowing that her husband, the household’s de facto chef, loves *Game of Thrones*, she gradually sold him on a daring all-black kitchen. “It happened one step at a time,” she says. “First the countertop went black, then the cabinets, then the backsplash.” In the end, she realized he wasn’t really concerned about the look; he just needed it to be his kitchen.



Lauren Svenstrup and Jim Fessler

Photo: Loren Weddings

The kitchen ticks Fessler's boxes: It's practical (every object has its home, thanks to undermounted cabinetry) and modestly priced (they went without expensive wallpaper). But it's also full of flair: Svenstrup enhanced the room with gothic porcupine quill blocks she designed, a CB2 brass-panel chandelier, and ceramic garden stools from Craigslist.



Terra cotta vase, \$195, jaysonhome.com; Arteriors iron pendant, \$830, lumens.com

To Svenstrup, designing a home for two isn't a zero-sum game, though it does require compromise: "You're giving the person you love something they love. But if you passionately hate it, choose something else."

The designer has helped over 100 couples find their happy medium by using design tricks, like installing a gallery wall in a guy's closet to display his sports memorabilia or putting collectibles inside vintage cabinets. "I can't fix a marriage," she says, "but I can make a couple's home a place they both love."