

Oxy on Film: To Netflix and Beyond

Fine Design: Susan Bednar Long '89

# OCCIDENTAL

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Susan  
Bednar  
Long



Interior photos courtesy Susan Bednar Long '85

## Bringing a modern-traditional aesthete to American design, Susan Bednar Long '89 makes "Tocar style" a household name

**I**N AN ERA WHERE ENTIRE cable channels are dedicated to home and garden improvement—where trading spaces and extreme makeovers are as commonplace as swatch cards at the Home Depot—Susan Bednar Long '89 warns of common pitfalls for the do-it-yourself decorator. "People often pick furnishings without carefully considering their relationship to the overall room," says Long, who with partner Christina Sullivan was named to *House Beautiful's* list of "America's Top Young Designers" last October. "They end up making mistakes—like making curtains too short, or choosing a wall color that is too dark because they haven't considered the size of the windows and the amount of sunlight in the room. The bottom line is people are going to hire us because they want a really good design."

In the eight years since Long and Sullivan founded Tocar Interior Design, the firm has drawn kudos for a "modern-traditional"

design ethos that the pair describe as the "Tocar style." It's a mix of old and new in which a Barcelona chair by Mies van der Rohe, designed for the city's 1929 World Exposition, might share the floor with translucent "ghost" seating from New Design guru Philippe Starck. Colors gravitate toward neutral earth tones and the presentation "is comfortable, elegant, and tailored with a twist of American rustic," according to Sullivan.

Though the modern-traditional notion entered the designer parlance about 20 years ago, Long and Sullivan claim to be the first firm to use the phrase in selling their services. "I feel a lot of people want that feeling of elegance, tailoring, and casual comfort in their interiors, but they can't articulate it," Long says. "Designers are responding to the needs of clients for individual, comfortable interiors that are not like their mothers' houses. The idea of sets of furniture is out. The idea of period rooms—all Art Deco or all



**TOP:** Long mixed dark and light furnishings—and durable materials—in a traditional suburban dining room tailored for a young family. **ABOVE:** Tocar used a double-sided sofa as a unifying element in an inviting and elegant living room conducive to entertaining.

Colonial—is dated, too. There are purists, who tend to be older, who would suggest that this mixing of modern and traditional elements is not proper design and is fundamentally wrong. I feel it makes for a much more dynamic and interesting room.”

Jennifer Pechet of Radnor, Pa., is a Tocar believer. Long and Sullivan have been redesigning her 5,000-square-foot home for the past 2 1/2 years, creating custom cabinetry while at the same time confronting that bane of all homeowners: clutter. “They’ve



Long photo by Melanie Grizzel



**THIS PAGE:** Tocar creations offer everything from crisp white walls to rich woods and modern nickel accents. **ABOVE:** A guest room in Long's Connecticut home: “By using tranquil indigo blue, powder blue, and graphic ikat fabrics inspired by Mediterranean cities, we wanted to make you feel as if you had been transported to a hotel on the beach in the Amalfi Coast,” she says. Other Tocar creations offer everything from crisp white walls to rich woods and modern nickel accents.

done a good job of balancing the needs of a young family with my desire to feel like I'm living in an elegant, sophisticated environment,” says Pechet, a mother of two sons ages 7 and 9. “They reused the space much more efficiently.” Tocar also revamped the family's 42-foot yacht, right down to the customized pillows and towels. “Sue has unbelievable and unrelenting attention to detail,” Pechet adds. “She doesn't impose her design aesthetic on you, and she really makes it fun.”

Long and Sullivan met while working in the decorative department at Ralph Lauren. Theirs is a yin-and-yang relationship: Long is more the traditionalist and is particularly adept at furniture design and color schemes; Sullivan is influenced by modern sensibilities. “I feel blessed we're working together,” Sullivan says. “To say we don't get into disagreements would be absurd, but those disagreements most of the time spur a greater creativity. Sue is a very humble person, not one of those designers who is at all



ridiculously flamboyant. She's down-to-earth, grounded, and incredibly talented at the same time.”

Long's interest in interior decorating began as a 8-year-old girl growing up in Connecticut, where she drew elaborate floor plans on graph paper and painted watercolors of houses. Ten years later, she enrolled at Oxy on the advice of a high school counselor. She was drawn to the College because of its reputation, size, and big-city locale. Long—who once considered pursuing work in jewelry design—double-majored in fine arts and political science, and her artistic interests blossomed under the tutelage of the late sculpting professor George Baker. “He was really inspiring and good at letting you do your own thing without putting any parameters on you,” Long says.

During her student days, Long saw artistic potential in Oxy's ordinary side. “I did a series of installations for my senior comps that took mundane areas around campus, and I changed them with simple materials,” she recalls. “The idea was to suddenly make people notice the space, and judge how they reacted. I chose most of the spaces because there was nothing aesthetically pleasing about them.”

The series of five installations, which she describes as works of three-dimensional spatial planning, was intended to offer new perspectives on institutional spaces long taken for granted. The results were memo-





**LEFT:** A media room was designed for a male client and his family. "He wanted a completely different non-suburban room," Long says. "We wanted people to be surprised when they walked in." **BELOW:** Austria meets Italy in a design meant to evoke a weekend retreat in the hills of Europe. Tocar blended fresh Italian striped fabrics and linens, vintage Italian ceramic lamps, and a rustic deer antler chandelier.



nable or mawkish, depending on your take. Long used inexpensive materials such as paper, scrim, and foam plumbing insulation to convert hallways, and, in her most ambitious effort, Morrison Lounge in the old Freeman College Union. There she transformed the normally staid space into a darkened den evoking a woman's womb. "It kind of freaked people out," she says. "I would hide and check out the reactions. Some people were scared, but most thought it was cool and it didn't get destroyed."

Long's senior comp experience spurred her to pursue a career in interior design. After graduation she hired on at a Beverly Hills design firm, while also taking design classes through UCLA Extension. She later joined Ralph Lauren, parting there in 1998 to start Tocar (a Spanish verb meaning "to touch" or "to influence"). In 2005, the firm completed seven projects, including converting a former Nelson Rockefeller townhouse into luxury offices as well as living space for a New York real estate developer. Interior design involves far more than choosing furniture, lighting plans, and curtain fabrics. For the Rockefeller project, Long and Sullivan installed new walls and mill work and chose artwork—including sizable oil paintings by artist Sonya Sklaroff. The project took more than 10 months to complete.

Tocar is juggling six separate projects at present, each of which begins with Long and Sullivan touring a space before making an on-site presentation to home or building owners. "It's almost like you're on a first date when you go to meet clients," Long says.

"They have to really like you, and vice versa. We basically do a design presentation per room. We'll show them a floor plan, all the furnishings, we'll give them paint colors and show them carpeting, artwork, and lamps. It really makes the client understand what they're getting." Many of Tocar's clients are close in age to Long and Sullivan. "They tend to relate to us more, and they respond well to our aesthetic," Long says.

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Most of Tocar's clients are people who are so busy with their lives that they want someone else to handle a project from start to finish. "That's what we're good at," Long says. Clients start the process by perusing design magazines, while husbands and wives complete separate questionnaires to root out their preferences. "Sue really listens to what the client has to say and what each wants," says Pechet, who plans to continue using Tocar to work on her home's second story. "If my husband and I had been born with a design aesthetic, this is what we would have chosen."

Long's personal space is very much in keeping with modern-traditional chic. She and her husband, John, a partner at a consulting firm, live in a 3,000-square-foot 1800s farm house in Washington Depot, Conn. The idyllic home sits near a brook and old stone walls. "Everywhere you turn there's a new surprise," Long says. "There's a room that has a Danish modern sofa sitting next to an old leather club chair with polished nickel accents. I have a really cool burl wood giant coffee table and a modern mahogany bench with an ostrich leather seat." Long, who gave birth to a son, Baker, in November, designed her nursery in apple green with turquoise accents.

Professional makeovers don't come cheap. A living room alone can cost \$100,000 to complete. "It's hard for first-time people to realize how expensive home furnishings really are," Long says. "Are there great pieces at Target? Sure. There are certain things that are well designed that aren't expensive, and more and more businesses are doing great things. You can mix those things in and we have no problem with that—but at the end of the day you do get what you pay for." ■