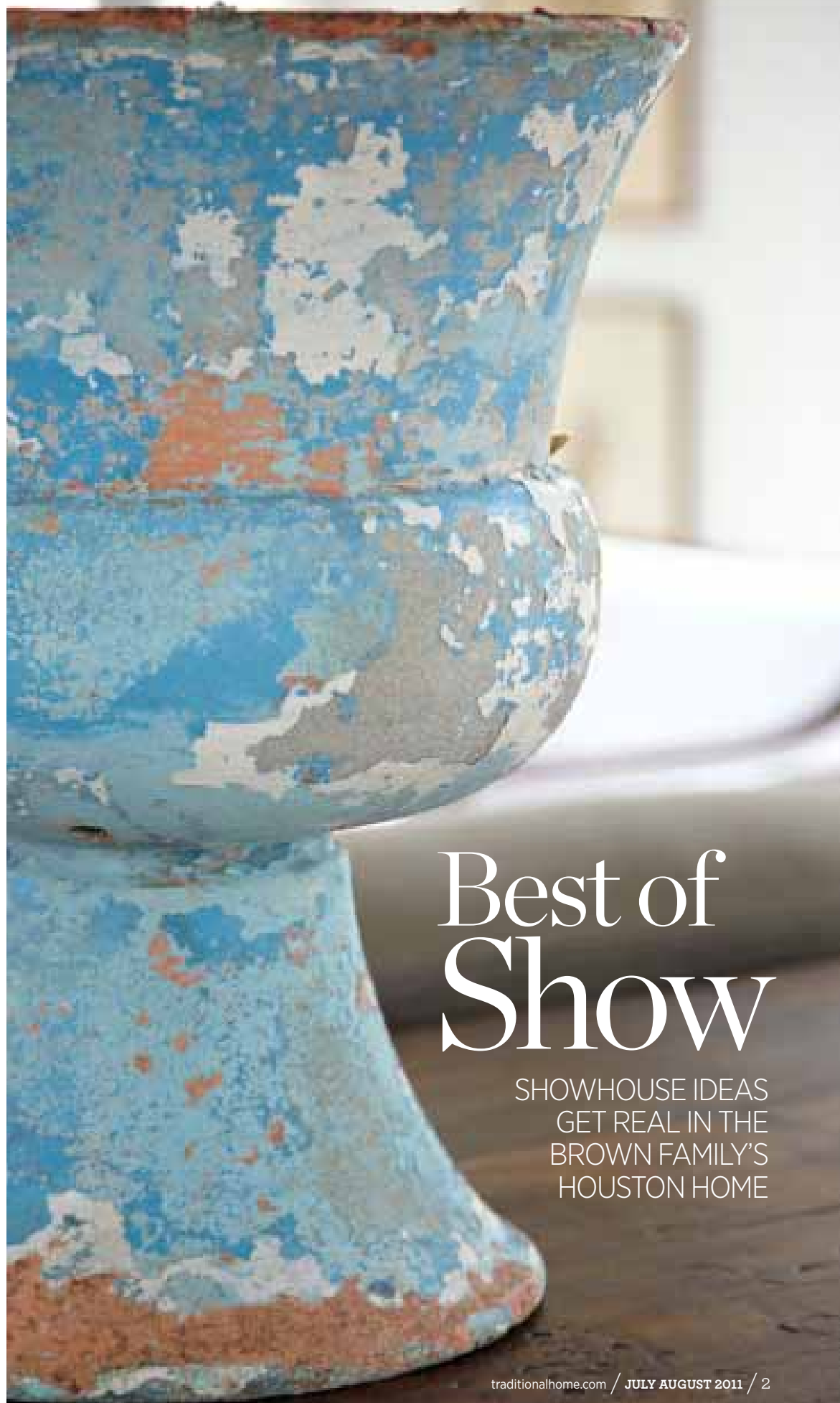


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Best of Show

SHOWHOUSE IDEAS
GET REAL IN THE
BROWN FAMILY'S
HOUSTON HOME





W

hen short-listing her favorite hobbies, Virginia Mary Brown begins and ends with decorating. “I’m addicted to home design books and magazines and to decorator showhouses. And now I have to add design blogs to the list of addictive substances,” laughs the Houston homeowner, who left her first job as a corporate attorney to start her family 15 years ago.

Four sons later, when she and husband Ray decided to build a bigger home on the Tanglewood property in suburban Houston where her grandmother’s 1950s-era ranch house had stood, she reaped a return. Virginia Mary reviewed all the decorating ideas she’d been collecting, winnowed out all but the best, and worked with architect Dillon Kyle to showcase them in her new family home.

“Dillon is a friend from childhood, and everyone I spoke to recommended him, which thrilled me,” she explains. “We took our time and developed the plans over two years before building.”

Several design concepts gleaned from showhouses appear in both the architecture and the decorating, but without a whiff of the over-the-top theatrics that can make a showhouse too rarefied or palpably impractical. “I’m a big mimic, especially when it comes to showhouses,” Virginia Mary acknowledges. “But I assure you, this is a normal home. It’s not the kind you walk into and go, ‘yeah, right.’ Real people really live here—cleats, dog, and all.”

Virginia Mary gave a special shout-out to those real people who get a uniquely personal upholstery treatment on her great-grandmother’s rocking chair “where all the babies were rocked.” Artist friend Heidi Prince hand-painted the rocker’s cotton duck fabric with the names of every family member who ever sat there. Starting with Virginia Mary’s great-grandmother, the litany concludes with the names of her and her two sisters’ children. Multiple appearances of the name Virginia Mary point to the time-honored Southern tradition of namesakes. “I love this chair,” says Virginia Mary, “but I honestly can’t remember if it was my idea or one I picked up from a showhouse or magazine.”

The open flow of the house and its three sides of natural light are definitely showhouse-inspired. Virginia Mary admired the



Living room The homeowner re-covered her grandmother’s sofa in white cotton duck for a fresh, modern look. French doors on opposite sides open to the front and back porches, where the antique brick pavers extend for visual continuity. A column of botanicals draws the eye up—a trick pilfered from Dan Carithers showhouses in Atlanta. Distressed urns, the coffee table, and baskets are from Thompson + Hanson, a shop belonging to the landscape architect. Venetian plaster dramatizes the fireplace. The sisal rug is forgiving for a family of four boys and a dog. **Family** Homeowner Virginia Mary Brown with sons Raymond, 15, Thompson, 13, Patrick, 10, and Walker, 8, plus Lulu, their Llewellyn Setter—“my only girl!” laughs Virginia Mary.

“ARCHITECT DILLON KYLE WAS ABLE TO RE-CREATE THE IDEA OF AN ALL-GLASS DINING ROOM I HAD SEEN IN A MAGAZINE. IT’S A SUNNY, HAPPY SPACE AND NOT TOO FORMAL FOR FOUR BOYS.” —Homeowner Virginia Mary Brown

concepts when she toured a couple of Houston’s annual River Oaks Garden Club Azalea Trail showhouses, designed in the 1930s by the late renowned architect John Staub. “Because his houses were built before air-conditioning, rooms had windows on three sides for maximum ventilation. It really makes spaces very bright and happy, and I knew I wanted that for our home.” Staub’s use of clear sight lines also resonated with her. “Looking down our entry hall, you can see all the way through the house,” she notes.

Virginia Mary further credits her up-close observation of Staub’s architecture with her own home’s use of step-downs, like the one leading from the kitchen to the sunken family room. This feature distinguishes the two open spaces, giving each its own integrity. “There’s also a change in flooring from pine to brick every time there’s a step-down,” she adds.

Laid in a herringbone pattern, all of the interior’s pavers are 1950s-vintage Cedar Bayou bricks recycled from her grandmother’s house. More are used outdoors, where they’re artfully mixed with new bricks to provide the desired coverage. “I got this idea of a vanishing threshold where there’s no visual break between indoors and outdoors from the Pink Ribbon Showhouse in Houston,” Virginia Mary says. “The bricks in the family room extend to the patio outdoors, so indoors and outdoors flow together.”

Among favorite showhouses Virginia Mary has toured are two in Atlanta by Dan Carithers, who was named a *Traditional Home* Icon of Design in 2009. “He placed art and objects above the archways and really drew the eye up. I tried to do that here, to take the eye all the way to the ceilings, which I painted a custom pale blue-gray for definition—but subtle, kind of like a shadow,” she says.

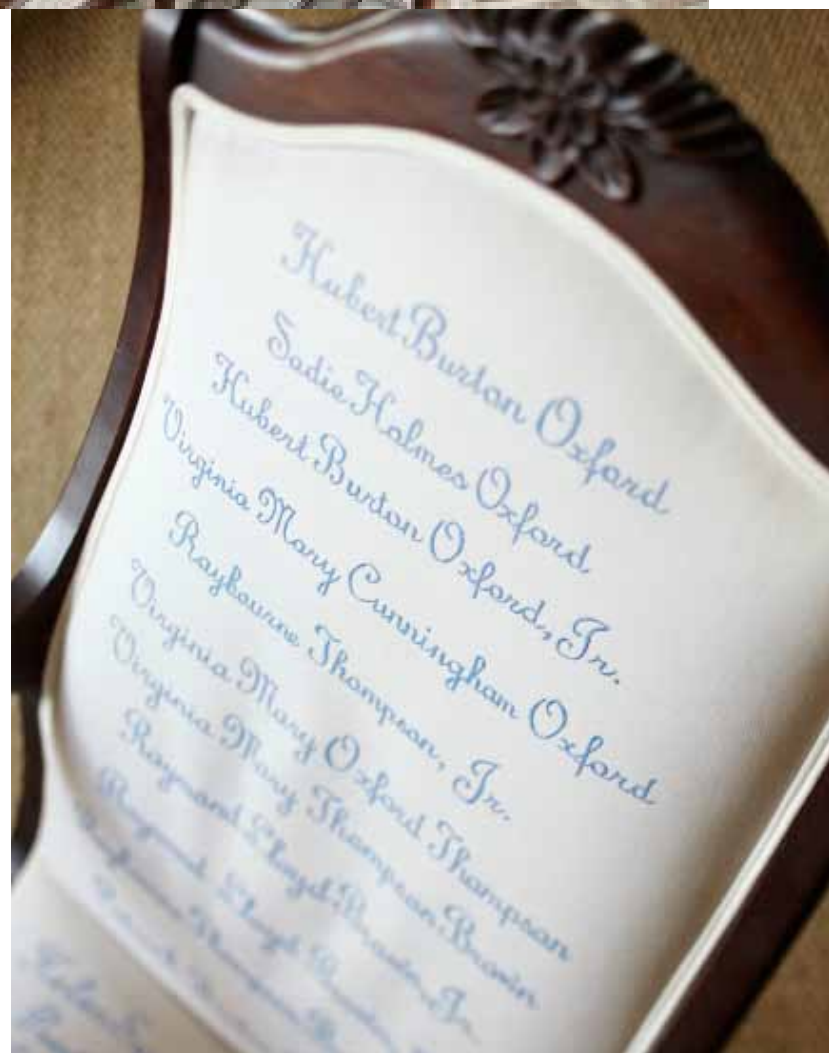
One example of how she draws the eye up is her arrangement of art in the living room between French doors. She stacked identically framed botanicals one above the other in a single vertical column from just above the floor to just below the crown molding. The eye sweeps up, and the effect feels bracingly fresh. Upstairs, she deployed family portraits in the same floor-to-ceiling formation, but this time she blanketed the landing’s walls for a gallery that’s both an intimate family tribute and an eye-catching style statement.

Despite her self-deprecating label as a design mimic, Virginia Mary is far more. Her own well-defined opinions are integral to the design. “I believe that architecture can help unify a family,” she

Dining room Most of the downstairs rooms have 11-foot ceilings and old, reclaimed pine floors. The dining room, with a table by Rose Tarlow, feeds into the kitchen, where windows are crossed with shelving—an idea Virginia Mary found in a magazine. The kitchen steps down to the living room, where the ceiling rises another foot and flooring changes to pavers. Pavers and a 12-foot ceiling also prevail in the family room.









Family room A Williams-Sonoma striped rug set on pavers neutralizes walls painted Farrow & Ball's "Cooking Apple Green." A Circa Lighting sconce and Paul Ferrante chandelier create tension with their opposing scales. The club chair is covered in Rose Tarlow fabric.

Exterior "I conceptualize from feel—from memories and pieces of buildings rather than according to a specific style," says architect Dillon Kyle. "Like a lot of old Southern homes, this one has multiple exposures."

Kitchen The long pantry frees up walls in the kitchen. The Viking range was a gift from one of Kyle's clients. **Rocker** Family names that are hand-painted on an heirloom rocking chair in the master bedroom look embroidered.

Entry A family portrait is reflected in a mirror.





Library Symmetry and millwork add a touch of formality to the library. “Everyone loves this room because we’re all readers,” says Ray Brown, an investment banker. Virginia Mary found the gray taffeta curtain fabric for \$5 a yard at a remnant sale at Interior Fabrics. Pine flooring throughout the house was salvaged from a North Carolina tobacco warehouse. Virginia Mary gathered “green” tips from both designer showhouses and shelter magazines. **Raymond’s bedroom** When it was time for his own room, oldest son Raymond moved to a spot above the garage. Patterned after a sleeping porch, the room has three walls of windows. **Gallery** Virginia Mary credits Atlanta showhouses by Dan Carithers for her to-the-ceiling art placement. **Boys’ bedroom** The younger boys’ shared room features a pair of identical berths and built-in desks. The oversize dog art tempers the lavender. The striped fabric is Lulu DK, and desk chairs are from the Sundance catalog.

theorizes. “I wanted a design that was not compartmentalized, because I wanted our family to be together and close.” For the same reason, she went against the trend and said no to a master suite downstairs, insisting that all bedrooms be upstairs. And in another increasingly uncommon move, she opted against a bedroom for every boy. “My two younger sisters and I grew up sharing a room, and we remain very close. I believe it’s an important way to learn to get along with other people.”

And it works. “My kids are really close, like puppies in a box,” she laughs. “They have fun together and are each others’ best friends. I think sharing rooms is why.” The two older boys, Raymond, 15, and Thompson, 13, shared a room until two years ago. The younger pair, Patrick, 10, and Walker, 8, will continue sharing for a few more years.

“At first, I worried about building a house this large, but now I’m pleased—it lives like a small house. When I stand at the bottom of the







Master bedroom Dressed in Leontine Linens, a Reid Reproduction Company bed is crowned with a painting by Sarah Lamb. An Ernie Leach tufted bench is covered in Rogers & Goffigon "Confection." Walls are Benjamin Moore's "Nightingale."

Sitting room Paneling and a sisal rug distinguish the space. **Bath:** Virginia Mary bought the marble mosaic tiles at a hotel's salvage sale.

stairs and say, 'Breakfast is ready,' I know everybody can hear me. I just believe it's important to know what's going on in my house."

Of course, too much of anything is never good, and that includes closeness. Thus the big, gray sliding barn doors that separate the sage-green family room—the only deviation from the home's mainly gray and off-white palette—from the kitchen.

"I wanted to be able to close off the family room when the boys are watching television in there and the adults are talking in the kitchen or the living room," Virginia Mary explains. Or the reverse. Both family and living rooms have TVs. "This is a family home. We

have a TV in the living room because we watch games there. It's just a fact of our lives."

The big kitchen was inspired by one she admired in a design magazine. "I wanted a lot of counter space and a big table in the middle. Everybody has to go through here to get anywhere in the house—and that was deliberate. We gather here at the start of the day, and at the end. With four boys, someone's always in here eating." The monogrammed chair cushions with their funky down-the-legs ties originated as a nod to practicality—"warm and soft to sit on." The adjacent butler's pantry provides most of the storage,



leaving the kitchen itself open, airy, and clean. “The butler’s pantry counter is where they pick up their sack lunches for school everyday,” Virginia Mary explains.

Furnishings are a mix of heirlooms plus new and antique pieces. In the dining room, a Rose Tarlow table that was an anniversary present from Ray is teamed with chairs passed down from Virginia Mary’s mother. The homeowner found the mirrors and lamps at the Round Top, Texas, antiques show. The inviting results raise one question: Who says a decorating junkie can’t be productive? ❏

Architect: Dillon Kyle **For more information, see sources on page 000**