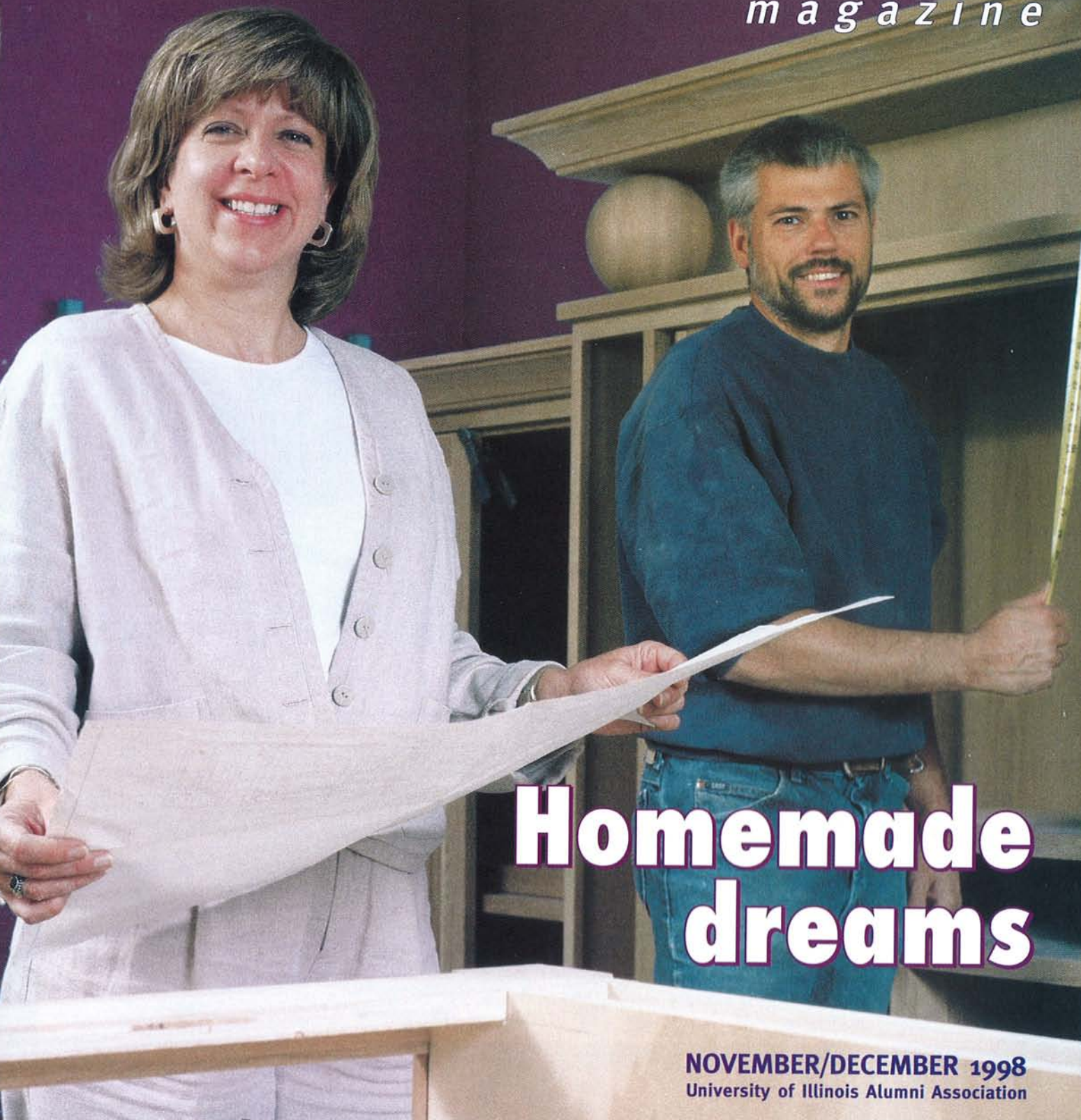


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Homemade dreams

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Homemade dreams



Making them **come true**

by Jessica A. Canlas '96

If world peace and ecological harmony are what you wish for, the wait might be a little long.

Other desires, though, are more feasible. You can save up for the perfect house and the perfect car. You can find the perfect job and maybe even the perfect spouse.

In the lives of **Elissa Morgante, M.Arch. '87**, **Frederick Wilson, M.Arch. '85**, and **Cheryl '83** and **Marius Daugvila '81**, however, it's "Been there, done that." For them, personal goals reach fruition daily.

Through their livelihood they make other people's dreams come true.

At Morgante-Wilson Architects, located in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, Frederick and Elissa bring to life the spaces that people aspire to inhabit.

"We have people come to us and say, 'Build us our dream house,'" said Elissa. And from clients' visions, to the drawing board, through to developer and builder, that's what they do.

"I always knew I liked to build things," commented Frederick. And I think we're good with people, and, when you're dealing with clients and builders, you have to be."

Architecture, however, was not Elissa's first love.

"I always liked art," she said, "as did Fred. But [architecture] was a profession I learned about in college, so I started taking introductory courses and found out I really liked it a lot."

While studying for her master's in architecture at UIC, she met Frederick, who was also in the program. The couple were married shortly after Elissa graduated.

Although she didn't academically pursue her original interest in art education, Elissa eventually did become an instructor at UIC, teaching undergraduate design and studio classes in the School of Architecture after a number of years after completing her degree.

She also worked in her field and was even employed by Kenneth Schroeder, former director of the School of Architecture, while Fred worked for Stanley Tigerman, Schroeder's predecessor as director.

Then, 11 years ago, the same year they were married, the couple decided to start their own firm.

"Elissa and I always knew we wanted to work together," commented Frederick, "pretty much from when we first met. We just had that same kind of design sensibility that partnered well."

Left: The renovated living area gained the geometry of tapered wing walls and a steel arch used for structural support. Just beyond the arch, a curved wall soars to a rooftop skylight.

Above Right: Architects Elissa Morgante and Frederick Wilson enjoy their breakfast nook with children Alex and Hannah. Since this photo was taken, the family welcomed a new member, daughter Isabelle.

Bottom Right: Stately and restrained, the front exterior was decluttered to harmonize better with the vintage brick homes in its neighborhood.

Photos: Reprinted with permission of Better Homes and Gardens Magazine





Evidence of that is their Wilmette home, which they purchased in 1993, remodeling it for nine months through early 1994. While shaping other people's spaces, they decided to create one for themselves and their new family.

Although they had already created a "dream house" at their city home, the arrival of two children prompted the family's move to their suburban abode, which was recently featured in a special interest publication produced by Better Homes and Gardens called "Remodeling Ideas for Your Home."

"It's a small house with a very nice location," Elissa explained. "That's why we bought the house. It's a corner lot, facing south and west; it's a block from the elementary school, and it's a wonderful neighborhood."

Built and designed in 1928 by an architect, the house was originally a colonial-style structure. While its second owner was an architect, little had been done to the house for about 25 years. Until its third owners came along.

"We immediately gutted the interior and rebuilt the front elevation," Elissa said. "It was just an ugly front."

They removed the asphalt shingle roofing and lined up the windows on the first and second floors, giving the house a cleaner look in front. With the additions of limestone windowsills and blue-glazed brick, its exterior became stately and refined, matching nicely with the neighborhood's other vintage homes.

"Coming from the city, where the houses are usually long and skinny, it's hard to really have big rooms," she noted. "One of our goals [for the new house] was to open up the space and get rooms that are gracious enough to have 20, 25 people in them," she said.

And that, they achieved. Where the original living and dining room had been separate, they are now combined into a one-room area. After removing a load-bearing wall that had split the room into two distinct sections, Elissa and Frederick replaced them with more contemporary-looking steel I-beams and columns.

"We left them exposed to celebrate [the fact] that we reorganized and allowed the room to be one big space," Elissa said. "So now, instead of two smaller rooms, we have one big space that works well."

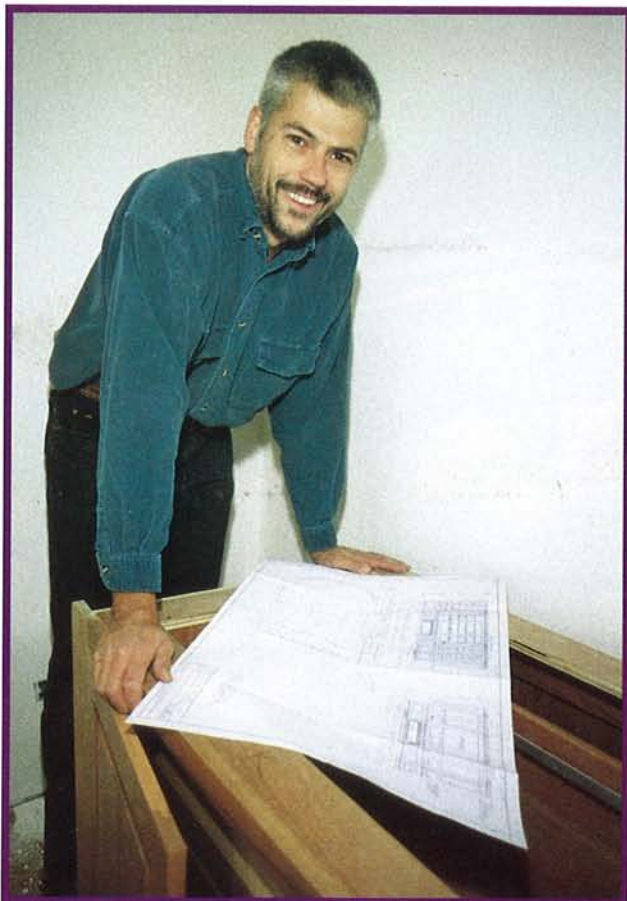
In addition, they opened up the staircase, "making it more

Above left: Geometric wood inlays in the kitchen cabinets underscore the home's craftsmanship. Decorative hanging light fixtures were made from inexpensive electrical store components and outfitted with terrarium bulbs.

Bottom left: A wide birch sill behind the l-shaped sofa in the family room contains heating ducts and provides for books and framed photos.

Right: Low-voltage landscape light fixtures were invented and used as sconces to illuminate the arched ceiling of the "Library Tunnel" that joins the front and rear areas of the house. Maple inlays in the walnut-stained oak floor help visually "announce" the transition.





of an event to go up and down the stairs,” she added. Lining the curved walls along the double staircase are pictures of family and friends, and atop it is a skylight.

The staircase area also doubles as a sort of dividing wall between what Elissa calls the “formal” and “informal” zones of the house. While the couple can entertain business appointments in the front living room and dining room area, the children can play in the family room, located in the rear of the house behind the stairs.

Underneath the stairs on the first floor, a short hallway connects the front to the back in a sort of transition space which the family calls their “Library Tunnel.”

Upstairs, the layout is similar. While the more formal master bedroom is in the front, above the living room, the informal children’s rooms are behind the stairs.

“We had no kids when we did our first house,” she said, “so there are things that we discovered we’d do differently for the kids to accommodate them, like cubbyholes for shoes and places for homework. We had to think about three kids sharing a bathroom and five people sharing a house.”

Specializing in residential architecture, the couple often finds themselves guiding their clients through the same difficulties that they became all too familiar with in their own homes.

“Once you’ve actually gone through it, the process of destroying and designing a building, you can really appreciate the kinds of things that the client goes through during those difficult periods of feeling homeless,” said Elissa.

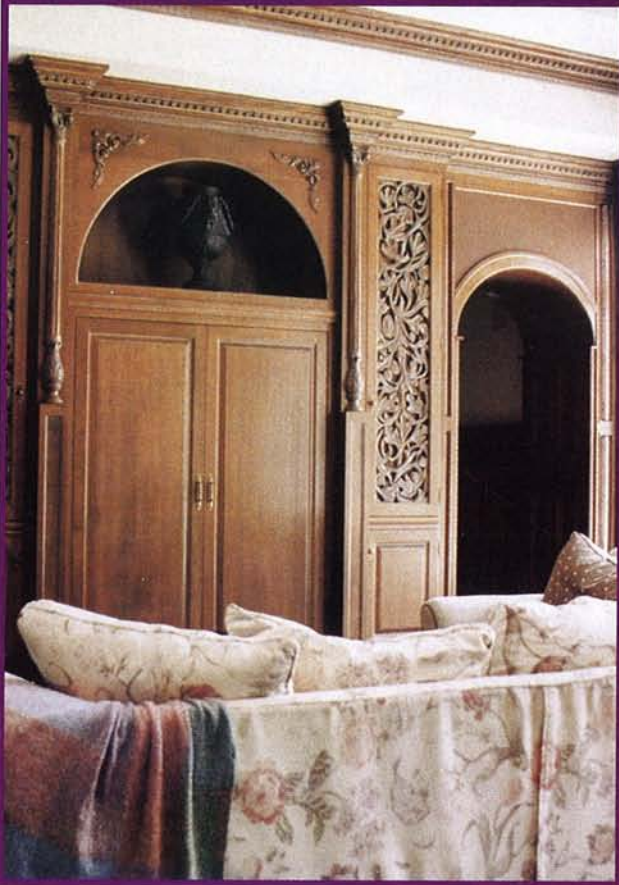
For Cheryl Daugvila, these are exactly the considerations that she confronts in designing and remodeling kitchens as president of Cheryl D. & Co.

“We like to get people excited about ripping apart their homes,” Cheryl laughed. “Any job can be exciting, but if the clients are having difficulties with people coming in and disrupting their lifestyles for months at a time, and they’re not into it, then your heart’s not in it, either.”

And, as Frederick and Elissa found themselves with their own particular needs in redoing their home, Cheryl’s clients come to her with the same kind of concerns. One person’s dream kitchen may be another’s kitchenette.

“It really has a lot to do with questioning the customer,” she admitted. “As much as ‘universal design’ is a huge term that everybody says has to fit everybody, that’s not true when it comes to personal homes. Typically, all our projects are designed toward the individual person or family that we’re designing for.”

In Cheryl’s case, the “we” represents herself and her husband Marius. The two met while pursuing undergraduate



Above left: Marius Daugvila produces unique cabinets at his shop and installs them according to his wife’s layouts. Photo: Roberta Dupuis-Devlin

Bottom left: Modern function in artistic disguise: Daugvila-designed and built, this quarter-sawn white oak entertainment center features classical fluted acanthus pilasters and intricately detailed panels custom-carved by Marius’ father. Its main compartment houses a 50” TV, while side compartments conceal stereo equipment and a bar refrigerator.

degrees in industrial design at UIC. At the time an avid sailor, Marius became interested in the materials Cheryl had chosen for a particular tent design she'd been working on.

"We had a graphics design class together," Cheryl smiled, "and one thing led to another, so we kind of started dating. And the rest is history."

"I was kind of a beach bum," Marius admitted. "I was living in the Indiana State Park Dunes, and people here and there were asking me to build things for them. Cheryl lived in Downers Grove, and she gave me the ultimatum. So I had to find a job in Chicago."

Fortunately, he found a job doing local commercial work, and the two were married in 1985.

"But I didn't have a feel for it," Marius said. "There was no creativity to it. It was just wham, bam, get it out the door. I knew I wanted something better, so I started working for an architectural woodworking firm."

Cheryl, who's been employed at kitchen and bath design firms since high school, continued in the custom design field, working showrooms and selling products and services.

"I was 16 [when I started]," she began. "I used to do the drawings for another kitchen and bath firm. The boss would go measure the job, and he'd have me re-draw it for his layout."

"One day, he said, 'You know how to do this,' and then it was a gradual elevation through the business from there."

Moving up in the ranks, however, wasn't enough. She quit her job to freelance from home, but found out quickly she'd caught a full-blown case of cabin fever.

"The most frustrating part was being an at-home worker," Cheryl admitted. "I lasted three years in the basement, and I said, 'I've got to get out in the public.' Sitting in my pajamas at noon designing people's kitchen was really quite lonely. It got me goofy."

But being home alone was the least of her problems. She also discovered rocky ground dealing with outside companies to construct her designs.

"I had this frustration of coming up against a lot of the mentality that comes with this business," Cheryl said. "There are companies who may be concerned with running their businesses properly, but they either won't do something or can't do it efficiently enough for what I have in my head."

That's when she and Marius decided to put their heads together to do things their way.

"After working for two other higher-end custom cabinet companies, I always joked about having to open my own business by the time I'm 30 so I wouldn't have to deal with them, to get what I want. And now having Marius to build

Above right: Plain-sliced steamed beechwood with book-matched veneer cabinets custom-built by Marius create uniformity in this Hinsdale kitchen. Stainless steel-laminated doors and accent trims coupled with rich black absolute granite countertops second the Daugvilas' contemporary vision.

Bottom right: Carved applique details accent maplewood Wood-Mode and Brookhaven cabinetry layered with a sandstone heirloom finish. A panel-front, built-in refrigerator and Baltic Brown granite countertops complete a refined "country" look for a Cheryl D.-designed kitchen in New Buffalo, Mich.





Cheryl and Marius Daugvila have achieved “A nice balance” working together building and designing kitchens.
Photo: Roberta Dupuis-Devlin

what’s in my head and coming up with his own ideas gives us the freedom of doing our own thing.”

Today, Cheryl D. & Co. has its own showroom in downtown La Grange, which opened in 1994 and displays samples of custom-made work from The Marius Collection as well as products manufactured by another line they carry called Wood-Mode Fine Custom Cabinetry. Just ten minutes away is Marius’ Lyons shop, where he and his staff construct the furniture.

“What I like best is actually building Cheryl’s creations,” he admitted. “She has more of an eye for the design, and I have the mechanical skills. She has the overall picture, and I put in the details. Once I get the drawing, we’re always collaborating back and forth, and then it turns out wonderful in the end.

“Cheryl’s the nucleus of it all and is quite talented. I’m just labor.”

Having been featured in publications such as the Chicago Tribune as well as on television through a Home and Garden TV special, it’s clear that Cheryl and Marius have come up with a winning combination.

“I would consider this my dream job,” she said. “I get to work with my husband, and we’re at the point where we can’t do it without each other. Marius doesn’t want to produce assembly-line designs, and he can create the unique types of pieces that other companies can’t for me. But he doesn’t want to take the time to sit down and work things out in

plan, like I do. So we have this nice balance. I can’t see working with anybody else.”

And being on their own allows them not just creative freedom. They get to take all the credit for it, too.

“I designed a kitchen while I was with another company,” Cheryl said, “and they used it in all their national advertising, blew up [a picture of it] for display in the factory foyer and everything. Now I hear that other people are taking credit for the design. My mother even showed me a newspaper where a competitor representing that company was using that kitchen in his advertisement.”

Even their showroom is a target for industry copycats.

“Even though it’s a smaller showroom, I’ve been told by a lot of reps in the business that it’s a nicer one. And I have a lot of competitors come check me out, then they go back and they copy. So this year, we decided that we wanted to do something so unique in the showroom, kind of like saying, ‘Fine. See if you can copy that,’” Cheryl smiled.

In her attitude towards innovation, Elissa expressed similar ideals.

“In terms of architecture, we want to add to the fabric of the city and the surrounding area, to the built environment in a positive way,” Elissa said.

But aside from the well-deserved independence and recognition the Daugvilas now enjoy, Cheryl stressed that customer satisfaction is still top of the list. Bringing the perfect kitchen to life for a client is a way of making her own dream come true.

“Just to hear somebody say, ‘You know, we still love our kitchen, and we still think it looks great’ means so much more to me than doing a kitchen for some famous person whom you never meet, and you never know if they liked it,” she said.

And satisfaction, for the Daugvilas, is a two-way street.

“It’s really rewarding when we finish a job,” Marius said. “Sometimes, we get nervous wondering if the client will like it or if it will fit. But all the frustrations and headaches seem to disappear when you walk into the room, sit back and just say, ‘Wow.’”

“In fact, we have a client right now who has his new cabinets sitting in his living room,” Marius continued, “and he calls every day just to tell us how much he loves them and how he can’t wait to get them installed in his kitchen. That just makes it all so much more rewarding.”

Frederick and Elissa agree. Watching their clients realize that the dream home isn’t just fantasy anymore brings them the rewards they strive for in their work.

“Ninety-nine percent of our work comes from referrals, and it feels great,” said Elissa. “It feels like we’re accomplishing our goals. We want people to be happy with their homes.”

Seeing through the work that these couples put into making their dreams come true, it’s clear what their lives’ work has come down to.

“We’re lucky,” Frederick said. “This business is like an animal. If we’d seen it from the backside, we wouldn’t have gotten on. But being fortunate enough to have great kids and get the business off the ground and running—it just ups the ante and makes us feel that much more fulfilled.”