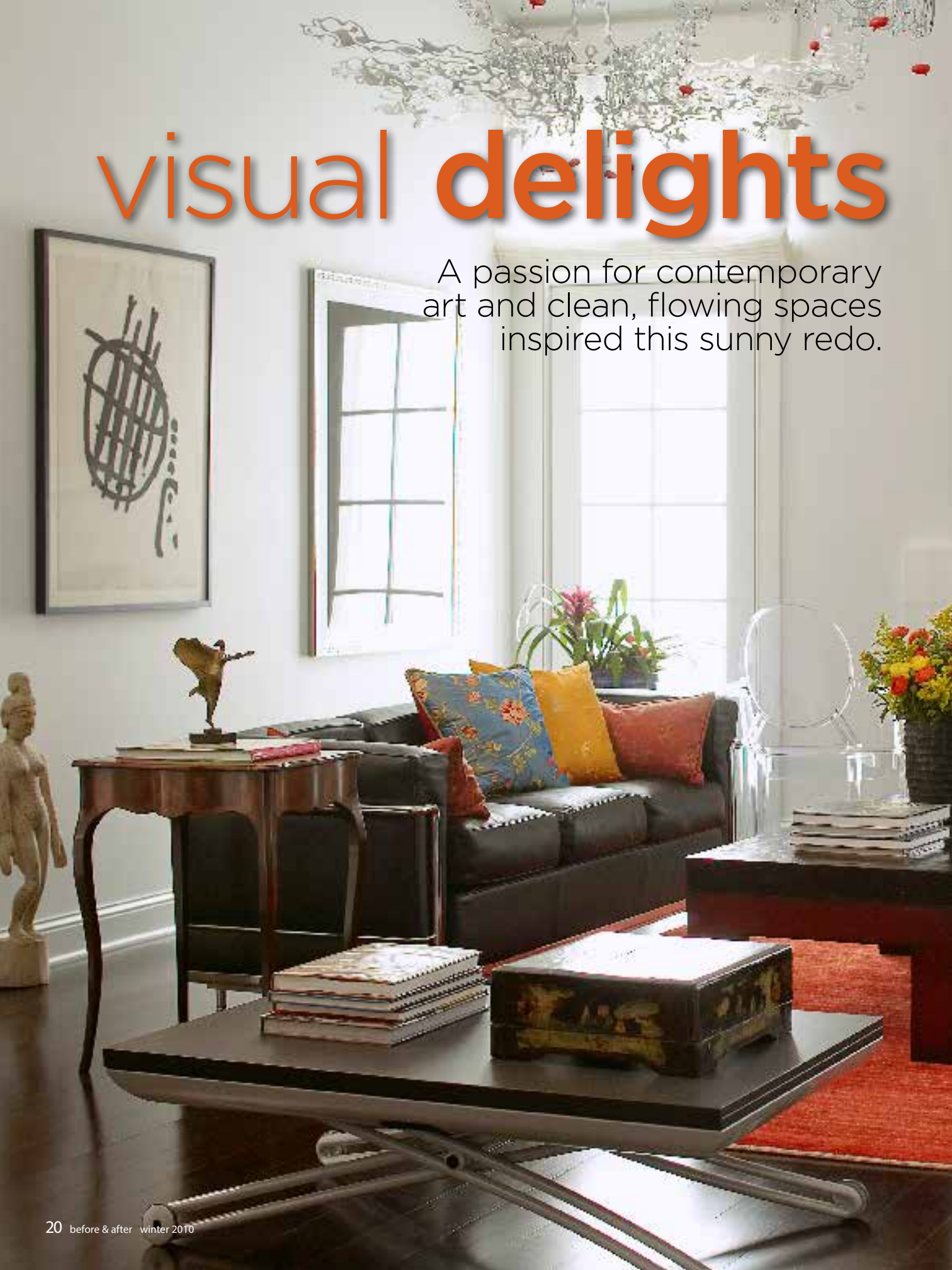


# visual delights

A passion for contemporary art and clean, flowing spaces inspired this sunny redo.



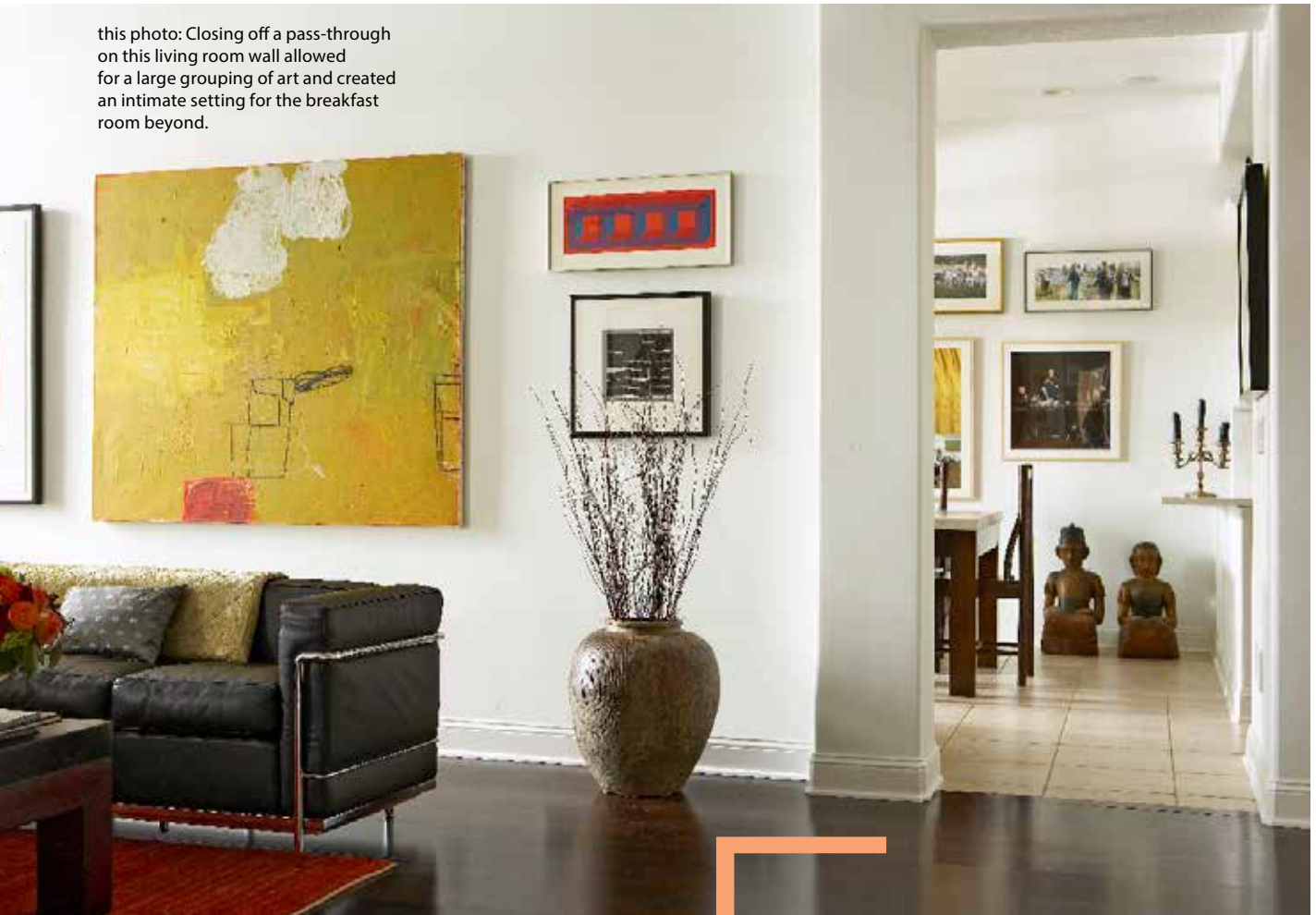


A new, sophisticated fireplace offers a warm and inviting gathering spot for this intimate seating area. The unique ceiling installation is by artist Jesse Small.



before

this photo: Closing off a pass-through on this living room wall allowed for a large grouping of art and created an intimate setting for the breakfast room beyond.



## LOOKING BACK

A Des Moines townhouse offered good bones, but its pedestrian layout and materials didn't speak to the homeowners' love of modern art, contemporary design, and original thinking:

- Natural-finish cabinets made the kitchen dated and ordinary.
- In the living room, a prominent wall was overstuffed with a television and off-center fireplace, making the space bulky and unbalanced.
- Three pass-throughs pierced living room walls, diminishing opportunities to display art.
- A poorly designed master closet and bathroom lacked the serenity the homeowners wanted.

For some people, great architecture is all about shapely moldings, dramatic windows, and impressive rooflines. For Jim and Ellen Hubbell, it's all about sleek, expansive wall space. These ardent collectors wanted uninterrupted vertical planes to display and enjoy their notable and ever-growing collection of original art.

So when they stepped into this urban townhouse, just a few miles from downtown Des Moines, they viewed it through the eyes of art lovers. "The volume and the architecture captured our attention," Jim says. "And especially for the way we live," Ellen adds. "For our lifestyle, for the art and collection—there were a lot of good walls."

The home is 4,800 square feet but can live intimately on one level with the kitchen and breakfast room, living room, master suite, library/den, and sunroom all on the main floor. A basement level and upper story offer the chance to spread out and accommodate more people and activities.

Jim, a real estate executive and owner of a renovation company, and Ellen, a retired publishing executive, began mentally editing features they didn't want or need, and also envisioned how they wanted to use the home's three levels. "The interior



above: Painting the cherrywood cabinets white transforms the kitchen into a tranquil, contemporary work core. Removing the raised ledge on the peninsula creates a cleaner look. right: Other countertop materials were contemplated, but white solid-surfacing won out when residential designer Cynthia O'Brien devised a crisp edge treatment that gives the material a modern look.





A stepped wall gives the staircase an open feel while providing space for artwork.

windows didn't line up... moldings didn't line up and were all different," Jim says. And the previous owners had beveled a lot of edges on walls and stairways. "Too many architectural gimmicks," Jim says. It was a "nice space," he says, "but really uncomfortable to live with all that."

With an eye to simplifying the interiors, the couple took their ideas to residential designer Cynthia O'Brien. "I set a goal to create a gallery space for their art, but at the same time let it be a home," she says. "It couldn't be cold like a museum, but had to be a comfortable place to live and offer warmth for guests."

The couple found satisfaction as unnecessary features of the house were erased. "It was fun to watch the demolition, because all the things that bothered us were going out the door," Ellen says. Several dramatic changes transformed the living room:

- Ceiling trusses were exposed, and special hangers allowed artist Jesse Small to install a showstopping series of sculptures that hang from the ceiling and shimmer in the voluminous space.
- Closing off two of the three pass-throughs created wall space for more art.
- An off-center fireplace and cabinets with a large television were removed and replaced by a centered fireplace with a narrow band of white marble around the firebox.

Removing a raised countertop ledge opened the view into the kitchen, where white paint gives the cherrywood cabinets a fresh spin. "As Cynthia says, 'White makes things disappear,'" Ellen says.

Another kind of disappearing act took place in the master suite, where walls were removed to create a walk-through closet/dressing room with a sitting area. Wood floors and white marble provide elegance and continuity. "We wanted serenity," Ellen says, "so we calmed down the colors and the materials in there."





Downstairs, a gathering space was created with an eye toward entertaining and watching television. A kitchenette provides convenience on this level, and a guest bedroom features a wall of shelving that organizes the Hubbells' art library. Another guest bedroom on the upper level doubles as an office for Ellen and provides additional sleeping space when the Hubbells' six grown children come to visit.

The children all feel at home when they stay, but Ellen and Jim gauge the success of the redo by the positive comments they receive from outside the family. "That's the ultimate compliment for us," Ellen says, "that when we entertain, people tell us that it is a warm and welcoming place."

RESOURCES begin on page 106.

Writer: Jan Soultis Walker Photographer: Marty Baldwin  
Produced by Zulal Biner

above left: This stylish walk-through master closet replaces a corridor-style closet with accordion doors on each side. above: Substituting wood floors for carpeting throughout much of the interior, including the master suite, promotes a clean, contemporary spirit. left: A low counter and a large mirror provide a convenient place for applying cosmetics.



this photo: White de-emphasizes components in the master bathroom and creates an air of serenity, while marble lends elegance.

## BY DESIGN

**Residential designer Cynthia O'Brien details the design process:**

- **Interview the client.** An opening interview begins the process, and discussions continue throughout the project to refine the final drawings. Be prepared to answer lots of detail-oriented questions: "An architect needs to know everything from the height of the occupants to the sizes of trays in the kitchen," O'Brien says. "Do the homeowners go out to dinner a lot, or do they cook at home? Do they entertain? The space has to be informed by the answers to such questions."
- **Design the project.** "I make up some drawings, and we talk back and forth," O'Brien says. "I like it to be collaborative. Ultimately, we need the clients to say what they think of the ideas, because they have to live with it."
- **Create final drawings and obtain bids.** "Sometimes you have to change materials along the way because maybe you can't get one material in a time frame that you need," O'Brien says. "So you adjust and make another choice."



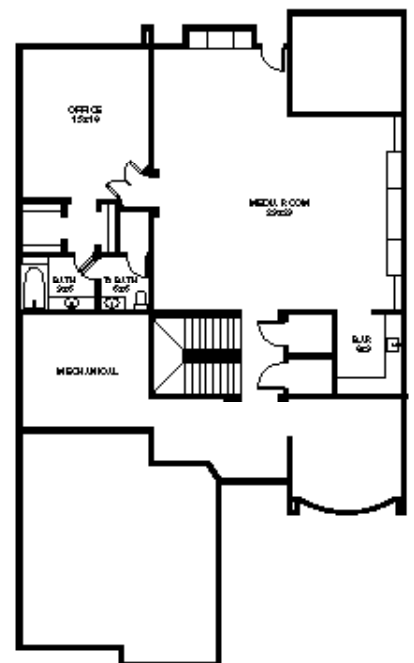
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Get tips for success at [RemodelingCenter.com/before-after-magazine](http://RemodelingCenter.com/before-after-magazine)







Main Level, After



Lower Level, After

top: In this lower-level guest room, a wall of open shelves serves as an art library for the Hubbells. above: Built-in drawers store guest linens. opposite top: This window-lined niche on the lower level nestles into the family room's exterior wall, providing a sunny spot for relaxing. opposite bottom: When guests fill the house, they often wind up in this family room. Expanding space for the adjoining kitchenette also expanded the possible menu: Before, it was drinks only.