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A deep dive

Text: R. Collins



Lauren Svenstrup, owner and design director of Studio Sven in Chicago, has an approach to interior design that is more like a deep dive. Naturally inquisitive, the designer continually seeks to interrogate design choices and solutions to mine the deeper constructs of a client's needs, manifesting their ideal spatial reality at home.

"I thrive in a process where people let us really explore the 'why' behind things, like what their lifestyle really is and what it could be," said Svenstrup in reference to her process, which also informs the philosophy at her interior design firm, Studio Sven.

It was fitting, then, when a client came by referral with simple needs—a few pieces

of furniture and advice perhaps—for a new condo in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, that the project would morph into a more sweeping effort. The original two-bedroom, two-bathroom condo held a basic arrangement of amenities and built-ins with a light color palette and simple moldings. When unpacking the client's taste and needs for the space, however, Svenstrup and the client—a business owner and steadfast Iowa Hawkeyes football fan—realized the space needed to exude a significantly more masculine, refined, and ultra-modern air than the new condo held, and its proportions needed rearranging to fit the bill.

"[I thought] let's design it from a stand-

point of where you are in your life, what image you want to be reflecting, what surrounds you...it's your product of your environment," Svenstrup said. "If you're in a beautiful home that represents the success you found in your career and how far you come, it only helps to drive that more. So, in that process of really figuring out who he is as a person and how far he's come, that's where the project dove into a whole other level."

Like her ability to address design preferences near the root, Svenstrup is also versed in cracking open the perceived boundaries of a physical space to reveal its potential for a client's needs. In the case of the Lake-

view condo—which was completed February 2019—the main solution for the space involved changing its proportions to maximize spaces that were relevant to the client while leaning on the aesthetic of an urban loft.

For Svenstrup, the deep smoky gray hue seen throughout the main living space—composed of kitchen, living, and dining room—served as a springboard for both changes, as it cloaked the previously stark white and cream-colored condo in a canvas, which modernized and masculinized the interior, and seemingly expanded its small windows underneath 12-foot-tall ceilings.

Though the use of the color—Benjamin Moore's Midnight Oil—throughout the

main space was a bold move within Studio Sven's repertoire, Svenstrup embodies a comfortability when treading the line between safe and daring acts of design in general. In fact, the designer traverses a rich terrain in between other binaries throughout the design process, neither advising clients "yes" or "no" on their decisions, but instead prompting them to wonder "why," in order to reveal the innerworkings of the way they live, work, and want. The approach, according to Svenstrup, is prompted both by her own natural inquisitiveness and her studies in furniture design and human-centered design.

"That part has always been my nature. I did not go to school initially for interior

design; I went for human-centered design, which is that questioning [approach]," Svenstrup said. "With human-centered design you can basically design anything: phone booths, architecture, skateboards, pencils, whatever; it's how someone interacts with their objects or environment."

By many accounts, human-centered design is an immersive, highly empathetic practice that begins with the person being designed for branching out into rich streams of solutions that address their core needs. Since founding Studio Sven in 2014, after years working as the design director for one of Chicago's top, high-end residential interior design firms, Svenstrup and her fellow curators of interiors, furnishings, and



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lifestyles have been dedicated to a cohesive, holistic studio process that aims to satisfy a client's core needs by fitting everything in an interior within the context of their lives. It is a process steeped in self-discovery for clients, as it prompts them to address the reasons for their decisions and culminates in confidence with the result, according to Svenstrup.

"It's that self-discovery process and it's fun; I really enjoy it, because at the end, it's not just a client who is like 'I love my home,' they're like 'it's my lifestyle,'" Svenstrup said. "We're really trying to enhance their lifestyle or design a lifestyle that they can maintain."

The studio works within a range of projects and budgets, from residential to boutique hospitality and from conception to turnkey installation. Other than collaborations with contractors, architects, artisans,

and craftspeople, Svenstrup and her team utilize riveting artworks and furnishings during their interior transformations, some of which are widely recognizable, such as the light, energetic condo for the mountaineer Alex Pancoe, whose lofty living room features a hand-painted ceiling and a stunning self-portrait of the climber Cory Richards taken post-avalanche.

Other projects include Chicago interiors with artful vintage remixes and jewel-tone infused hangouts, and many others that create an overall diverse mixture of space while making it consistently easy to recognize Svenstrup's sophisticated, vibrant compositions. This is also carried into the Lakeview condo, where the uniform, tonal approach to the main area makes unassuming details within increasingly savory.

To create the perfect canvas for the modern interior, Svenstrup's team removed the

condo's baseboards and molding, laid the rich dark hue overtop, and installed polished, dark wood flooring. Besides fully activating the main area's windows, the color matches and mutes the appearance of the client's large flat screen TV when it is inactive and creates a clean canvas underneath where there was previously a fireplace.

"A lot of the challenge in the beginning of this design was figuring out the right scale: scale of the room, scale of the furniture; and making things that were out of proportion feel a little more in proportion," said Svenstrup.

Additional moves to regain proportion and control of focal points in the condo appear in the kitchen, which was completely reconfigured. The L-shaped space was cut down to a single wall for appliances and darkened cabinetry that extends from floor to ceiling; and a statement island in Marqui-



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na quartzite borders the space to lay focus on other living areas more relevant to the client. One such space, the living and TV viewing room is cloaked in the dark hue, from walls and TV to the knobby, indoor-outdoor rectangular rug—ideal for the client’s puppy—and leather sofa, with its accompanying tufted ottoman and Lou Accent Table by Arteriors Home. Studio Sven’s Quill Blocks from its own shop sit across from a trio of smooth dark vases on a low-slung entertainment cabinet.

The work that physical and visual layers of texture do to accentuate the color appear in one of the area’s most unassuming details: the geometric “black wire crystals” that appear to grow up the corner of the room, next to a short, rustic wood bar. For Svenstrup, part of the work of flourishes like these within an open floorplan is controlling the sightline across an interior, instead of revealing its curiosities at a glance; in effect controlling the eye toward its rear-end finale.

“When you open the front door you want to make sure that the thing that you see straight in back is impactful, but you need to give moments of wanting to stop so your eyes do stop before you get all the way there,” Svenstrup said. “Having that perfectly symmetrical moment happening back there was really important.”

In this case, the final resting point is the dining room, where a long, vertical painting is flanked by bay-like windows and illuminated by the adjustable Concorde Chandelier by Regina Andrew Detroit, which was inspired by a supersonic airliner and finished in blackened iron and gold leaf. The area, which doubles as an office space, is furnished with cane and barrel-backed dining chairs and a stainless-steel dining table dressed in a high gloss graphite lacquer to reflect natural light and add additional abstract texture to the space. Artful additions also appear in the approximately 30-foot long hallway to the bedrooms, where gallery lighting illuminates curated keepsakes like buttons and memorabilia from the client’s adventures as a Hawkeyes fan, which pop off the wall’s dark canvas.

In the bedroom area and accompanying bathroom, the light of the palette switches on, and both spaces are swathed in cream and light accents for an almost spa-like feeling, according to Svenstrup. The bathroom features a standing shower cased in translucent and fogged glass, and white-and-gray tile neighbors a dark wood double vanity. In a bedroom, custom wood built-in closets extend past their previous dimensions to help proportion the room; and there is also a long bedside vintage print of the Italian actor Rudolph Valentino.

The transition from the living area to the hallway display, and then to the lighter bedroom spaces was strategic for the design team, as it characterized a shift into personal space that allows the main living area to relish in its profound design notes. It is also exemplary of one of Svenstrup’s methods for designing residential interiors, in which individual aspects of the client’s unique personal makeup can be organized and arranged in a way that does not overpower them or the core goals for a space and living within it.

“We can very easily tackle the concept of a beautiful design. That’s only part of it,” Svenstrup said. “Making it something that helps you function better in your home and feel better in your home—because you’re very much a product of your own environment—and something that feels totally like you, but an enhanced version of you; I think it helps you to live that life.”



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