A delicate BALANCE

The right mix of formal sophistication and family comfort makes this a house both adults and kids can love.






MOMENTS

LEFT: The draperies, in a light red toile, are the main color accent in the otherwise neutral family room. BELOW: The tailored valance gives the large bay window in the breakfast area a sense of enclosure and coziness. RIGHT: Inverted box pleats banded with an informal taupe-and-cream check means the toile valance strikes a balance of casual and elegant.





The first clue that Libba and Brett Rule's stately new home is also casual enough for a busy family comes with a glimpse of the beautifully landscaped lawn and the classic veranda furnished with down-home, comfortable rocking chairs painted crisp white. The conclusion is confirmed inside with formal fabrics, dressmaker details, and soothing colors mixing with antiques and inviting furnishings. This home not only boasts elements of traditional formality, but also the easy livability required to accommodate three kids younger than 12.

After Libba and Brett built their home on a new street in one of the oldest subdivisions of Charlotte, North Carolina, Libba knew they needed to update their look, which included family antiques and lifelong collections. The family loved the house, but "it's amazing how new and shiny a new house can



LEFT: The English-style dining table dating from the 1920s was handed down from homeowner Libba Rule's grandmother. Designer Mark Phelps had it refinished and aged. BELOW: The blue-and-cream flower wallpaper was the one covering Libba had installed before meeting Phelps. To complement the pattern, he added plaid pinch-pleat drapes.

"I DON'T DO MUCH WITH top treatments. I LOVE TO stay tailored."

—designer Mark Phelps





LEFT: A Low Country architectural style blends the house into the older neighborhood. BELOW: Most of Libba's collection of blue Cantonese porcelain is showcased in the living room. RIGHT: "Symmetry plays an important part in the formality of this room, while the upholstered pieces are an invitation to relax," Phelps says.

"We love the blue ceiling, WHICH HE GAMBLED ON PAINTING WHILE WE WERE OUT OF TOWN!"

—homeowner Libba Rule

look!" Libba says. "We really wanted to warm it up." In addition, they had a formal living room so stiff that it was never used—even for visitors.

Local designer Mark Phelps' self-described "tailored traditional" style integrated the Rules' elegant antique pieces into a child-friendly home.

"I tend to choose very traditional things," Libba told Phelps. "But I want a younger look. I want you to push me as far as you can before I get fussy and start rebelling." Phelps relished the challenge.

"We had a good mutual trust," Phelps says. "Libba grew up with beautiful family pieces and has always had a good eye for porcelain and antiques. I bounced everything off of her."

To produce the patina of time while creating a fresh look for the new house, Phelps attacked on several fronts. He first picked a neutral palette for walls, adding soothing accents of colors from the garden in the window treatments, fabrics, and carpets. Starting with









LEFT: Walls were painted a neutral cream, and then striated with an umber glaze to age the living room. A custom-designed ottoman has a softer feel than the traditional coffee table, and the sofa is covered in a fine chenille. BELOW: Libba says of working with Phelps: "He's so good at choosing for us now that he could give us one or two choices, and they would be right."

up-to-date BUT NOT UPTIGHT

Interior designer Mark Phelps tells his secrets for using fine fabrics, wall coverings, and color to create a sophisticated, traditional elegance that's both fresh and family-friendly.



- Take one color and use it throughout the house in varying hues to keep a house consistent and calm.
- Use soft, refined colors, nothing too saturated. Add a colorful accent to a neutral room with fabrics.
- Go for a collected look by using fabrics in multiple patterns with different scales but similar colors. It's a look that is elegant yet muted.
- Consider a large-scale plaid or check in a lush fabric such as silk. It's casual and sophisticated at the same time.
- Choose a small-scale striped silk with a random-width tassel trim for window treatments in more formal rooms.
- Tone down dressy draperies by adding a quiet, tailored trim, such as a solid band or a check.
- Use fabric-covered ottomans in place of coffee tables for a refined look with soft edges.
- Don't forget ceilings for adding interest and warmth. Try wallpaper or paint on an accent color.


INTERIORS

LEFT: "Detailed but tailored—that's my trademark," Phelps says. Covered buttons accenting the goblet-pleat drapery headings are among his favorite details. BELOW: "I didn't want anything too frilly," Libba says of the master bedroom. RIGHT: Phelps used checks, plaids, and vines in cool blues with soft yellow walls as a backdrop to create a restful atmosphere.





Libba's favorite color—a Wedgwood blue with gray undertones—in the living room and master bedroom, Phelps added shades of corn silk, olive green, and a muted red as he worked his way through the house. An area rug, originally belonging to Libba's mother, in the family room helped initiate the color palette as well. Many of the walls were glazed, just enough to age them; doors were painted a bronze hue.

"He used soft creams instead of white for the woodwork," Libba says, "and all of the wallpaper and paint colors seem to glow at night."

For interest, Phelps had the living room ceiling painted a pale blue. "We love the blue ceiling," Libba says, "which he gambled on painting while we were out of town, fearing we would reject the idea unless we saw it first!"

Next, Phelps added window treatments in sumptuous fabrics adorned with dressmaker details. "I don't do much with top treatments," Phelps says. "I love to stay tailored; [I] don't like fussiness. I like trim and contrast—a solid color down the lead edge, for example. And I favor goblet-pleat treatments.



OPPOSITE: "My childhood bed had a canopy, so I wanted one for my daughter, too," Libba says. LEFT: "I mixed a lot of prints in this room and papered the ceiling as well as the walls to give it a cottage feel," Phelps says. BELOW: The window seat in a "girly, garden-look" bedroom is the perfect escape for a girl with two brothers.

"WE WORKED WITH SOME formal pieces BUT KEPT IT soft, comfy, and casual."

—designer Mark Phelps

[Adding] buttons is a casual touch, made elegant by covering them."

The next challenge was to make the house casual enough to be a haven for a family on the go. "We worked with some formal pieces but kept it soft, comfy, and casual," Phelps says. "French and English antiques are mixed with new upholstery. There are no rooms that are not approachable." The children's things are neatly stored but always close at hand: Homework supplies are tucked into the family room sideboard, near a table often used for projects; books store in the drawers of the coffee table.

And what of the formal living room that gathered dust? "Mark put a relaxed sofa and club chairs there, and now we really use it," Libba says.

"We play games with the kids, we read, and even nap there." Proof that coziness and elegance can come together to fashion the perfect family home. ■



RESOURCES ON PAGE 90
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