

# A dance of spaces

By Francie Healy



Ask her what she does for “down time”, and there’s a pause.

“Down time?” she repeats, as if she’s never considered it. “When?”

Registered interior designer Penny Southam is the Principal of Southam Design Inc., Ottawa, as well as the founder and partner of Studio S Interiors.

She admits she’s “turbo-charged” from the time her feet hit the floor in the morning to the moment she kicks off her shoes at the end of the day, has a nice glass of wine, and makes dinner for her children.

This is pure joy speaking – joy in her work, confidence in her own talent, delight in her endless energy.

But Penny Southam knows how and when to draw the line. Her kids are that line. Her clients know they must meet with her during the day from Monday to Friday when the children are in school, with rare

exceptions.

And when her work day ends, her mind doesn’t.

“I get my best creative ideas when I’m sleeping,” she says.

This must be what happens when you have the brain of both scientist and artist, the two elements working in concert with one another.

Anyone who has seen her work knows Penny’s award-winning spaces are the inspirations of an artist. But she’s more than an artist. She’s also a scientist. In fact, that was her first choice of career when she was a top student at Concordia University in Montreal, where she studied biology and neuropsychology. She was going to become a veterinarian.

One New Year’s Eve she was at a party with some of her relatives in Sundance, Utah, at the home of actor William Devane. The party was attended by a number of Hollywood actors, including Robert Redford (“in his sheepskin coat and cowboy hat”). She was so enchanted by the creative, even outlandish, environment that it became a turning point in her life.

“I was used to being around science people with pocket protectors,” she laughs. “I thought, do I really want to be a vet? Of all the courses I took at Concordia, I really only liked one anyway.”

It was time to give up the dream she had had since she was six years old. She wanted more.

Next stop was acting school in New York City. To many people, that very idea might have seemed daunting. But not to Penny.

“I have always known that whatever I put my mind to I would succeed at,” she says. “I’d make it happen.”

So she attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in NYC, and it turned out she was really good at it.

“But the thing about acting,” she says, “is that no matter how good you are, it’s a matter of being at the right place at the right time.” She acted and “did the waitressing thing” in New York City. And knew she definitely did not want to be a waitress for the rest of her life.

What, she asked herself, would combine the creativity of acting with a science education?

Her answer was interior design.

She took a few interior design courses to test her interest, and enjoyed it so much that she returned to Montreal to study. Once she graduated, she decided she’d like to work in Europe. So she went to Slovenia to work for an architect. But civil war broke out and she returned, this time to Ottawa.

Interior design is an “exact fit”, she says. It demands the detailed and left-brained activity of things like knowledge of the building code, construction details, and floor plans. On the other hand, it empowers her to create beautiful spaces, “a world for people to act out the lives they live or work in”.

Her style is contemporary and unique, with fresh, clean lines. She likes texture and the challenge of asymmetrical balance, which she admits can be tricky.

“Asymmetrical design has to be ‘just so’,” she explains. “And if you take ‘just so’ the wrong way, it’s no longer a beautiful balance. It’s an eye thing. A ‘feel’ thing. You have to play with it.”

She adds although she likes a contemporary look, it’s not “cold contemporary”. It’s more “transitional – a fusion of modern lines with classic elements”. She loves light, unique detail and the use of glass in design.

When she’s designing with AutoCad, she likes “to listen to funky lounge kind of music”, she says. “My hand just moves to the groove and I get into it. It’s like a dance. It’s fun.”

Southam Design projects are as different in scope as they are unique. At any one time it’s a retirement home in Orleans. Or it’s a custom home. An office. A hair salon.

“It’s always changing,” she says. “Every day is different.”