

# CS Interiors

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# Green Gables

A Mettawa couple makes contemporary work in the country—horses included.

By Lily Hansen | Photography by Linda Oyama Bryan



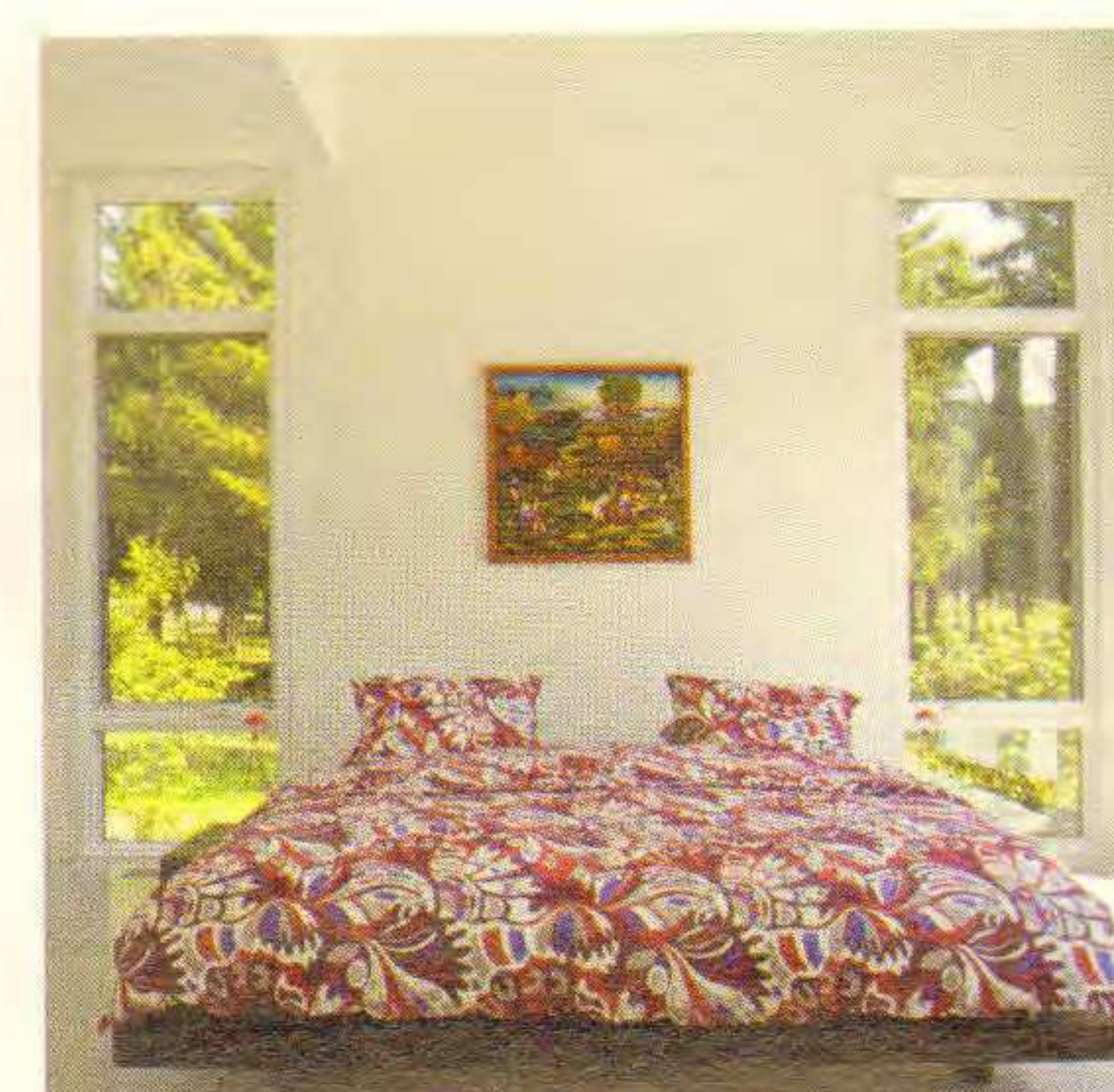
Upon relocating to Chicago three decades ago, Northwestern University professors Thomas and Franziska Lys waxed romantic about the endless possibilities for their then newly inhabited Winnetka home—the same technique they took before breaking ground on their recently constructed gabled getaway in Mettawa, Ill. Working alongside architect Orren Pickell of the eponymous Orren Pickell Designers & Builders firm, the worldly pair did their academia-inspired research before deciding upon the aesthetic of their contemporary country home. “We went to Europe and really liked the French, one-story farmhouses,” explains Thomas. “And we’re not exactly ‘here’s the checkbook, tell us when it’s done’ type of people, so we made sure we were involved throughout the design process.”

Avid horseback riders for most of their years, the duo searched high and low for a rural retreat where they could relish nature and equestrianism

## NATURAL SEDUCTION

Top: An attached lap pool heightens the tranquility of the rural surroundings. Left: “There’s a pasture between the farm and house where I can see our horses grazing,” says Franziska. “It’s very relaxing.”

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...CONTINUED in their own backyard. Dreaming up a mellifluous fusion of traditional architecture and modern design, the team worked closely for more than a year on the 37-acre property—located on a former tree farm. With a juxtaposition of stark blacks and whites, steel and concrete, the team created an atmosphere of tranquility where Thomas and Franziska could take long rides on their four-legged friends before returning to the chaos of the city.

“I used to ride when I was a kid,” Thomas says, “and Franziska and I went on a lot of vacations where we would spend a week going around Barcelona or Chile on horseback. Why ride somebody else’s horses when we could have our own? It’s an escalation of commitment... you start small and suddenly you’re deep in it.”

At the end of the majestic half-mile driveway leading to the home, one immediately appreciates that the architecture arising from the land showcases—rather than competes with—the surrounding natural site. And one of many advantages to the house being poised eight feet above ground level is the lush view of the sprawling yard, minimally obscured by the floor-to-ceiling glass windows and the substantial height of the arched ceilings.

Of the “brass tacks, back-to-basics” feel of the farmhouse design, Pickell explains: “It’s a trend in Europe right now, where if you don’t need it, don’t put it in. When something is just a big white box, you can always throw in trim to make it interesting, but when all you have is a window and planes CONTINUED...

**FARM LIVING** Top left: A luminous, glass railing staircase bathed in natural sunlight highlights the green-house aesthetic of the home. Above right, from top to bottom: A modern palette of gray and white in the living room flaunts, rather than conceals, the home’s emerald envelope; the master bathroom keeps it sleek and simple; bedrooms need little besides window views for added interest.



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...CONTINUED of plaster and drywall, it’s got to be perfect—there’s no room for error.”

Complementing the dramatic cathedral ceiling, glass railing staircases and open risers is a no-frills, muted modern décor consisting mainly of leather-upholstered and custom-designed stainless steel furniture. The functionality-before-frivolity design is evident in the standing seam metal roof, heated concrete floors, and geothermal heating and cooling system. “The mechanics of the house were—frankly—over-the-top,” says Pickell, “and the geothermal system was the biggest I’ve ever done. The plumbing fixtures were very unusual and beautiful in their simplicity.”

Seizing the opportunity to dabble in furniture design, Franziska delivered sketches of sleek, unique furnishings to a local metalworker, Woodstock Ornamental Werks, who then fashioned her stainless

steel desks and dining and coffee tables. “I drew what I thought would fit the house, and our lifestyles, and we worked together as a team. We have pieces that nobody else has,” says Franziska.

After the home was complete, the couple brought in specialists to build the timber frame-style barn for their three horses, which, jokes Thomas, is “a stone’s throw away. Far enough that the smell doesn’t trail over.”

Coining their new home the “Nektosha Hof,” a fusion of German and Potawatomi words meaning “horse yard,” the Lyses agree that greener pastures—perhaps as lush as the ones their horses graze upon—have arrived. “A lot of my colleagues and friends buy vacation homes, but essentially they end up going there three times a year. So what’s the point?” asks Thomas. “How about living ‘on vacation’ year-round and combining the hectic part of life with greenery and relaxation?” ■

**CUSTOM COUNTRY**  
Top: A second-floor perspective of Pickell’s architectural vision.  
Above: A minimalist arrangement of black leather Barcelona lounge chairs around a central fireplace encourages reflection.