

ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

A longtime Libertyville design studio gets a Chicago address—and launches a line of swoon-worthy home accessories.

By Marissa Conrad / Portrait by Maria Ponce / Interiors photography by Werner Straube

Seven years ago, a colleague asked Susan Brunstrum, then an interior designer in Libertyville, Ill., a question: “Put your business aside for a second. What do you want for the next chapter of your life?” Without hesitating, Brunstrum blurted out, “I want to live in Chicago!”—surprising even herself.

Brunstrum’s self-made business, Sweet Peas Design, was thriving. She thought carefully about what a move would look like, both for her—a single mom of two almost-grown kids—and her company. And when the time was right—kids almost out of college, business not just thriving, but ready to expand—she took the leap. In 2015, Brunstrum moved into a Gold Coast condo. And last year, her firm left its Lake County address for one in Chicago’s bustling Old Town neighborhood.

“I’ve always scaled organically, and as needed,” she says. “Quite frankly, I’m proud of it. I’ve never had any investors. When I’m ready to make a change, I just do it. There’s no looking back. What’s next is always forward.”

This quiet determination has served the designer well. Over the last 15 years, Brunstrum has carefully built one of the most respected interior design firms in the Chicago area, championing an integrated team whose recognitions include three ASID Design Excellence Awards, two Chrysalis Awards and several prestigious show houses. Now, as she continues to grow her client roster, Brunstrum is moving forward with a few more big decisions.

First up: a name change. In June, Sweet Peas became Studio Brunstrum, a name that celebrates not only its owner, but all seven employees who report to her studio. “I didn’t want the firm named just after me,” Brunstrum says. “We’re very collaborative.” (On ditching Sweet Peas: It was her college nickname, so she’ll always feel attached, but it was giving the wrong impression. “Our work is not ‘cute,’” she says. “It’s not kids’ bedrooms.”)

Along with the new name, Brunstrum is beginning to take on commercial clients, such as restaurants and boutiques. She’s also launching her own product line, Elements by Studio Brunstrum, featuring a mix of solo designs and collaborations with local craftspeople. A capsule collection of rugs, made from wool, silk and cactus, is a partnership with Julie Dasher Rugs, a textile designer Brunstrum has worked with on one-off custom rugs for nearly a decade. The four rugs, available in a variety of custom colorways, are softly colored and beautifully patterned, inspired by tide pools, catamaran sails and other natural objects from the outdoors.



Chicago interior designer Susan Brunstrum looking through art at Gruen Galleries.

For the Gracious House Show Home, the use of deconstructed wallpaper by Harlequin was inspired by the peeling paint at Camp Abundance in New Orleans. Chairs via Andrew Martin, cocktail table via Bradley Edelman hair-on-hide rug, artwork from Gruen Galleries, glass sculptures by artist Pearl Dick, floor lamp by Barbara Cosgrove





Studio Brunstrum incorporated artwork by Sally Ko and a lacquered yellow vintage Asian administrator's chair into the Lake Forest Show House's master bedroom.

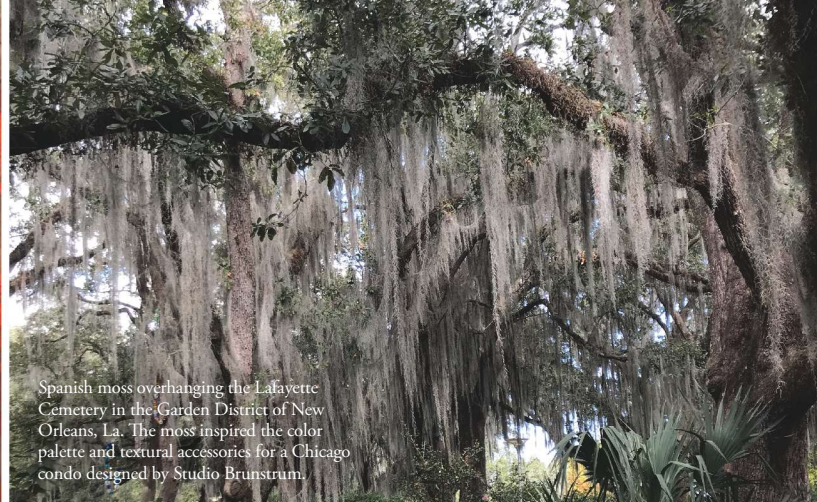


The lounge in a Chicago bachelor's three-story home designed by Studio Brunstrum. Rug via Stark, swivel chairs by Wesley Hall, cocktail table by Vanguard, Chicago skyline artwork by Gail Mancuso, chandelier from Schwung Home, columns painted by Minnihan





A detail shot of *The Octopus's Veil* by artist Michael Armitage. The color palette inspired the colors for Studio Brunstrum's new website and branding.



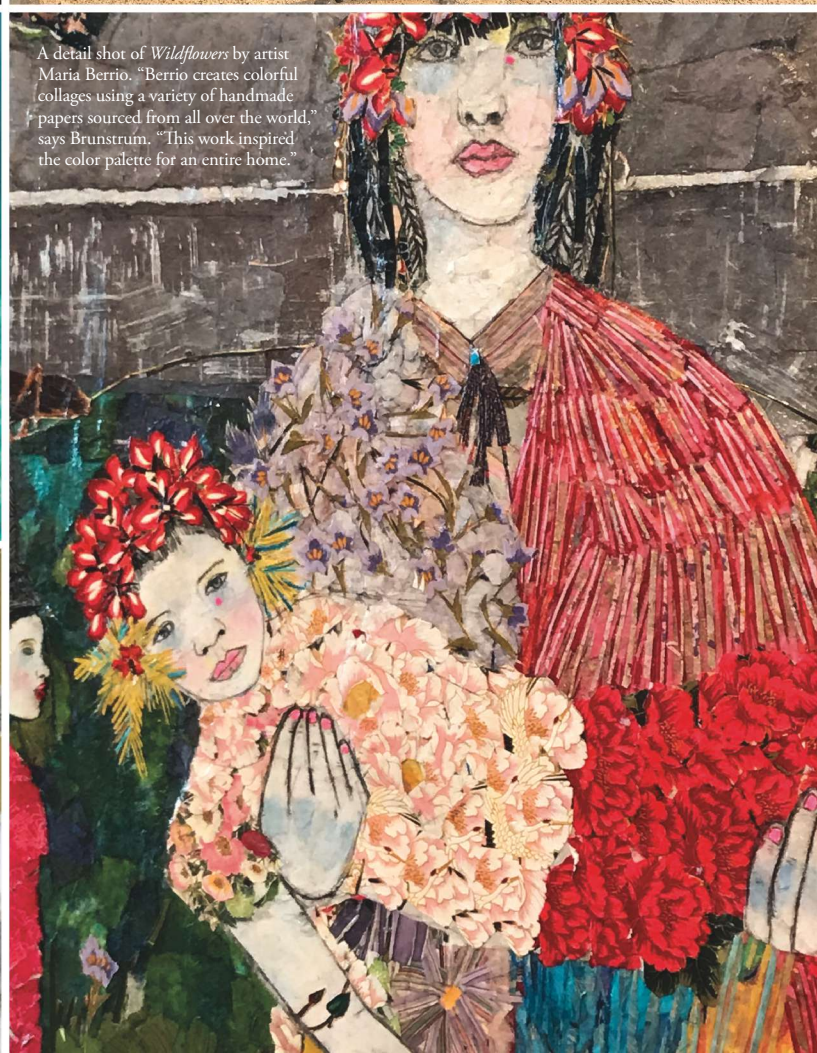
Spanish moss overhanging the Lafayette Cemetery in the Garden District of New Orleans, La. The moss inspired the color palette and textural accessories for a Chicago condo designed by Studio Brunstrum.



A stone pathway at Villa del Sol Hotel in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, provided the inspiration for the flooring in a Chicago bachelor's three-story home designed by Studio Brunstrum.



The Pacific Ocean off of Playa La Ropa in Zihuatanejo, Mexico. The ocean inspired the design for Studio Brunstrum's Eddies and Tidepools rug, part of a collection made in collaboration with Julie Dasher Rugs.



A detail shot of *Wildflowers* by artist Maria Berrio. "Berrio creates colorful collages using a variety of handmade papers sourced from all over the world," says Brunstrum. "This work inspired the color palette for an entire home."




Layers of paint on a wall at Camp Abundance—a residency and special event compound for artists, writers and filmmakers in New Orleans—served as inspiration for Studio Brunstrum's Elements line of rugs.

Brunstrum and I meet for coffee in Old Town. Halfway through our conversation, she interrupts herself. “You have goosebumps!” The breeze at the sidewalk cafe has picked up, and the sun has disappeared. Brunstrum points to another cafe, where the patio tables are bathed in sun, and ushers us there. On the way, she stops to compliment a stranger’s shoes. The baristas at both shops know her by name.

This is all, of course, extremely nice. It’s also something else: perceptive. Brunstrum notices every detail, which is what makes her an exceptional designer. Her daughter recently teased her that she takes almost all of her photos zoomed-in—say, a close-up of sand instead of a shot that shows the whole beach. In Mexico, on a scenic boat ride, she took photos of the water, wildlife and rock formations. These are the textures, patterns and colors that collect in her head, ultimately inspiring both her commissioned work and her Elements pieces.

Lately, she says, some of her clients with busy lives want to unplug. They want her to design a room sans technology, to hang as a family without phones or laptops or tablets. This resonates with Brunstrum, who treasures time with her kids. Their dad, her husband, passed away unexpectedly of colon cancer before she launched her business, and they’ve been a tight-knit family of three since. Her son came with her to Sweden and Denmark—their first solo trip—and, as of June, she has some exciting news about her daughter: They’re coworkers. Kelsey left her job at Abercrombie & Fitch’s corporate office in Columbus, Ohio, to join the Studio Brunstrum crew.

“She wants to be an entrepreneur,” Brunstrum says. “And she said to me, ‘Mom you’ve been in business 15 years. You’re doing something right. I know I can learn from you, and I’d like to learn how a business is run.’”

And the business may be expanding again soon. If Elements does well here, Brunstrum wants to develop it into a national lifestyle/design brand. But first, she needs a new studio. Wait... isn’t *this* her new studio? Eighteen months in, her team is already outgrowing the Old Town space. She’s scouting locations. “I don’t know where we’re going to land, but I know we need more room,” she says. “It’s a wonderful problem to have!” 

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