

TexasMonthly

January 29, 2018

STYLE & DESIGN

An Artist's Loft in Historic Downtown Elgin - UT professor Margo Sawyer turns a grocery store from the early 1900s into a light-filled studio and home, complete with a rooftop garden.

BY LAUREN SMITH FORD / Photography by Wynn Myers

On the first floor of the century-old red brick building on the corner of a historic block in downtown Elgin, English artist Margo Sawyer works in her studio, a 3,000-square foot-white box. From here, she creates plans for large-scale installations of her signature powder-coated steel boxes in vibrant hues that can be seen around the world, from Kosovo to Houston, where her “Synchronicity of Color” at Discovery Green is a popular photo spot. Sawyer, an art professor at the University of Texas for almost thirty years, moved to Elgin in 1998 and in 2002 bought the building, which was once a grocery store in the early 1900s—she affectionately calls it the “Bright & Early” building after the faded hand-painted sign on the side. Made up of three stories and flooded with light, the loft is composed of Sawyer’s ground-floor studio, her office and bedroom on the second floor, and a large, open living, kitchen, and dining space on the top floor, with a small set of steps up to a succulent-filled rooftop garden. The loft has been used as the backdrop for advertisements for Google and Smirnoff and for independent films. The renovation took three years, Sawyer says. “It was all worth it to live in a community like Elgin, a town full of the sweetest people,” she adds. “This place, set away from Austin, has given me the space to truly focus and create.” Take a tour through the celebrated artist’s inspired home and studio.



In the early stages of the three-year building renovation, Sawyer would make monthly trips to Ikea, buying drawers on each trip, as she could afford it. The end result is a minimalist white kitchen with butcher block counters, a focal point of the top floor.



The red, yellow, and blue blocks on the floor are one of Sawyer's pieces, a similar look to what is currently on display in her exhibit at the Holly Johnson Gallery in Dallas, which runs through February 7. Sawyer's work on the wall was made in 2001 with Flatbed Press in Austin.



The living room on the third floor is surrounded by windows on all sides. Sawyer thought about buying the light blue leather sofa from Design Within Reach for seven years before she splurged on it after selling a painting.

"I have gathered things and bought pieces for my home around the world," she says. "I always have a calling toward Asian objects, which are a counter to my minimal, baroque touches. I wouldn't say my house is classic or contemporary modern. Growing up in England, I just like to mix it all up."



Sawyer built her dining table herself with leftover wood from the remodeling of the building, which entailed constructing a new shell inside the century-old walls.



Inspired by the English gardens of her childhood, Sawyer maintains not only her roof garden, but one in the alley behind her home as well as others in front of two buildings she owns down the street. "I want to be a change agent and bring beautification wherever I can," she says.

"I spend most evenings on the roof garden, just reading and reflecting," Sawyer says.

Stairs set against exposed stucco walls lead down to the other levels, which are used for Sawyer's bedroom and office and then down to her studio on the ground floor.



When Sawyer bought the building in 2002 after getting a loan from a local bank, she emailed friends about how she was hosting her version of a "barn raising," and more than 20 people came to help her hang sheetrock and paint her bedroom so she could move in.



Metal fabricators and specialty powder coaters around the Elgin area help make the blocks used in Sawyer's work. Pictured is a commission for the soon-to-open Lancaster Hotel in Houston.



Sawyer met artist Donald Judd as an MFA student at Yale, and the two stayed in touch until his death. "His work has always been an inspiration, but it's also that he took a risk and moved to a small town," she says.



Collections from her travels around the world hang on the wall in the studio. Sawyer spent a year in India and then in Japan on a Fulbright Scholarship, and also lived in Rome for a year.



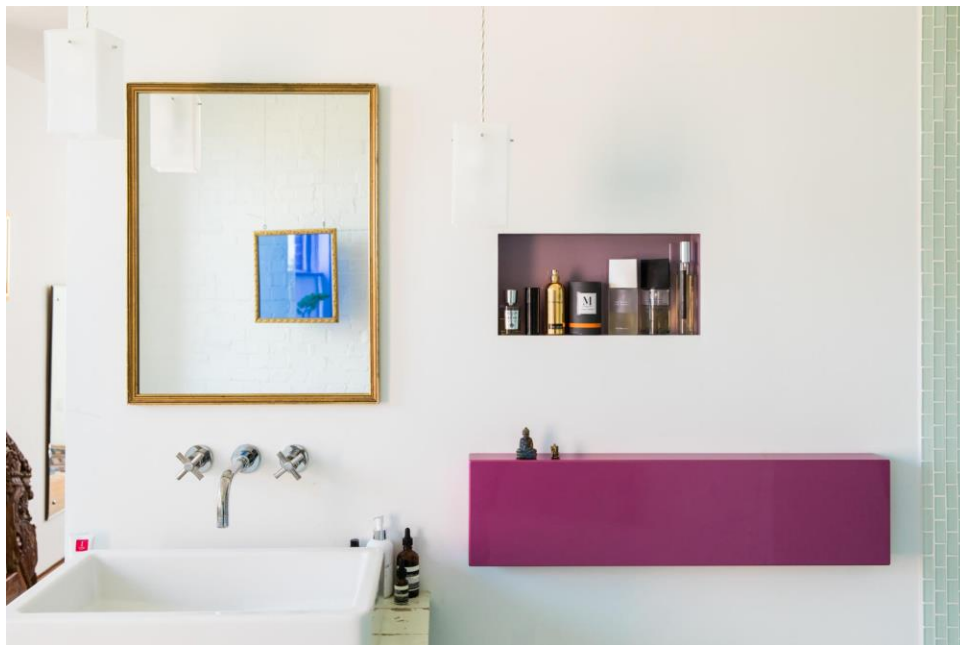
Sawyer often takes a break from work to get lunch at the nearby Thai food trailer, Katie's. "When I am driving here, I mentally decompress, and then when I am driving into Austin, getting ready for the day, I take these back, winding roads and see cows, goats, horses. It's just lovely," she says.



Sawyer's office on the second floor overlooks her studio on the ground floor. One of the accolades on display is the recognition she received for getting the Texas Sculptor of the Year award from the Texas Senate.



The soothing palette of white with pops of color is carried through into Sawyer's master bathroom.



The rectangular cutout in the wall of Sawyer's bathroom is a creative way to store her apothecary goods.



The top floor of the building was once used as a hotel and became a house of ill repute WWII, Sawyer says. "I remember when the mayor of Elgin at the time came by for a tour to see how my renovations went," she remembers. "As he looked around, he said, 'Many young souls were created in this space.' Another time, a friend asked if I ever felt the presence of ghosts in the house. I said to her, 'No one died here...they just had fun!'"