



Mark Matson photos FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Kimberly Renner says her years of experience and her personal vision lead the way as she begins a restoration project, but that the house has a say as well.

## Glossy DOSSIER

# The house whisperer

Kimberly Renner brings neglected homes back to life

By Becca Hensley

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Some people talk to animals. Kimberly Renner talks to houses — old houses, especially those in charming, historic neighborhoods. A one-stop-shop sort of home restorer, a jack of all trades, Renner revitalizes cast-aside older homes and brings them back to life.

Almost impossible to categorize, she is more than any one label: She is visionary, general contractor, space-planner, artist and interior decorator. She finds distressed houses and lovingly nurses them back to life. Renner starts at the beginning and stays with her charge all the way to the design phase. She knows how to invest in real estate, read — and redo — blueprints, dabble in plumbing and sockets, juxtapose antiques with contemporary furnishings and determine which paint plays off which fabric in a room.

Each house she undertakes becomes an installation art project that occupies her thoughts 24/7 until the moment she walks out the door and the new owner moves in. And, because she lives in the neighborhood where she works, Renner's never really off duty. "I want and expect to have long-term relationships with my clients," she says.

**Glossy: Tell us about the Renner Project.**

**Kimberly Renner:** We are a design-intensive restoration company that specializes in older properties. Located in Aldridge Place in Central Austin, we tend to prioritize older homes in the neighborhood, revitalizing them from start to finish.



Renner and Cole Thompson, project manager, work on a North University home together.

**KIMBERLY RENNER**

The Renner Project  
[Therennerproject.com](http://Therennerproject.com)

**Tell us about your background.**

One of my friends calls me a "bottom feeder." But that's just because I have a willingness to take on the houses that have suffered the most neglect. To me, they are ripe for restoration. I have a bachelor of arts and come from a family of artists and designers — this gives me my "eye" — but I am also an operations-based business person who has been restoring houses since 1994.

**What attracts you to older homes?**

To me, they have more soul. But, I also love the fabric of old neighborhoods, the resonating textures of all that's happened

Continued on page 18

'I pore over blue prints until the space planning issues are resolved. At a gut level, I know when it's right.'

**Kimberly Renner, at right with project manager Cole Thompson**



# The house whisperer

Continued from page 17

there. They deserve to be preserved and saved. We change the houses up a bit but work to maintain their original integrity.

**How do you begin a project? How do you know what to do?**

Initially, it's an intuitive step. I spend hours in the house just visualizing until the design solutions start clicking. Then I pore over blueprints until the space-planning issues are resolved. At a gut level I know when it's right. But I've been in the business a long time, in the trenches at every step, so knowing what works and what doesn't, understanding the construction and design process — that's my job. The house has a say, as well — as does the client.

**You salvage what others perceive as junk. Optimism and vision pervade your work. How do you do this?**

The past 16 years have taught me to see beyond a house's heinous condition. We tease out the positive attributes, look for their fine bones. I am also fortunate to work with my brother and a talented team of great folks.

**On the interior and general design front, you urge clients to mix it up.**

**You're known for your ability to combine styles, to meld the contemporary with antiques. Not only do you envision the reconstruction and lead the team, you do the interiors.**

Yes, diverse materials and unexpected things are more interesting to me. I love objects with a story. Helping homeowners bring their personality into the home is key to it looking like them rather than their designer. I prioritized a recent client's collection of elephants (hers) and record albums (his) that neither had previously planned to display.

**You have a talent for rummaging. Where is your favorite place to forage?**

I am very fond of estate sales, especially the Warren Oden ones. Those gals have sold me some of my most prized possessions. Also the City-Wide Garage Sale.

**Tell us about a current project.**

It is a choice opportunity! I am currently restoring the former home of Dr. Charles Hackett, founder of the University of Texas Institute of Latin-American Studies. He built it in 1923. It is a beautiful example of Prairie Style architecture and was in completely original condition when we found it.



Mark Matson photos FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Kimberly Renner, with Thompson, says she prefers the character and history of old homes.