

AT HOME WITH NANCY HILLER

'Hoosier Cabinet' author is back with a look at the loves of women's lives: Their homes

By Donna Cronk, her editor

She's as adept with a pen as she is with a handplane. Nancy Hiller was introduced to Henry County residents on a personal level when she researched one of our prized products from the past: The Hoosier Cabinet. The Bloomington cabinetmaker, designer and author spent time here introducing us to the finished 2009 book, "The Hoosier Cabinet in Kitchen History."

Hiller, who founded and runs NR Hiller Design, Inc., is back with a strikingly illustrated book, "A Home of Her Own," published this month by Indiana University Press. Photos are by Kendall Reeves.

The book looks at houses in varied styles owned and loved by women who also fit an assortment of descriptions. The book is more than a brick-and-mortar description of these unique, comfortable and comforting homes or of decorating advice or ideas on paint color. It is an emotional journey, delving into women's unique relationship with the places they call home.

Hiller agreed to a question-and-answer interview.

Your work is connected to houses from working on, designing for and writing about them. How were you first interested on a deeper level with the concept of house and home?

My interest stems from my experience of living alone during my 30s. It was an

emotionally and financially challenging time. I lived with my two dogs in a '20s bungalow, which I adored. But paying the mortgage was a struggle. I was lonely, and I was trying to figure out what to do with my life, beyond my everyday work to pay the bills. I spent most evenings working on the house or garden, often into the night. The work was completely absorbing and enjoyable. In fact, I often found myself silently humming "Heaven...I'm in heaven..." from the 1930s song "Cheek to Cheek," while I weeded or stripped wallpaper.

Beyond the pleasure of the work itself, I saw how my own work was transforming my home into a lovely place with a reality and character of its own, beyond my active investment. That was hugely satisfying in a personally affirming way.

Obviously, you feel that home is a particular comfort, not just shelter, to many women, especially those who are in many ways largely on their own (either financially, widowed or without partners.) Does a well-loved home offer a stability to many women that other relationships and the world at large do not?

The stability a home can offer comes at least in part from its standing as property—at least, in cases where a woman owns her home, as distinct from renting—though I want to stress that my understanding of property

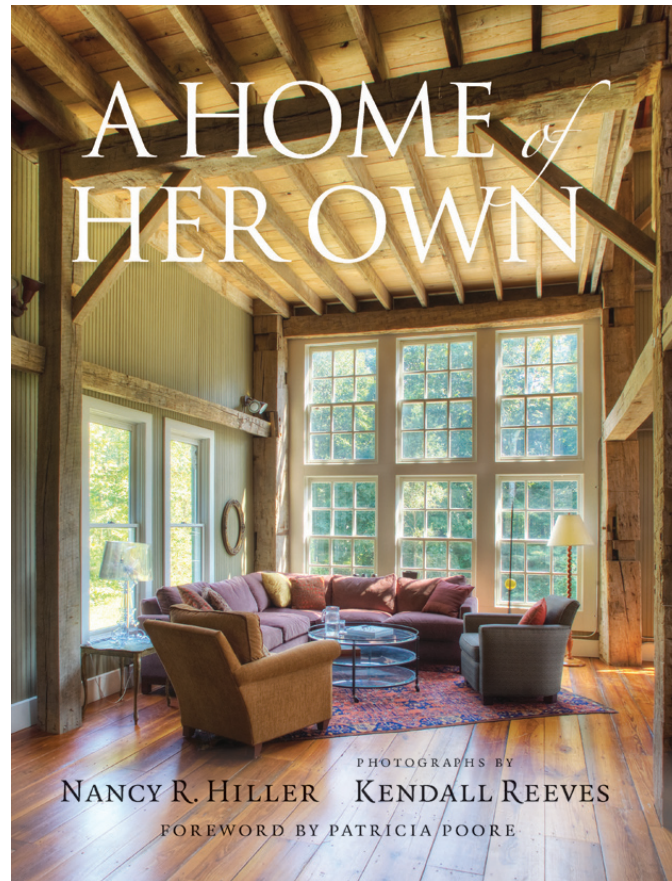
goes beyond the real estate market sense of "alienable commodity." (I elaborate this point in the chapter about Mary Agnes Conard, who lived in a trailer.)

Home ownership can allow us a degree of autonomy, which often translates in practice to a kind of stability. Beyond this, some of the women profiled in my book also describe a stability stemming from a sense of belonging to the history of a particular place, whether that place belonged to members of their own, or someone else's, family.

At the same time, it's important to note that "stability" doesn't necessarily mean "ease." My years in my bungalow were more like steering a ship in heavy seas than anything most people would describe as "stable." The stability that came from my home was existential, rather than an objective description of my state. I was working very hard to keep things together, as many of us do. But the effort invested in the keeping-together constituted its own kind of stability, as it showed me I was capable of far more than I had previously imagined.

What makes a house a home physically to a given woman varies according to taste and affordability. What makes a house a home to you?

Investment of myself in the place, whether that means making and tending a garden,



painting rooms, or redoing the kitchen.

For me, the other critical element to making a house a home is surrounding myself with familiar objects — furniture I've made, old stuff bought at yard sales and junk shops, pictures and pottery given to me by family and friends. "Family" and "familiar" are variants of the same basic Latin word — an observation that offers insight into how certain objects we've lived with for years can feel like companions.

I'm not sure a house can truly be a home for me without a dog.

The women and their homes featured in your book vary wildly from an antique farmhouse to a mid-century ranch and even a trailer. Yet all are loved by their owners. Is there a common thread?

They are all deeply attached to their homes and aware that some central features of their personal development are tied to this relationship with their home.

What is YOUR ideal home? Physically and/or emotionally?

This is a hard question to answer, because I am keenly aware of how hard I try to be happy in whichever place I'm living at a given moment. But lurking behind the layers of dutiful "should's" is a house I sometimes glimpse in dreams. It's in New England—Upstate New York or Western Massachusetts, which have relatively similar climate and topography to the English "standard" of my youth. It's an old house, preferably from the nineteenth century, and small, with stone walls in the garden. Those are the key elements.

Even though old houses hold a magic for me that no new place can match, I have been intrigued by how attached I've become to the house I had built in 2004. I did a lot of the work myself—laying and finishing the hickory floors, incorporating salvaged doors, plumbing, and light fixtures, and building all the cabinets and bookcases. It was this experience that convinced me that the key element in my ability to feel at home in a house is the investment of my own physical labor in realizing my vision for a place.

The book states that the average single-family home was 1,065 square feet in 1950 and 2,438 in 2009. With the economy changing, the emphasis on sustainability and more common sense perhaps paid by future homeowners, do you think the figure will reverse? Could a smaller home actually make a family draw closer?

Mere proximity does not necessarily lead to interpersonal closeness.




Nancy Hiller at work, left, and above, a Chicago home from the book. All photos by Kendall Reeves.

In fact, it can have the opposite effect. (No surprise here!) The small houses of earlier times went hand-in-hand with a different domestic culture — one in which family members were brought up learning interpersonal skills that have largely

been lost in our day — patience, self sacrifice, tolerance, sharing. Merely pushing people together without inculcating those skills can be disastrous. But we need to relearn them, especially considering how many families are now living together in multi-generational households due to economic necessity.

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