



STAFF PHOTOS/CAROL LOLLIS
Wallpaper can elevate a mundane space into a focal point, explain Hannah Ray and Sally Staub, right, at Workroom Design, their interior design showroom in Florence. Above, below and bottom right, a few of their wallpaper samples.



This is not your mother's WALLPAPER



STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS

A new business in Florence is helping people design happy homes — with color, pattern and ridiculously great wallpaper

By VALERIE REISS
For the Gazette

If you're looking for a dose of happy, just open the door to Workroom Design Studio, a new interior design studio in Florence. If the wallpaper with monkeys holding fuchsia pomegranates doesn't make you smile, then step into the gallery with cherry red walls and explosively colorful art — and if you still haven't felt a gentle lift of spirits (are you even awake?!), then amble over to the long table with a giant, 42-inch-wide, red pendant work light above it. That should do it! And that's the idea — the studio's owners, Sally Staub and Hannah Ray, are preachers and practitioners of creating joyful spaces. "If people

walk in and say, 'Oh, this feels good, this is a happy space,' then it's a happy thing," said Staub.

Joining design dreams

For nearly a decade both women chugged along with their own businesses — Staub ran her interior design company, Sally Staub Design, from her home, and Ray ran Tack Upholstery Studio, often giving interior design advice with her furniture.

But they itched to do more — yet had no employees or extra time. "We were both working our tails off on our own," said Staub, "and we both had larger visions of what we wanted to be doing." A mutual friend had introduced them seven years before and they had a friendly relationship, sending each other clients. Then one day last summer they started talking more, and over some margaritas at Homestead in Northampton, they had a "what if



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Wayward gardening

'I call it wayward gardening, but I'm sure there are plenty of other names for it. Undisciplined, maybe, or squirrel-brained.'

By MICKEY RATHBUN
For the Gazette

A topic that garden writers don't seem to spend much ink on is one that's near and dear to my heart. I call it wayward gardening, but I'm sure there are plenty of other names for it. Undisciplined, maybe, or squirrel-brained. Wayward gardening is what happens when I go out to the garden to tackle a particular task, weeding the daylilies, say, or changing the water in the hummingbird feeders. Before I know it, I'm doing something completely different, most likely something I didn't even think needed to be done.

This morning I went out to weed the perennial bed out behind the



AUGUSTINE CHANG—Getty Images/Stockphoto

house. It has become a jungle in the past few weeks, thanks to all the rain we've had. In an ideal world, I'd get rid of weeds when they're still small and haven't yet staked out large

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Julie and David Starr of Florence worked with Staub and Ray to create a happy interior — including the pineapple print above.



A yellow peacock-print paper from Workroom Design Studio in Florence transformed Susan Intile's pantry at her home in Northampton.



Susan Intile and her husband, Angelo, selected this dragonfly print for their bathroom.



A sample at Workroom Design in Florence.

New business helps people design happy homes

FROM C1

we had a design studio?" conversation. "Our aesthetics were lined up, our energy too," said Staub. "It was like falling in love — OK, let's do this!" And, added Ray, "The impressive part was we did it!"

They started looking for a space. They also began merging companies. "We asked each other, 'How do you spend your days?' We made lists: 'When you meet a client what do you do?'" said Ray. They also got invaluable help from a local management consultant, Karen Carswell, who said that these days a business plan was less important than a website, which they got in the works. "When you're working on that one paragraph about who you are it's really informative," said Ray.

Carswell also told them communication was key. "Call each other every single day," Staub recalls hearing. "Ask: What are your stumbling blocks? Tell each other."

At first, all this communication was awkward, but: "Now you should see how many times a day we talk," said Ray. "Our husbands keep asking if we're leaving them."

Finally, they found a dreamy space in Florence, entering into an agreement with the landlord. For nine weeks they stockpiled stuff in Staub's garage: furniture, wallpaper, and art, collaborating on their first big project together—the showroom that would feature Ray's custom upholstery, the art of local creators, and one of their shared loves: incredible wallpaper. "Wallpaper elevates walls into visually charged places," said Staub. They had palm paper planned for their

space. Then, just before the 2018 holiday season, the landlord bailed, deciding a design shop wasn't for him. Staub and Ray were devastated. "It was a financial blow and a time blow," said Staub.

"We were so keyed up and working so hard," said Ray. They scrambled to return and cancel all the items they could.

But the loss ended up revealing that they could rely on each other in rougher times: "It was great because we held each other up," said Staub. "When one of us was feeling down emotionally, the other one would rise up."

A launch pad for interior joy

Then, on January 1st, 2019, a painter friend alerted them to a space in his studio's building — a full floor across the parking lot from Café Evolution. They started from scratch — scrapping every design idea from the previous space — and got to work, adding drywall, fixing brick walls, re-doing the floors, painting the walls. And of course, they added carefully selected wallpaper — the monkey and more. The studio opened in April. "What's nice about having the studio is that people can see it in place," said Staub. "If a client had just seen a sample of the monkeys, they might be like, 'What is this and why would you put it on a wall?' But here they can see impact." They can also see (and buy) Ray's upholstered furniture, flip through sample books of fabric and wallpaper, and peruse and purchase art in their Red Light Gallery.

Now they have one employee who helps with the upholstery, and they meet with clients under the giant red light fixture — which

matches their company logo. A demi-wall on casters has a presentation board on one side and blue, white-painted wallpaper on the other — meant to be spun around for a dramatic mood board reveal for clients. They're working with homeowners locally, in Boston and as far as Washington D.C. using FaceTime to assess far-away spaces. When working with clients, they try to strike a balance between respecting their comfort zones and nudging them into new, more colorful pastures. "I like to push people a little bit, but be respectful. If someone is all neutral and they want to stay all neutral, OK, we'll do that, of course," Staub said. "But sometimes we'll push a little bit. And they'll push back a little bit. And they'll come back and say — it's OK to push me."

Offering a design education

They presented one such client with the idea of adding wallpaper with a pattern of silkscreened clouds to a vaulted stairwell. "Our pitch was: Look, here's a rather unnoticed, mundane space that you can elevate to a beautiful focal point," Staub said. But the client said no. "We don't often pout over things," said Ray, "but on that one, we were pouting." Yet a few days later, the client told them, "I can't get the clouds out of my head," said Ray. The client was so gone, she asked if they could extend the paper to the ceiling. "That's exciting for us when we see the happiness," said Staub.

The designers also feel that they're educators — a bridge between the sometimes obscure world of design and people who don't spend their time flipping

through wallpaper samples for fun. "A lot of clients will come back and say, 'Now that we've talked about the lights,

"It's good for your emotional well-being to be happy in your surroundings. There's lots of research on that," Staub said. "We think that color and pattern and contrasting elements create energy, happiness, and all those things are important for our emotional existence."

I went down this road and suddenly see all these beautiful lamps that have those arcs that you showed me that I'd never noticed," said Ray. "Our job is to introduce concepts." They do this in every decor style — from modern to French Country and everything in between.

They design rooms or whole houses or offices. And what they aim to offer is the same dose of happiness that's in their studio. "It's good for your emotional well-being to be happy in your surroundings. There's lots of research on that," Staub said. "We think that color and pattern and contrasting elements create energy, happiness, and all those things are important for our emotional existence."

The new wallpaper

Tips for bringing it home

Supposedly, Oscar Wilde once said of his Paris hotel room, "This wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. Either it goes or I do." He died there. Somewhere along the way from its roots in China to its heyday in Western Europe to us across the pond, wallpaper got a reputation as being the epitome of tacky. Think flocked neon paisleys, unsettling toiles, and those rooster-themed kitchen borders. But about a decade ago, wallpaper — the prettier, fresher, modern versions — started appearing in a few design-y homes. And now, a dazzling array of options are available (in fact one company, Spoonflower, will print any pattern you think up). We might just be at peak wallpaper. But it can be scary to commit. "People are nervous to do wallpaper, they say, 'What if I get tired of it?'" said Sally Staub, co-owner of the Florence-based Workroom Design Studio. "But there are

a lot of really great subtle options." She and her business partner Hannah Ray help you navigate the papers that make a house a stylish, personalized home.

Know thyself, know thy paper

Ask yourself: What's my style? Traditional or modern? Bold or subtle? "You should select a pattern that reflects your style," suggested Staub and Ray. Also, know thy room. "Pick large-scale patterns for a room to help visually widen the space," suggested Workroom. Small spaces like a powder room can become like little jewel boxes when fully papered.

Dive into the options

Always see the paper in person, rather than relying on online samples — studios like Workroom have binders stuffed with glorious samples you can flip through. Most sites will offer an "order sam-

ple" option; sometimes they're returnable. (If not, they're good for crafting!) A few companies to start with: Hygge & West, Cole & Sons, Osborne & Little, Flavor Paper, and Chasing Papers. With wallpaper so ubiquitous now you can even find great papers at West Elm, Wayfair, and CB2. Some current faves of the Workroom crew are the fishy Fornasetti Acquario by Cole & Son; grasscloth over a metallic ground paper to create depth and contrast; and some of the later line drawings and saturated colors.

Budgeting paper

Staub and Ray point out that while wallpaper is a bigger investment up front than paint, it lasts much longer — about 10-15 years. And with some of the less-expensive, newer peel-and-stick papers (Chasing Papers has a good variety) you can install it yourself — and remove it if you change your mind or are



An array of wallpaper samples at Workroom Design, Hannah Ray and Sally Staub's interior design showroom in Florence.

a renter. If you're handy, you can also apply pasted wallpaper yourself — or budget to hire a pro. Workroom loves Mike Jennings, a local expert who has been hanging papers since long before the latest

resurgence.

Where to paper?

You can do a full room for maximum effect — or give a little taste of wow with a single accent wall, the back of a book-

shelf, or a half-wall, papering above a chair rail. You can even go up. "Wallpaper a ceiling to pull your eye to one of the most neglected places in a room," said Staub.

—Valerie Reiss