



Photo by Claudia Casbarian

The Cottages at Matt Camron is one of the city's newest creative communities.

# Thriving cottage industry

Businessman gives tiny homes second life as collection of shops

By Diane Cowen  
STAFF WRITER

Houston design fans have a new place to shop in the city's newest creative community, The Cottages at Matt Camron.

Located on Westheimer between Bammel and Sackett, the grouping of late-19th-century and early-20th-century cottages fill out a city block that also includes Giacomo's restaurant, the Alchemia and Pomp and Circumstance boutiques and the longtime Matt Camron Rugs & Tapestries showroom. Businesses setting up shop in the restored structures – homes adapted into businesses – include interior designers, home-goods specialty stores and a pilates/yoga studio.

Jennifer Barron Interiors and Restored Motion Pilates and Yoga were the first tenants, and in the two years that followed, they were joined by Tokerud & Co. and Jackson Warren Interiors. Home goods shops that also feature interior design firms include Roseanette Navarro



Matt Esfahani and daughter Sarah Tringhese are the driving forces behind the project.

Interiors, Suzanne Duin's Maison Maison, Renea Abbott's Shabby Slips (a second location for her) and Paloma & Co. (which also houses Paloma Contreras Design). There's also a social-media/marketing firm operating here, Swiggard Creative.

If you're shopping there, Maison Maison has the cutest restroom in the area, and while you're there, you can check out her luscious decorative pillows, custom lamp shades and a variety of scarves, handbags, jewelry and other goods. Shabby Slips is filled with vintage and antique home furnishings, many of which have been reupholstered in luxurious fabrics, and Roseanette Navarro's shop has a mix of antiques and new items, from inexpensive accessories to one-of-a-kind furniture and lighting. Contreras and Paloma & Co. shop co-founder Devon Liedtke opened their shop earlier this year with a range of things, from cocktail napkins and candles that make great hostess gifts to original art and antiques for your home.

They're the kind of small cottages that builders often tear down to make way for townhomes or to accumulate land for bigger houses, but back in the 1980s, businessman Charlie Thomas

Cottages continues on D3



DESIGN

## Finding balance and joy at home

Adding elements of feng shui creates positive energy

By Diane Cowen  
STAFF WRITER

If the idea of feng shui scares you, take this Eastern philosophy of home organization down to its most basic level: It's merely a study of energy and how it affects people.

Houston interior designer Sophia Vassiliou learned about

feng shui in design school years ago and has practiced it on a small scale, working fundamental elements into clients' projects in a way that isn't too scary. Rarely does anyone ask for her to "feng shui" their home, but they do want more energy, light, balance and function – all essential elements of this ancient practice.

"Its main goal is about creating good, healthy energy," she said. "It's about opening space to discover joy, balance and beauty."

Vassiliou spoke about the subject recently at a Houston Chronicle-Houston Design Center Access Design event. Here are seven tips from her talk:

1. Addressing clutter is a popular topic these days, and it's an important one for Vassiliou, too. To improve the energy of your home or office, you may need to first get rid of clutter – because sometimes it's hard to see the things that bring you joy when they're covered with so much other stuff. Vassiliou

Design continues on D3



Courtesy of Sophia Designs

Designer Sophia Vassiliou used white paint and added mirrors to one wall to help reflect light and brighten up the room.

**SHOPPING:** Take care when learning to navigate the online marketplace. **PAGE D2**

**DEAR ABBY:** Memories of the good times haunt woman after divorce. **PAGE D5**

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STAR



Photos by Claudia Casbarian

Architect Patton Brooks developed the master plan for the cottage community — from landscaping to making sure there was adequate parking for all the shops.

**COTTAGES**

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collected them and a handful of others — 15 in all — from various sites around the city and gathered them one block away from their current location.

For years, various businesses operated from that location, known as the Gardens of Bammel Lane. When that block was sold to Giorgio Borlenghi, who planned to build a 26-story luxury residential tower, Matt Esfahani, founder of Matt Cameron Rugs & Tapestries, knew the charming little cottages would likely be lost.

Esfahani bought seven of them from Borlenghi — who since has shelved his plan for the high-rise — and worked with architect Patton Brooks to create a new life for them.

It was Brooks' task to assess the space left on Esfahani's block — after all, his rug store, the restaurant and two boutiques were already there — and determine how many of the cottages could fit there and which buildings would best survive a move. One is the first home built in West University Place in 1927 and another, built



Maison Maison offers a variety of luxury home goods.

in the early 1930s, was a floral business in EaDo. The site where Paloma & Co. operates previously was a hair salon.

"Matt and I worked together to come up with the seven best, and I came up with a master plan to fit as many of the old houses

on his block as possible," said Brooks, who worked in Houston for 50 years before heading to Santa Barbara, Calif., where he

lives now. "Having lived in Houston all those years, I appreciated the fact that they were the old-style good-quality houses."

Brooks created a master plan, including landscaping, sidewalks and paths so that the people who work or visit there can move around freely. Brooks, Esfahani and Esfahani's daughter, 35-year-old Sarah Tringhese, who manages the property, wanted it to be a destination, where people could visit designers or shop and then stop at Giacomo's for something to eat or drink.

There's a grassy area and small gazebo, the perfect spot for design events when the weather cooperates. Already they've had a book signing at Maison Maison, and Tringhese said there surely will be more events coming.

"We really wanted a sense of community," Tringhese said. "You spend so much of your day at work, you want it to be an enjoyable experience, too. There are paths everywhere, so we wanted people to walk it and use it."

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**DESIGN**

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liou said that a key element of interior design is editing, and that's what you can call sorting through what you keep and what you get rid of.

**2.** Think about the flow — or "chi" — of your home. Feng shui followers talk about "blockages," and in a home, they can be something as simple as narrow doorways or spaces that don't have enough entry points. You might have furniture blocking walkways, too, so consider foot traffic in your home and rearrange things to make it easier to navigate. Can you get from one room to another easily and without hindrance? If not, you might need to add or widen doorways.

**3.** Vassiliou said that feng shui, in some ways, is the art of placement. Placing the right balance of colors, materials and furnishings in a room yields function, beauty and joy. Even negative space — literally, empty spaces — are part of the equation.

**4.** The colors you use matter and correspond to feng shui's five elements — wood, fire, earth, metal and water. Wood elements are browns, greens and wood tones, where fire captures passion, energy and warmth in reds, oranges



Courtesy of Sophia Designs

What once was a dark room benefited from a lighter paint color and the addition of white linen shades.

and yellows. Earth colors are golden or sandy and include animal print and natural stone. Metals include stainless steel and gray-blue-white tones and bring the energy of calm, clean precision. White, gray and black are "water" colors, and the use of mirrors and glass are helpful.

**5.** Light is important for good feng shui. Sometimes a room just feels dark and depressing, so you need to do what you can to bring in more natural light. If windows aren't huge and can't be replaced, consider window treatments that let in more light instead of

darkening a room. For example, you can replace heavy, layered window treatments with more minimalist Roman shades. Mirrors are another great design tool because they reflect light and are both decorative and functional.

**6.** Ceilings can help a room feel lighter and more open. If you can, create a vaulted ceiling by removing a drop ceiling and let the roofline deter-

mine a room's height. No matter how big the room is, that will always make it feel bigger.

**7.** Remember, feng shui isn't just about following a fixed set of rules. Sometimes it's simply about adapting your home to be more functional. Let common sense be your guide as you find balance and joy where you live.

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