

HOME

Four-story townhome is inviting, heady stuff

Interior designer downsizes but keeps luxurious flair in welcoming space with a view

By Diane Cowen
STAFF WRITER

Steve Clifton stretches out on a big outdoor sofa and savors the breeze on the fourth-floor balcony of his new townhome in Somerset Green.

He looks out over a man-made canal and fountain and marvels at how the constant light wind prompted him to remove the ceiling fans out here.

The hyper-social businessman and interior designer makes friends everywhere he goes, but at this townhome he designed himself and moved into last November, he said neighbors are constantly walking the well-landscaped sidewalks.

"It feels like a European village," said Clifton, who owns Scene One Interiors, a trade-only showroom and design studio at the Houston Design Center. "I bought early because I can't not be on a canal."

When Clifton started his search for a home a little more than two years ago, he searched high-rises and mid-rises, looking for a lock-and-leave opportunity where he wouldn't have to take care of a yard or pool or much of the other maintenance that went with the 6,800-square-foot home he'd been living in in Bellaire.

The native Houstonian ended up in a 4,300-square-foot, four-story townhome, but out on this balcony, it feels a lot like a mid-rise.

After college years ago, Clifton bought his first home, and he still is sentimental about it.

"It was my first experience buying a home, and it was 1,600 lovely square feet," said Clifton, now 58. "It was absolutely the best neighborhood I ever lived in. We all outgrew our homes, but no one wanted to leave. We had block parties all of the time, and we have all moved away, but every year we still get together somewhere."

From that charming first home, Clifton moved to St. George Place in the Galleria area, a home that doubled in

value in three years. Then came Bellaire and a 4,500-square-foot spec home under construction where he lived for six years. He designed his dream home after that, a 6,800-square-foot Tuscan-style abode with everything he ever imagined he wanted.

After 11 years of taking care of it all, he was ready for less work.

He called his best friends, Alan York and Frank Lozano, and asked them to look at potential homes with him. He looked in three mid- or high-rises that all fell through, then looked at a simpler patio home. Then came Somerset Green, which is still being developed, and the men were looking at an empty lot as they surveyed the pretty canals, bubbling fountains and big views of downtown as well as the Galleria area.

"My friend said, 'Steve Clifton, you're the biggest snob I know. You're not going to give up your big house in Bellaire

and move to that little patio home. You'll never have anyone over because you'll feel like everyone will think you've lost all your money,'" Clifton said, laughing hysterically at his own story.

So when he was in the sales office signing a contract, his friends asked about the lot next door. They bought it, built a townhome of their own, and now the men — who lived very close to one

another in Bellaire — are neighbors again in this 46-acre gated, master-planned community developed by Hines.

It's not unusual for a casual invitation to dinner to end up being a party for 20, and on any weekend that Clifton is home, any number of friends or family members could be visiting.

Clifton has a summer home in Door County, Wis., and when he took York and Lozano to see it, the two men bought their own place there.

"Last weekend I went to Tennessee where I bought property outside of Gatlinburg, and I wanted them to see it," Clifton said. "I said, 'What do y'all think?' and they said, 'Yeah, let's make it bigger.' We're building a four-bedroom, four-bathroom home now."

The Somerset Green townhome of Steve Clifton, who owns Scene One Interiors, has the feel of a mid-rise. It is surrounded by pretty canals, bubbling fountains and big views of downtown and the Galleria area. His best friends from his Bellaire days liked the area so much, they bought the lot next door.



A 17-foot custom Swarovsky crystal chandelier by Elegant Lighting hangs from the fourth floor.

A designing mind

Clifton grew up on the north side of Houston and went to Sam Houston High School, then enrolled in the architecture school at the University of Houston. He thought he loved it, but a professor pointed out that though he loved the design side, he didn't like the more technical engineering side of it.

So in his junior year, he

changed his major to interior design and never looked back. That time spent studying architecture gave him an appreciation for the building process, and now he often works on whole-home construction design with architects and builders.

Just out of college he worked for a design firm for a year or so and knew he needed to go out on his own. So he created Scene

One Interiors in the guest bedroom of his Cypress home and eventually moved into the Houston Design Center, where he operates a 6,000-square-foot showroom and maintains a design staff of seven who work with outside clients and some showroom customers who walk in without designers.

Last year, Clifton did a massive renovation of his showroom



The grand piano, spiral staircase and antique settee make a dramatic entrance in Clifton's Somerset Green home.



In one corner of the living room is Clifton's "Dumb-Dumb" sculpture.



Photos by Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

to accommodate the Christopher Guy furniture collection he has carried for a few years. Now, two-thirds of his showroom space is devoted to the glamorous furniture collection, with much more in his 30,000-square-foot warehouse.

Clifton first opened his store in the 1980s thinking he would be a pioneer with contemporary and modern furnishings in Hous-



ture.



Steve Clifton entertains a lot, and his kitchen gets plenty of use on weekends.

ton. He was wrong – traditional style was king, and it took 30 years for that to change. Even his own homes were full of traditional furniture with pops of contemporary here and there.

“Seven or eight years ago they said contemporary was in style, and I said, ‘I’m not doing it; Houston’s not going to do it.’ But Houston did get on board,” Clifton said of the growing affection for contemporary décor. “Traditional will never be dead in Houston, but contemporary is getting more popular.”

Perfect for entertaining

On the third floor of Clifton’s townhome, his master bedroom suite takes over. He has a grand bedroom with a luxurious chaise near a coffee bar on one end. “I live on that thing,” he said wistfully about the chaise and a dreamy throw tossed across it. His bed is a Christopher Guy creation, a headboard of metalwork dotted with red velvet pieces in round and oval orbs.

His master bath is full of glamour, with three Murano glass chandeliers that resemble giant flowers hanging over Absolute Black granite counters, veiny taupe marble floors and cabinets with antiqued mirror doors. “It’s not done until it’s overdone,” he giggles.

Then comes the closet, grand enough for a couple, but Clifton and his massive shoe collection fill it handily.

“I had to have a super-duper deep closet. And this is my shoe corner. I’m a shoe whore,” he declared, holding up a new favorite pair. “I just love this. My builder was like, ‘Are you sure?’ You should have heard me fight for this. He said, ‘You don’t need so many shelves.’ When I moved in, I had 120 pairs of shoes, and now I’m up to 145 pairs.”

This is also the floor that gives you the best view of the massive 17-foot Swarovski crystal chandelier that hangs from the fourth floor down into the stairwell leading to the second floor. Even from the first floor looking up, you get the sense that it’s snowing crystals as the sparkling faceted orbs dangle.

Down on the second floor is a big public space with a living room, dining room and kitchen, all a creamy beige. Evidence of Clifton’s many travels shows up in accessories, including the porcelain leopard statue he found in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, that now sprawls across his dining table. Or the “Dumb-Dumb” sculpture in one corner of the living room or the large painting he bought in New Orleans for a big wall near the spiral staircase.

On the rare nights he’s home alone, he doesn’t cook much, but he has a fabulous kitchen for when friends do show up. He raves about how his Thermador steam oven makes quick work of everything and brings leftovers back to life.

The fourth floor with the big balcony is an entertaining space, with an outdoor kitchen and another indoor seating area with a full bar. If you get tired of the view, Clifton will get out his professional-grade karaoke machine – he’s had plenty of practice, and his specialty is a playlist of Elton John’s library.

It was probably inevitable Clifton would be involved home design. Even as a child, he was



The townhome is in Somerset Green, a 46-acre master-planned community developed by Hines off of Old Katy Road inside the Loop.

interested in homes.

He’s sentimental and hangs onto cards, letters and other mementos from his happy childhood. One day, he said, someone at his office found an old, three-ring binder full of things Clifton had created when he was in fourth grade or so.

“I started drawing architectural plans in the fourth grade. My dad bought me a drafting board because I wanted to do that. I still have them,” he said. “One day the guys at work found them and came out laughing, ‘What is this?’ I had named the houses, and I had priced them: The ‘Ranch on a Slope,’ \$39,900. That’s where it all started. It’s crazy, but we all start somewhere.”

diane.cowen@chron.com



Clifton holds a favorite, a Donald Pliner shoe. He had his closet made extra large to accommodate his 145 pairs.



The bed in the master bedroom is by Christopher Guy and features a headboard of metalwork with soft orbs of deep red velvet.