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**THE MYSTERY HANGAR**  
Home design takes flight

**THE LONE ARRANGER**  
Design guru Erin Ellwood

**BEYOND BAROQUE**  
IN THE HOME OF MOZART



One section of a converted garage serves as an office. The simple yet elegant book shelving is made with two-by-12 boards and adjustable steel plates.

# The Lone Arranger

Design guru Erin Ellwood on interior space planning

BY MATT KATZ

PHOTOS BY GASZTON GAL

**IT STARTED WITH AN EYE.** The catchy name and hundred-dollar hook—any room: rethought, rearranged, redecorated for just a hundred bucks—came later. Decades later. After a childhood in the heavy shadow of her father, the celebrated Modern architect Craig Ellwood, heir apparent to Mies van der Rohe and his spare steel boxes. After a child of her own and a successful career as a Hollywood production designer and a move from L.A. to the quietude of Ventura County.

For \$100 per room, Erin Ellwood, a.k.a. the Lone Arranger, will put her inborn eye for design to work, making sense of cluttered interiors. We spoke to her about her new venture and her general philosophies of spatial organization.

**The first thing I always do** is ask people what they want to feel in this room? To me, a space is a visceral thing. Do you want to feel calm in the space? Do you want to feel energized? Do you work here, sleep here, cook here? What goes on here, and what's the flow like? I always start with this internal question. It makes people think. Often they want it to look cool—but for what? I don't like design for the sake of design. It's like, "Tell me what you do in here. Do dogs come traipsing through and do kids spill and throw up?" All that relates to the surfaces I would recommend. ... My father always said "form follows function," and that's what I think. Let's talk about how you live and not just make this look good, because it'll fall apart when I leave. It'll look really cool for a week and then go back to the way it was.

**My father's career deeply affected my world.** I grew up with the Eameses; Ray and Charles Eames were friends of my parents. My father was designing stuff that nobody else was doing at the time. I mean, people on the street would call the police as these houses were going up because they were so shocking.

**My house wouldn't have worked** if I didn't have the garage. It's like having two more rooms: my office and my daughter's playroom. I had to make use of the space. I really like clear division—this half is mine, that half is hers. I started with that idea and observed the space. This one has a [ceiling] beam, which made for a great place to make the "L" in my bookcase. I could see it.

**This room is all over the place,** and to me that's why it works. There are often six kids in [this converted garage] playing, so I don't care about the floor. It's cement. The dogs can walk through with muddy paws. The colors are all over the place because kids are in here painting. But on this half, I have all my books. The other side of the bookshelf is a piece of Corten steel—I love the color and movement—and you can use soapstone to write on it. That's what welders use to make their notes. There isn't really a theme here except, "this is her half, this is my half." The lack of theme kind of makes it work, too. It is what it is; it's utilitarian.



**There's clutter and there's composition.** What I do a lot of times when I go into someone's house and they have a collection of something, like shells, and they're scattered all over the house, I get them all and I put them in one place. Then it's a statement. When it's all over the place, it's clutter. When it's grouped all in one place, it's a composition.

**People have ideas.** I knew this one woman who said, "I just want stairs." She'd always lived in single story houses. It's funny what drives people instead of, "I want my life to function really well." Life is crazy. I want it to be as sane as it can be.

**Some people have no idea** how they feel about anything, so I do collages: a rug, a photograph, a painting. I send these collages in an email so you're looking at an idea. It's what we used to do for film, make a storyboard with things like flooring and wall color. They were called mood boards. You'd look at one and we'd see how you responded.

**White is terrifying** to people. It's like cutting your hair off—suddenly you are there, there's no hiding, this is it. White is the same thing for people, and it scares them. There's something nude about it.

**My general philosophy** is that the bones of any room—the walls, the floors—should be monochromatic, and color is brought in via hits of color. I'm not big on

painting whole rooms specific colors, but at times one wall calls for a color. Which is something that's kind of hard to explain.

**Design, to me, is like cooking.** When you cook, certain things work and certain things don't. You know it when you taste it. In design you're cooking with color, texture, composition. Certain things work and certain things don't.

**It's real easy to make things look good for cheap,** and I love doing that, especially in this day and age. You can have a really ugly chair, but you can do something crazy and unpredictable to it and make it suddenly cool.

**A lot of times it's about what isn't there,** not what is there. People often think, "Oh, there's an empty corner, let's put a plant there." Things don't need things in them. Sometimes that corner with nothing in it is the best you can do. ... All interior spaces need space—air, breathing room. The big mistake is there's just too much stuff. People don't need more stuff. People need more air, and more calm. Space creates calm.

**I'm not into things,** or making your house look like [an architecture magazine]; it needs to look like you. How do you live? That's what I look at. It's not about making somebody look groovy. That's not how I work—it's much more internal for me. ▣

**Above:** A painting by Nancy Nye covers a window with an unpleasing view. "I love to break rules," says Ellwood of the oversize art piece, which dominates her living room.

**Right:** The pink chair adds a colorful pop, lending the space a fresh feeling.

**Opposite top:** Ojai sculptor Mark Benkert suggested backing the book shelving with mill finish steel, which serves as an artistic canvas for seven-year-old Amélie Ellwood. Like welders, she uses soapstone to draw and write.

**Opposite bottom:** Paintings by Erin's favorite artists (including Millei, Picasso, and Amélie) combine with small doses of saturated color to give her living space a distinct point of view.

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