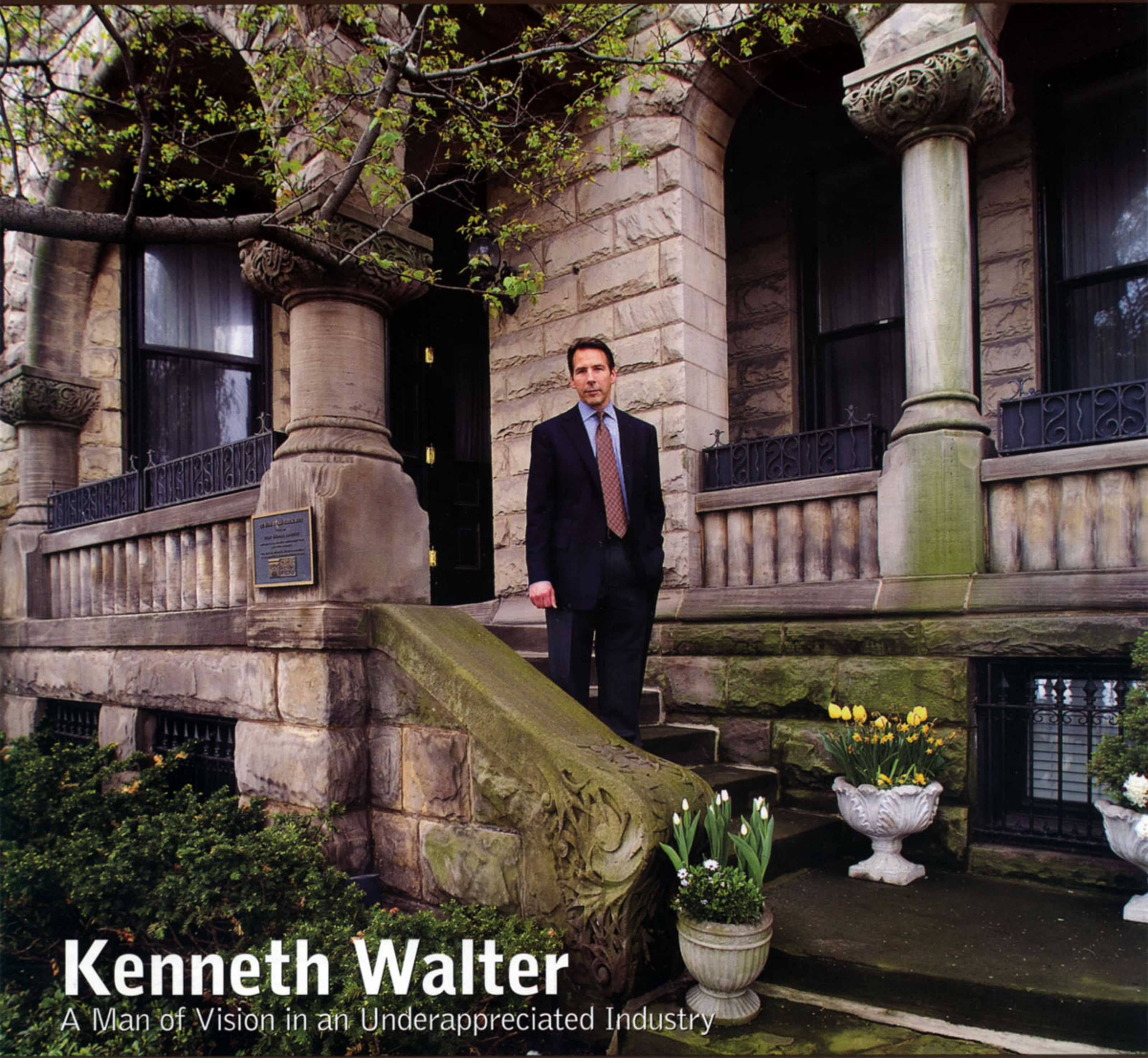


Chicagoland Edition

Builder/Architect

Interior Design Profile



Kenneth Walter

A Man of Vision in an Underappreciated Industry

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By Sheila Inbinder

"So you're the guy who made this place look so great," were the first words Janet Owen spoke to Kenneth Walter when she accidentally met him at a mansion she was showing for sale.

Unusual to start an interview with a comment from a third party, but coming from Janet Owen, that statement carried a lot of weight. And, it was my first insight into an unusual and thoroughly interesting person. His name is Kenneth Walter. His profession: interior designer. And that quote says it all.

There are very few professions that command our complete trust. Everyone can rattle off most of them. Very few, however, would think to mention interior designer. Farfetched? Think what you are putting into his or her hands. Your surroundings. The place, where no matter how busy you are, you still spend the most time. Unless you're doing it entirely yourself, you are dealing with someone where trust is essential.

Walk into a room. It could be a mansion, a bank, a hotel, a resort, an ordinary house. It doesn't matter. You form an impression. You like it. You hate it. You're indifferent. Admit it or not, we all form immediate impressions. We notice things, and those impressions come from what our eyes first see. The saying goes: "You only get one first impression." True. But sometimes, you can create a second impression — an even better one. When

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— Kenneth Walter

it comes to design, one of the best at creating a lasting impression is Kenneth Walter. Referring to him as an interior designer is almost an understatement, although professionally, that's what he is. But, for the moment, forget his talent. Forget his experience. The two things that will ultimately draw you to the man are two basic but vital points: his passion for his work and the trust he inspires. That passion speaks for itself. The trust comes from the bond established between him and his client. His clients have good reason to put themselves in Kenneth Walter's hands.

"When somebody calls me, they might find me from a referral or a past client, or a website, or even a magazine article they may have seen," he says, "but they'll call and I will spend 20-30 minutes talking to them. I call it a pre-interview. While they're asking me questions about how I do things, I, too, am asking them questions." It is vital to Ken to know about the people he might take on as clients. He maintains when he got into the business 25 years ago, it was so cut and dried. "If it was a woman calling me for residential, I needed to meet her husband and that was about it." Today, according to Ken, it is much more complicated. "I want to know about the different dynamics. Are they married, do they live with somebody, do they have kids, are they divorced." This line of questioning isn't meant to sound intrusive. Ken tries to see out of the client's eyes. "There are same-sex couples today," he goes on to explain. "You just can't make any assumptions." Mind you, this is just "pre-interview." Why go through all this? "I know at the end of the conversation if it makes sense to have a face-to-face meeting. The last thing I want to do in my practice is waste somebody's time because nobody has time to waste anymore."

Kenneth Walter is the guiding light behind Gray & Walter Interior Design. And while it's true that not everyone uses the services of an interior designer, that is one group that remains the unsung heroes of the industry. They put your best foot forward. And you get all the credit. Kenneth Walter is very successful, not just because he's so good at what he does, but because of his approach. Ken will be glad to show you his portfolio, projects that he's done in the past for other clients. The interesting, no, emphatic, point however, is not what he's done for those others, but how he can keep the "you" in you. This, more than anything, is what sets him apart and above. Decorating, or designing, is such a personal thing. What works for one may not work for somebody else. That's one reason he isn't interested in highlighting previous jobs. He will do so to give a prospective client the essence of his ability, but it is the individuality, the very personal approach, that counts.

"People will look at the book and say, 'Wow, I could live here', or, 'This would make me happy.' Some people will say they don't see anything they want. I tell them they're absolutely right. These rooms weren't designed



for you. They were for Mr. Jones, or Smith, or a hotel in New Orleans. They were designed for a specific client." And that's what he wants to do for the person looking at the book: design specifically for them.

Gray & Walter Interior Design might not be considered a large firm by most standards. It consists of a staff of six. "Still," he is quick to point out, "we do work all over the country. We have even done some work internationally. I think part of the problem is people are under the misconception that bigger is better, that it takes a big staff to do a project. They don't seem to understand that if you're organized, and if you have the experience, you can do the job." Asked if he doesn't also feel this gives him a more personal, more hands-on approach, he replied, "I wouldn't want to be pushed upon somebody's assistant's assistant while paying full price."

Ken fully understands not everyone can enlist the aid of a professional, and that's fine. What he finds more difficult to understand is why those with the wherewithal don't use a professional.

"People are somehow under the assumption that creative ideas and beautiful furniture, beautiful spaces, just materialize. If you have the wherewithal to have a beautiful home, a beautiful environment to live in, to wake up every day and your favorite colors are all around you, and you're surrounded by beautiful art work that you're now collecting that you never even knew about, and you have all this beautiful custom made furniture made exclusively for you with fabrics that make your heart sing, why would you want to deprive yourself of that?"

Janet Owen, a high-powered real estate agent and woman of impeccable taste certainly appreciates this sentiment. She was really impressed with his work, and after that initial meeting at the mansion she was representing, they became friends. "He really loves what he does," she acknowledges. "He feels about his business the way I feel about mine; he gives it his all. He'll have sleepless nights over something if it doesn't go just right. That's the kind of commitment he has."

Janet said, when they met at that mansion, when Ken realized she had a showing, "he went around and tweaked things, to make sure they looked really, really good. I just think he's a great guy."

If buying a house is the single largest purchase someone can make, Ken feels decorating it should come in a close second. "If you think about it, there are all kinds of interior design. There's the Pottery Barn approach when you're doing a room for \$5,000 or \$10,000. That means all your furniture, some drapery panels, a rug, pictures on the wall." He does not say this disparagingly, acutely aware this is what many people can afford, and, as he acknowledges, "That's fine." However, he is also quick to point out, "When you're talking about interior design that's done especially for you, tailored to your requirements, this is extremely costly. I think the best design comes from a dialogue that's spoken between the designer and client." He stresses this point, noting, "If everything is about the designer, something is wrong." Some people will tell Ken they're too busy, hiring him to "take over." However, he feels if someone has the time to work with him, "isn't it nice that they're going to get exactly what they want?"

This brought up another point. Just what is the difference between an interior decorator and an interior designer. Or, is it just semantics? "Twenty-five years ago when I was still in college, I was told that the difference between a designer and a decorator was that a designer received formal training and a decorator was someone who hadn't ... someone who dabbled and just went



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around willy nilly, so to speak," is how Ken explained it. "But," he went on to say, "I'm not sure that is totally true. I think a great designer actually does decorate, too; there is an aspect to decorating even in interior architecture." He continued, in his opinion, "If a space has not met the client's objectives, it is not decorated/designed." So, actually there is a difference, but at the same time, they go hand in hand? "I guess decoration also has to do with the use of fabrics/textiles/art/rugs to complete the space. Great design requires many things, like attention to getting the shell right, architecture, designing the space so it flows right and feels right. And then decorating it ... filling it with what is appropriate, whether the decor is contemporary or traditional."

One person who appreciates this distinction is Arthur Frigo, who has known Ken about 15 years. "We go back to the original restoration in his Lake Shore Drive mansions. When I was restoring them, particularly 1250, where I was going to live, I was in search of who was going to do the interior decorating." But Arthur Frigo was not looking for someone who could merely decorate. "I had done projects previous to that, one that was very contemporary. The demands of Lake Shore Drive, however, were not just that of a talented decorator. They had to be somebody who appreciated the period."

Mr. Frigo went on to explain that he had had some experience previously that indicated, as he put it, "you can have talent, but if you don't appreciate the period, you might err, and particularly with that house, you might go Victorian, and it is not Victorian at all." He interviewed many people "and Kenneth came across the best in terms of really feeling the period and what to do with the house. We didn't violate any of the period ambience." He also confirmed my sense of Ken. "In order to be successful in that field, you can't just do whatever you want; the client has to live with it. Ken is a good listener, and at the same time, I never felt like he was compromising. That was important to me."

Asked about any current projects, he said, "We're doing a second restoration now, converting the house where we originally did a duplex and triplex. We are now restoring it back to a single-family house. It is quite dramatic." Obviously Ken has lived up to Frigo's initial opinion of him, and then some. "He does have good judgment and eloquent taste." This is something very important to this particular client. "A lot of people are good decorators, but whether they have judgment and eloquent taste ..." Another plus he pointed out was Ken's ability to relate to architecture, "which is a



“He’ll have sleepless nights if something doesn’t go right. That’s the kind of commitment he has.”

Janet Owen — real estate agent

you. That’s why I encourage people to meet with other professionals before making a decision.” Is he ever called upon to “undo” what someone else has done? “Yes, and it’s hard.” Ken, however, realizes . . . “We can’t be all things to all people,” and appreciates the fact that it is difficult for some to project what they have planned in their mind. So mistakes can be made.

We talked about “typecasting,” something Ken tries to avoid. Known mainly for doing residential work, he would like it made clear how versatile his work is. “One of my biggest clients is a private club downtown. I’ve worked for them about nine years now. It’s just as personal as doing a private home. It’s still all about the décor, and furnishings, and compromise.” He tells the story of a man who walked into the club, and really loved it. “He

whole different challenge. He did some excellent designs; he designed the whole living room ceiling, which was a pretty difficult thing. He’s capable of interior architecture as well as the decorating; he’s very talented with a wide range of skills.”

When asked how a prospective client finally chooses to hire him, Ken’s answer was somewhat amusing. “It’s like dating,” was his reply, and went on to explain, lest he’s giving the wrong impression, “Not that you’re going to be intimate with your designer, but on the other hand, if you don’t trust him or her, if you feel they’re going to take advantage of you in some manner, whether it’s monetarily or emotionally, that’s not the right designer for

owns four banks and he wanted me to do his banks. When I hesitated, as I had never done a bank previously, he said, ‘make our banks look beautiful and we’ll teach you everything you need to know about the banking business.’” He is not in agreement with designers who want things done only their own way. “It’s not your home; you don’t live there. Yes, there has to be a style and there has to be a sense of a lot of thought going into it, but if there’s nothing about the client in there, it loses some of the personal aspect. So, you try to take your ideas and put them in a manner that is going to make sense. You want to maintain that personal touch.”

It was amazing to me to learn that Ken knew from the age of 16 that he





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Arthur Frigo — client

wanted to be an interior decorator. What made him decide on this career at such a young age? It just seems like such an unlikely choice for a 16 year old. "I guess I was very aware of my surroundings, and was very aware of when things were working and when they weren't working. Even at that age, I felt I could make a difference — the way things look — and that would be a good way to spend my life, making surroundings more attractive for people."

Ken went to a prep school in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. He feels his art teacher didn't know quite what to do with him. "She never had anybody like me before. Usually, art consists of the fine arts: painting, sculpting, sketching, etc., but other than those arts, she just didn't know what to do with me." So he began doing research for schools that he felt would fit his needs, finally settling on a school in Long Beach, CA. This turned out to be quite an adventure for him. "It was my first plane trip," and he relished going out to buy the ticket, and his trunk, and everything that went with it. It also never occurred to him that he wouldn't like the school or the town. "I was focused. I knew I was putting myself through school and I knew I was investing in myself and getting my education. I needed to get out and go to work." Ken never had to go to a plan B. "You know," he says, "the first five years you work in the design field is better than going to graduate school, where all you're being told about is hypothetical. Working in the field, making things, actually doing things, learning from your mistakes, this is a process, not an event. It helps make you the person you are."

After his internship in California, Ken came back to Chicago. He wanted to work for Ann Gray, whose work he'd seen in *Architectural Digest*. However, she had no openings so he took a job with another firm. About one month into the job, Ann called and offered him the job he originally wanted. Honorable person that he is, "I turned it down because I didn't think it was a very loyal thing to do, to start working for someone and one month later, abandon ship." He did stay in touch with Ann, and ironically, six months after taking the other position, the company closed. Kenneth Walter finally



became affiliated with Ann Gray. Call it karma, kismet, or fate. The original person Ann Gray hired not only became his co-worker, "We became good friends and ended up falling in love and getting married."

They worked together for seven years, until Noreen became a stay-at-home mom. Two designers working together and living together — I had to hear Noreen's version.

"He was pleasant to work with," she told me, "but we didn't care for each other at first."

"There was some competitiveness. Actually," she clarified, "we were all competitive in that we vied for Ann's attention. She was a great personality." At first, the now husband and wife didn't actually work together, but they ultimately became project directors, although he worked more in Texas and Noreen was in South Carolina. Doesn't sound like an ideal situation for a budding romance. However, Noreen completed a project in Charleston, and when they got together to celebrate her birthday, they realized how much they missed each other. "It kind of evolved from there."

Noreen said she always enjoyed the larger projects, the commercial ones, where Ken preferred residential — "Because it's so much more personal. I'm kind of quiet and not a people person, but Ken has a real gift of relating to people." She also stressed he enjoys the peace and quiet of home. "I guess it has to do with dealing with the public so much. He draws out his clients, and that's so important in this business. You can be as creative as you want, but you have to relate to people, and he really gets involved."

Noreen might be accused of being a tad bit prejudiced, although she does have the advantage of knowing him both professionally and personally. So in the interest of fairness and objectivity, I opted for a more "objective" viewpoint. Leslie McGranahan, an economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, has been working with Ken since 1998 when she and her husband purchased their first apartment. He helped with the budget, design and even did a lot of shopping for them. "We spent a lot of time at the mart together." Interestingly, when they moved to London two years later, Ken was even able to assist them there. Moving back to suburban Chicago, Ken was once again there, helping with the move, deciding where everything went, "even what we accumulated in London." They had interviewed several prospective designers before deciding on Ken, but really liked the work he had done.

"He was very warm and very accessible. We didn't know what we were doing and he made us very comfortable to talk to; he wasn't pushy, but would advise us, yet let us keep our own style." What was most important to Leslie is that she felt she was so impressionable: "I knew what I liked but I needed some guidance. He was good at that middle road. Our apartment looked fabulous, but I felt it reflected me." And there is no way I can exclude some of her final comments. "We have three children now and need very specific things. We need a rug that you can't see spit-up on." There is not a doubt in my mind that Ken took that right in stride. "He understands your house has to look absolutely beautiful but be appropriate for where we are. He's such an easy person to be around; he makes the process easy." Having nothing to do with interior design, I have to add one last comment: "My kids also love Ken."

Ann Gray became ill and phased out the business. "I was basically the last person there before she closed the doors. On my last day, she told me she was still trying to figure out how to retire and make me President of the company." Many things were going on in Ken's life at that time, and he accepted a job in Atlanta, but after about four months realized, "It just wasn't



me." Fate intervened again when a client from Texas called about getting together on a project. Although Ken was unaware of it at the time, the man also contacted Ann about another project. "I ended up going to see Ann. It made no sense for each of us to do two separate projects. She decided her health was good enough to go back into business, and that's when we established Gray & Walter.

I asked Ken what he would like most to be known for. In a word: diversity. "What people don't seem to understand is if you're a designer, you can do anything. Some designers are known for a certain style. You hear that name, you think of that particular style. What I would love is when people hear my name, they think of me as a chameleon, and they will get whatever their dreams are. I don't have a style. I do whatever is appropriate to their taste and the architectural space. I don't want a label." Ken feels it is unfortunate that some people are afraid of change. "They do the same thing over and over. I love to be challenged. I love when I get a job where I don't know about something and have to do research. I live this. I breathe this. I worry about my clients all the time. I'm concerned about them personally. If I see an article that pertains to something in their lives, I'll cut it out and send it to them. How can you do something if you're not going to be in it all the way? Why would you want to take on anything if you're not going to embrace it fully?"

We touched briefly on technology. All this modern technology seemed out of character for such a personal, hands-on business, even conceding it is definitely a necessity in today's world. Summing it up, Ken agrees technology is a good thing. "There is more you can show your client."

As devoted as he is to his clients, he is even more devoted to his family. Ken and Noreen are the parents of three daughters. Lauren left for college this year, an event that he confesses really shook him up. Kathleen, 17, has a real talent for art, and Rachel, who just turned 12, wants desperately to be a teenager. Not to be overlooked, and very much part of the family are two dogs, a yellow Labrador named Georgia, and Morgan, a white Cockapoo. ("I walk the dogs for their exercise as well as my own.") Ken is a baseball fan and was brave enough to tell this Sox fan he favors the Cubs. He does allow himself some leisure time, collects watches and admits to smoking the occasional cigar. He loves to travel, and enjoys Europe for both buying trips and vacations.

Kenneth Walter is unique; a man who truly puts the "custom" into customer. ■