



# BRINGING COMFORT HOME

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by DROR BALDINGER



Some people possess a rare gift enabling them to walk into a space and envision what it's meant to be from the very beginning.

Glancing around Bobby Dent's historic loft in downtown Comfort, dripping with eye-catching conversation pieces that read like the story of his well-traveled life, it's obvious he's got an innate eye for design.

"I know what I like," Dent shrugs. "I just walked into this space and knew exactly what I wanted to do."

Dent's knack for perfecting interiors more than compensates for his lack of a design degree, as evidenced by his 1500-square-foot, two-bathroom, one-bedroom loft sitting on the second story of a 1891 building overlooking High Street in downtown Comfort. The building that once served as the town's original saloon is now an eclectic swirl of industrial, antique and mid-century modern vibes punctuated with unique furnishings Dent has accrued from around the world, each one with an interesting story behind it.

Take the Beverly Hills Rodeo Dr. and Wilshire Blvd. street signs mounted in the hallway for example.

"I noticed this street sign sitting on the floor of an antique shop and noticed it had no price on it," Dent recalls from his time living in Los Angeles. "I asked if it was for sale and the owner told me it was already sold and that the person that bought it was picking it up that day. So, while I had some cash on me, I left and went to an ATM and got more. I returned to the shop and waited until the person came to pick it up. After a lengthy conversation and negotiation, it left in my car."

When the city of Beverly Hills ordered 900 new street signs and started installing them in 1950, Dent says it kicked off the installation with a media campaign featuring the star of a newly released film.

"It was no other than Gloria Swanson who was starring in



I had bought the building in downtown Comfort and moved here.”

Dent says his parents thought he had lost his mind when he left Atlanta at age 30 for the tiny town in Texas, but the bold move he made in his young and fearless days became a Comfort bed and breakfast he operated for 22 years. He’s since sold the hotel, but over the past decade he’s rescued, restored and resold historic properties alongside his close friend and business partner Joey Story. When they stumbled on the two dilapidated historic buildings sitting in downtown Comfort, the 1891 building Dent now occupies and the 1913 building next to it which once served as the town’s pool hall, the real estate move became something more.

*Sunset Boulevard* and I have a photo of her on a ladder posing with one of the new street signs,” he says. “Now every time I walk up the stairs I see the street sign, I’m reminded of my time in LA.”

While Dent has traveled around the world, he is no stranger to Comfort. Born and raised in Georgia, he actually came to Texas on a fluke when he was 30 years old and saw a historic 1880 building in downtown Comfort that spoke to him.

“I was traveling through Texas driving through Comfort and saw that building with a ‘For Sale’ sign and couldn’t get it out of my head,” recalls Dent who returned to Atlanta where he was part-owner in a computer supply company. “I must have had a bad day at work or something because the next thing I knew

“Joey and I bought these buildings, restored them and put them for sale, but Joey’s husband, Ed Story, suggested not selling them but starting *The Elephant Story* instead,” says Dent.

*The Elephant Story* ([the-elephant-story.com](http://the-elephant-story.com)), which operates out of the neighboring 1913 building, is one of Comfort’s most unique shops, promoting elephant conservation in Asian elephant countries by increasing awareness about endangerment caused by deforestation in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar and selling indigenous crafts and textiles from Asian countries. Net profits from *The Elephant Story* benefit various Asian elephant support foundations. Today, Dent manages *The Elephant Story*, residing in Comfort since 2014 after leaving to become a personal assistant to his longtime close friend and famous actress

Madeleine Stowe who has starred in films including *The Last of the Mohicans* and *12 Monkeys*.

“Once I sold the hotel, she asked me to come to LA to work for her,” says Dent. “We have been friends for more than 25 years and her daughter is my goddaughter so I moved to LA for three years. That explains my eclectic collection — a lot of it was from traveling with Madeleine.”

Whether it is the Irish China or the Italian linens and dishes found in Dent’s loft, most of his furnishings and finds serve as tangible souvenirs of the places he has been and the memories made there. Take a look around his loft and point to an item and chances are it was collected from one of a dozen or so countries around the world. Myriad elephants and fabrics were collected from Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam — countries Dent has been traveling to since 2007.

“My love of elephants has me always looking for them — I have them on fabrics like an antique Thai flag, there are wooden elephants and cast iron ones,” he says. “I am drawn to the native hill tribe fabrics which capture the quality of their craftsmanship, many of which I’ve had framed as works of art.”

Dent’s pottery dishes and glassware are from Ireland where he lived for three months in 2001 when Stowe was filming *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

“We would venture out and explore on our off time and we found our way to the Nicolas Mosse Pottery and Jerpoint Glass studios,” he says. “We both bought the hand-made, hand-painted pottery dishes from Nicolas Mosse and hand-blown glassware from Jerpoint. I still use them every day and it is a constant reminder of my time there.”

A cast iron planter on the dining room table that holds Dent’s collection of antique stone fruit was found in Spain — a must have because it’s red, his favorite color. The two pendant lights over the kitchen island contain glass pieces which are flea market finds from Santa Monica, parts of a commercial coffee maker from the 60’s he thought would make interesting statements. Dent’s love for southern pottery, especially pieces from Georgia and North Carolina, can be seen in the five gallon double-handled jugs used to store syrup and other liquids. And he’s decorated with pieces that contain personal, ancestral ties as well.



“My fraternal grandmother was part Cherokee Indian,” says Dent. “I have an extensive collection of Cherokee Indian river cane baskets and Cherokee Indian souvenir tomahawks that were sold to tourists in and around Cherokee, North Carolina.”

Dent loves original painted antique furniture so he kept the loft’s color scheme a creamy white, allowing each piece to stand out.

“All my antique furniture are southern pieces, primarily from Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Texas,” says Dent. “I like pieces that have their original paint or surface.”

While Dent made a point to retain the original look and character of the building, he called on his go-to craftsman Don Biermann where refinishing and remodeling were needed. Biermann came to the rescue by removing walls to open up the space, re-milling original woodwork and installing a sliding ladder across the kitchen to allow access to the upper cabinets that stretch to meet the 12 foot ceilings.

“We are fortunate to have a great contractor who listens to what we want and can make anything happen,” says Dent of Biermann. “He is a Comfort native and we work with him exclusively on all of our restorations. While I can’t drive a nail straight, if I tell him what I want, he can make it happen.”

Out of the many places Dent has lived, he says he feels at home in his historic loft overlooking downtown Comfort’s main drag.

“What I love about this space is that it overlooks the main drag (High Street), it has these great 12-foot ceilings, all of the original woodwork which is a very time consuming craftsmanship that you just don’t see anymore, original windows that flood this space with light and beautiful pine floors,” says Dent. “People who walk in here say they would expect to see this kind of place in New York City and they are always surprised to find it here in Comfort, Texas.” ❖

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