

# THE FORDS

PITTSBURGH'S DYNAMIC BROTHER-SISTER DESIGN TEAM, STEVE AND LEANNE FORD, ARE ALL ABOUT SIMPLICITY AND STYLE IN THEIR HIT HGTV SHOW *RESTORED BY THE FORDS*

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# KNOW BEST





LEANNE AND STEVE'S  
INTERIOR MAKEOVERS ARE A  
FEAT NOT EASILY ACHIEVED  
WHEN WORKING WITHIN  
CENTURIES OLD VICTORIANS  
AND '80s-STYLE COTTAGES.







To define a Ford project as simply “modern” is to pin down a free spirit — either it can’t or shouldn’t be done.

It’s true that the spaces Pittsburgh renovation siblings Leanne and Steve Ford design are sophisticated, but they are more livable than luxurious, with a tried-and-true vintage soul. There’s personality with a whole lot of heart, and

spaces are down-to-earth, just like their roots. The Fords’ designs are famous for a mix of natural and synthetic textures, like wide rustic windows and exposed ceiling beams, with a coat of timeless white paint glossed overtop, and touches such as brass light fixtures over a lean marble countertop, or a vintage leather sofa in a bright, white sunroom. The brother-sister duo are free spirits and kick-back-and-relax kings, no shoes required.

And unlike many fixer-upper pairs around, “out with the old” is not their style. Instead, the Fords integrate the aged and weathered blemishes of a home into their redesigns to create cozy modern habitats fit for both New York lofts and rural Pittsburgh cottages. “When I walk into a home, I always look for things I can keep,” Leanne says.

With a little elbow grease and originality employed by Steve’s trade skills and Leanne’s personal spunk and creativity, the two achieve a classic lived-in style made for anyone of any age.

But it wasn’t always white paint and vintage furniture for the Fords.

Before committing to contracting full time, Steve Ford managed a white-water rapids company, worked as a ski patroller, built sets for retailers like Modelcloth, Rue21, and American Eagle Outfitters, and even owned and operated a clothing store called Decade on Pittsburgh’s South Side. Meanwhile, Leanne freelanced in the fashion industry for 15 years, bouncing between jobs as a stylist and creative director in New York City and Los Angeles for brands like Roxy and Quicksilver. Leanne channeled her creativity through various outlets, including writing songs for her friend’s band, Escondido, and working as a fashion editor for magazines such as *Seventeen*. And though she often did interior design work for friends and colleagues in her free time, it wasn’t a full-time gig.

Things changed once Leanne and Steve combined forces four years ago to start remodeling an early 20th century schoolhouse. “Steve can really build anything,” Leanne ex-

plained. “And when I started doing design and called contractors to talk about my ideas, they would go, ‘You can’t do that. I’ve never seen that.’ Other contractors did not want to think outside the box. So I called my brother, and we thought outside the box together.”

With a shared love for fashion, design, and hard work, the Fords made their restoration dream a reality. In 2015, *Country Living* magazine featured their work. Suddenly, Leanne began to be recognized for her white-on-white aesthetic and combination of lived-in luxe and vintage flare. HGTV offered her and Steve a spot on their channel, and they began shooting for the first season of *Restored by the Fords*.

For Steve, the dedicated brawn behind the operation (he once slept in his truck for two nights on a construction site so the home could be completed by the time filming began for the show), home renovation is hard work that excites him, especially when he is alongside his sister.

“Working with Leanne is great. And residential construction is much more creative. Antique doorways, vintage parts — it’s an adrenaline rush. It isn’t just, ‘Put up some drywall and some paint and call it a day.’ It is more artistic, more crafted, more exciting.”

Crafted, yes. But when it comes to her clients, Leanne wants their homes to look curated, rather than decorated. She avoids trendy looks that might signal the use of an interior decorator.

“It’s about the client, not me,” Leanne said. “My job is to make a beautiful house that they are happy with. I know there is a vibe that is ‘Leanne Ford,’ but I’m not doing that on purpose. I’m like a ghostwriter. I want to fade into the background so that once they start living there, they don’t even remember me being there. They are just happy and proud of their home.”

If you ask her what sets her work apart from other interior designers, she’ll tell you she doesn’t really know. She may go on about what she likes and what she looks for -- but insist that she indulge in talking about her style, and she’ll dodge.

“The question is, ‘What’s the secret sauce? What’s the secret to it all?’ And I can’t even say I know officially,” Leanne says.

Though, anyone who sees her style might say it is her knack for the natural and the neutral. When they walk away from a space (construction dust settled and white paint dried), a habitat has been borne. The mark of the Fords is personality, warmth, relaxation, and comfort, without compromising class.

This kind of homey tranquility is exactly what Alissa Wilmot wanted in her family’s outdated cottage. She and her

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husband, Andrew, along with their three kids, are featured in episode seven of *Restored by the Fords* as a busy family with an interior design dilemma. After moving back to Pittsburgh from Philadelphia to purchase Alissa's childhood home from her parents, they knew a change in style was necessary.

"I mean, it still had all the things I loved about it when I was a kid," Alissa says, recounting the regret she had about living there for more than a year without renovating. "I loved that it was pretty big, I loved the school district, and I liked the backyard. But some of the style issues with the home I didn't even like when I was 14 years old."

Alissa and Andrew are both physicians and wanted their home to imbue their daily routine with zen and relaxation. They saw the need for a major redesign, but didn't know where to begin.

Cut to their nine-year-old son, flipping through channels and stopping on one of HGTV's home makeover shows — "They should do that to our house!" he said, matter-of-factly. He was serious, but Alissa paid no mind to the thought. "It's not a forte of mine to work with home decoration or design," she says. Andrew, on the other hand, got curious.

After searching HGTV's website, he discovered there was an upcoming home renovation show currently in pre-production. The producers were scouting for outdated homes with lots of potential and willing homeowners located in the greater Pittsburgh area. Though hesitant, the Wilmots sent in their application and waited to hear back.

Before they knew it, a Skype interview was set up with the show's producers, and a camera crew arrived to film their homes: Leanne and Steve to the rescue.

"This wasn't something we'd ever done before. It was exciting, though," Andrew says. "We talked about what we wanted to do with the house, and they were very excited about its potential."

The Wilmot cottage had plenty of floor space, but its layout faltered in providing adequate breadth for their family to grow. The living room, though having a modern structure with a dramatic slanted ceiling, featured outdated paneling that Leanne felt was better off being painted white. From a loft overlooking the entrance, a wooden staircase zig-zags to the first floor in a dated yellow stain straight from 1981. "Takes us right back to prom," Leanne says in the episode, joking to Alissa and Andrew. But as she often does, Leanne works around the character of the home to create a design that fits. "I love the loft, I love the hints of wood, and I want to keep that feeling, but kick it up about 36 years."

Throughout season one of *Restored by the Fords*, Leanne and Steve help numerous families and couples keep the character of their homes but give it the unique Ford flare.

In one episode, they're hired by a client to redesign a mid-century home created by Don Owen, disciple-architect to Frank Lloyd Wright. The clients want it to keep with the buildings mid-century exterior, but have it look like its revamped, con-

temporary cousin. Its a two-part project, and the Fords return for the season finale to deliver an in-ground pool, painted black; a faux rock wall, painted white; and a bathroom island (yes, like a kitchen island, except better).

In another episode, the siblings come to the aid of a young couple with a regal, three-story Victorian home. They are looking to keep some old-world tradition but inject newfound life into the stuffy dining room and a bland, cookie-cutter kitchen. As a remedy, the Fords put up modern brocade wallpaper and install glossy white walls and cabinets in the kitchen.

Leanne is often at the helm, making design decisions and allowing her home in Pittsburgh to act as headquarters for the pair's pre-construction meetings at each episode's beginning. "There's no beer," she says to Steve after he opens her fridge at an episode's start. And though Steve is older, Leanne takes on the sisterly role of teaser and babysitter, side-eyes and head-shakes free of charge.

In between clips of demolition at the old Victorian, Steve stands beside his sister as they each take turns in various locations catching us up on the renovation process. Leanne is joking about Steve's major in college. "Leisure and recreation," he says, reluctant and a bit embarrassed, to Leanne's delight.

And while there is a pattern to the production of the show's first season, the work Leanne and Steve produce never ceases to amaze. When they walk into a home, they leave behind a design marvel alone in its Ford-ness, yet so much a part of the home and its owner.

In the case of the Wilmots' home, Leanne saw potential from the very beginning. "My biggest goal as a designer was to turn it into their house, as opposed to their parents' house," Leanne said. "Have it be elevated and updated, and not have it look like something its not."

With a large work crew, some of which Steve has known for years, projects take eight weeks to complete. It's not impossible for Steve and his team, but a challenge for the crew working in such small spaces. It's work that is ultimately rewarding, though. Steve says he feels honored to have helped Leanne's vision come to life. And the Wilmots' '80s cottage-turned-California bungalow was no exception.


Cue the hardwood ceiling.

"We've turned the ceiling into a focal point, making the house feel fresh, and modern, and ahead of its time," Leanne says. The kitchen's peninsula and cabinet uppers were taken out to open up the space and let nature shine in. And the home's bulbous brass fixtures and fisherman's net chandelier paint the Wilmots' nights in a whole new light.

"It was so natural and pretty and simple. And it was like this release," Leanne said about the Wilmots' new space. "And at the end of it I wanted them to love their new house."

Andrew and Alissa felt that the Fords have totally changed their life for the better. "Their design brings the nature from outside in and plays on the strengths of the environment in a more timeless way," Alissa said. Andrew agreed, adding, "It feels like our home now."





These hardwood panels were no good on the ground, so the Fords thought the ceiling was a nice place to show off their textured undersides.

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TAKE NOTES, NATURALISTS, AND DO NOT LET THEIR WORLD OF WHITE FOOL YOU. THEIR DESIGNS ARE METICULOUSLY MADE TO FEEL CURATED, NOT DECORATED. NO LOUD COLORS OR OVERCOMPLICATED FLOOR PLANS. THEY LET OPEN CONCEPT LAYOUTS AND EARTHY TEXTURES DO ALL THE TALKING.

#SHELFIE LEANNE PRIDES HERSELF ON HER COLLECTED SHELF ARRANGEMENTS THAT ADD DEPTH AND THE HOMEOWNERS PERSONALITY TO HER DESIGNS.





