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FOR THE SEASON



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Barbara Westbrook

WHETHER DECORATING A CONTEMPORARY HIGH-RISE APARTMENT OR A STately HOUSE WITH CLASSIC ARCHITECTURE, THIS ATLANTA DESIGNER INFUSES EACH PROJECT WITH WARMTH, COMFORT, AND FURNISHINGS THAT FEEL STYLISTICALLY AT HOME BUT TRANSCEND THE EXPECTED. TEXT KAREN CARROLL

Southern Home (SH): Who or what has been your greatest decorating influence?

Barbara Westbrook (BW): I grew up in Virginia, a place rich with historic architecture. Antiques and architecture were much loved in our house, and my mom dragged us through plenty of antiques shops and wonderful old homes. That certainly helped train my eye. Early on in my design career, I worked for some

talented Atlanta designers—Charles Gandy and Bill Peace of Gandy/Peace, as well as Nancy Braithwaite. From Charles and Bill, I learned about modern design; everything was very organized and precise, and they taught me a lot about editing. Nancy shaped me in a major way with her mastery of color. We would go through dozens of samples just to find the perfect shade of white, and it helped me realize the importance of those decisions. She is all



about strength in design—a room has to be anchored with a certain amount of power. I totally bought into that.

SH: How would you describe a Barbara Westbrook-designed room?

BW: My hope is that it's always beautiful. I like an element of surprise, but I never want it to be shocking. In my office, we say that we don't do ugly. I guess that's a pretty simple philosophy. People should be able to live comfortably—have a cup of coffee, read a book, chat with a friend—in every space we design. A house should feel welcoming, whether it's modern, traditional, or somewhere in-between.

SH: The range of your work seems to continually navigate that line between contemporary and traditional, sometimes even within the same project. Do you personally lean one way or the other?

BW: My personal aesthetic is probably traditional with a few modern pieces mixed in. I was living in a turn-of-the-century cottage but moved fairly recently to a house built in 1950. It doesn't have the charm the other one had, but we needed more space. I'm still

fleshing out the interiors, but I want it to feel warm—a place where people can come and plop down, watch TV, and relax.

SH: How do you keep a traditional room from becoming too staid or predictable?

BW: I do try to incorporate at least some things that have cleaner lines—even a small drinks table can add an unexpected punch. And the artwork becomes very important for bringing in a sense of freshness. It doesn't have to be abstract, just as long as it isn't all old oil paintings. I particularly love using black-and-white photography.

SH: Conversely, what are the challenges in making contemporary design feel warm?

BW: When things are more spare and edited, every piece has to be really good. For a traditional interior, I can easily find an inexpensive, crusty bench at a flea market that will look fabulous and add personality, but that's harder to do with modern pieces. Contemporary furniture can look cheap when it's not made well. Texture also becomes huge. If everything is flat, it feels cold. I'll mix leather with chenille or mohair so it





doesn't get too slick. And I don't like all the wood tones to match. I'll layer a warm walnut on one piece with a black/brown finish on something else. In a modern setting, it's more about the materials.

SH: Regardless of the style of the room, we rarely see patterned fabrics on your upholstery. Tell us why.

BW: I believe upholstered furniture should mostly be a backdrop for everything else. On occasion, I might use an accented fabric—a little check on a wing chair or something—but I prefer not to see a giant sofa in a loud print that distracts you from more interesting things going on in the room. A solid-colored sofa grounds the space and can become the canvas for gorgeous pillows, some with texture, some with pattern. And if the sofa has a curved back or sculptural lines, you can read the shape more clearly. I don't like visual chaos in a room. However, if a client tells me she has always dreamed of having a floral sofa, I'll make that dream come true.

SH: What is your philosophy on color?

BW: I love color, but I use it strategically, particularly when it comes to the walls. Neutrals are generally easier to live with.

They help you notice the objects rather than the walls, and they work with any palette you want to bring in through fabrics, art, and accessories. Even when I use a blue or green paint, it tends to be a bit muted for richness and depth.

SH: Do you have favorite neutral paint colors you return to time and again?

BW: I use a lot of "Chalk Gray," a white with a hint of green by Pratt & Lambert. For a black/brown, I like "Obsidian," another Pratt & Lambert color. And although I'm starting to tire a bit of gray, I still adore "Pavilion Gray" by Farrow & Ball. My own house is a color called "Glass of Milk" that was part of Martha Stewart's range for Sherwin-Williams. Sadly they don't carry her line anymore, but isn't that the best name?

SH: Where do you turn for inspiration?

BW: These days, I tend to find inspiration in small moments rather than, say, a grand trip to Europe. It may be a visit to a shop or showroom. Being introduced to new artists also inspires me, so I like to visit Jackson Fine Art in Atlanta. Sometimes it's the

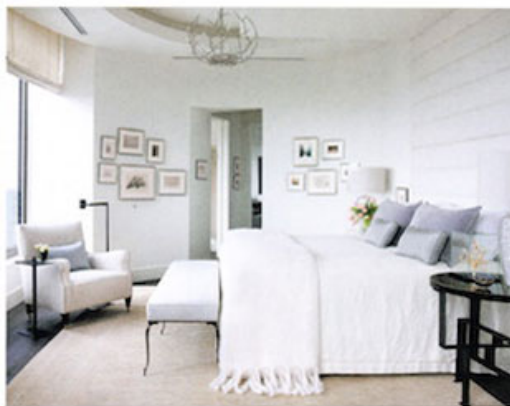


architecture I'm exposed to that gives me inspiration. Recently, I was in a 1960s house by the late A.B. Parker, an architect who did a lot of work in Florida, and I had never seen anything like it, even down to the tiniest details. The light switches were a light gray metal that looked like they had been melted into the big, rustic stone walls. Just seeing the thought process of someone who paid such careful attention to every single thing reminds me to always go that extra mile. We should care about light switches!

SH: What are some decorating elements you can't live without?

BW: I'm drawn to antiques with patina and also to black-and-white photography because it adds a modern touch. And I love books; besides their obvious use, they're also a great platform for accessories. I also like to use linen fabrics. And wood—I'll never have a space that's all metal, lacquer, and glass.

SH: Speaking of wood, you recently debuted your own furniture collection with Holland MacRae. What is the thread that ties the pieces together?



BW: I've always loved Holland MacRae's reproductions because they're made by families in England who have been building furniture for generations. The owner, Mary Holland, and I started talking about pieces that are hard to find—for instance, a dining table that isn't outrageously expensive but still has a pretty handmade finish on it. We've designed beds, side tables, dining tables, and a good rustic coffee table, all based on one-of-a-kind pieces I've purchased at some point. Whether in my decorating or in my furniture collection, everything I do is an interpretation of something I've experienced or seen—I'm combining various bits and parts together. I'm totally intrigued with people who create something that is so far out there you could never imagine it, but that's not who I am at all. Sometimes when it hasn't been done before, there's a reason.