

Southern Comfort

A Designer Interview with Amy Zolin

Photographs by ChiChi Ubiña

What influences did you have growing up that made you become a designer?

Being raised in Tennessee and North Carolina was a true education for becoming the designer that I am today. The South is known for hospitality, style and graciousness that is unique to this the region of our country. I remember the saying that great taste, like great style, never goes out of fashion. I did not see myself as a designer as a young child, but I was raised to be a strong, respectful, young woman who appreciated the arts, formal entertaining, and the essence of having a home that was grounded in the past. My mother and grandmother gave me a sense of history and respect for tradition. They spent years collecting antiques and china and they both entertained with ease in their homes. I remember my first trip to see the plantation houses in Charleston and Monticello in Virginia. At the young age of 18, I began collecting Russian art with a focus on women subjects. My friend's mother was an art dealer, classical guitarist and yoga instructor. She arranged for the ballet great, Baryshnikov to come to Tennessee and took me to my first real ballet. I started to understand the relationship between beauty, art and people. I wanted more of what was out there and I left for New York as soon as I had the chance. I decided on a career where I would travel, but it wasn't until I became a buyer for Saks Fifth Avenue that I saw this dream come to life. Traveling through Europe in France and Italy on buying trips for Saks gave me an even greater sense of architecture, history and style. Good taste and business savvy armed me with the toolbox that I needed to segway into the world of Interior Design.

Tell us a bit about your business:

I established my design firm in 2000 after leaving the world of high fashion. Our family business in North Carolina was in the furniture industry, manufacturing high-end upholstery and case goods. I grew up feeling comfortable in factories and watching tradesmen and women at their craft. I took my business background and family connections and had the great privilege of working on my first job for an executive in the Hamptons which launched Amy Zolin Fine Art and Interiors.



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Every detail makes this living room cozy and chic, including a ceiling in horsehair from Phillip Jeffries, custom gray leather by Verellen, Holly Hunt bronze occasional pieces and the magnificent Nobu Fukui painting. Surfacing brings the room to life.

My company, Clarity Home Interiors was formed in 2011. It is a personalized full service design firm that focuses on each client as an individual project. Passion and emotion are key elements of designing interior spaces. Looking at a room from a designer's perspective and transforming the client's lifestyle desires into reality, is a real thrill. The hunt for the perfect fabric, the inspiration piece that drives the movement of the room, the perfect wall color, excitement as the client sees your vision come to life, these are all things that make being a designer so rewarding. Each project is built on the previous one and 14 years later, I am thrilled to be where I am today.

Currently, we are working on wonderful projects in Connecticut and New York. A few of the projects include a 50-acre farm in Redding, Connecticut, an apartment on Fifth Avenue in New York, a new construction home for a young family in Riverside, Connecticut, and a family compound in Millbrook, New York. We have a range of projects that take us to wonderful architects where we are able to work on the initial design of the interior space through the installation. We also work on smaller projects like kitchen and family room renovations and relocation moves for families changing homes.

What would you consider your design style?

My style is tailored to each client's needs and requirements. I have a strong sense of being a Modern Classical Designer. I ride a fence between two worlds of respecting traditional design elements and understanding the need for modern transformations in the current design world. When I look back at each project, I would describe them as eclectic, fresh and personal. I embrace color and personality in each home while considering the role that nature plays as well. Natural light, the views from the exterior space help tell a story inside.

How long have you been designing? Where did you study?

I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From 1991-1999, I was a buyer Saks Fifth Avenue where I developed the luxury accessory business with Chanel, Gucci, Prada and Fendi. As Coco Chanel said, "Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky; in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening."

How do you define "home?"

Home is a place that evokes a sense of belonging and security. It's the place where we are most likely to be ourselves and share our lives with others. Home to me is where my family is.

Mika Frechette and I collaborated on this project in New York. The home owner wanted to move from her apartment on the Upper East Side to give Tribeca a try. She selected a new construction, loft apartment that featured high ceilings. Her only direction was that the apartment would have a very different feeling than the previous apartment and that contemporary furniture would play a role. We wanted to create a modern space while using threads of the client's life to bring it together.

We selected the soothing color palette of creams with neutral brown tones.





What are some questions you ask your clients before you begin a project?

Hiring a designer is a bit like dating at first. It is important to get to know each other and for me to understand the client's vision for how they want to live in their home. I often meet a client a few times before we send out a specific proposal for a project. Understanding the use for each room is important. The formal living room has taken a back seat to the family room space; however, I never make this assumption. Establishing budget parameters upfront are important before we are off and designing.

Inspiration is the root of a great project. Working with Tiffany Nelson of Nelson Macher Fine Art gave me the opportunity to use the client's art collection as a visual inspiration. I believe there is a great advantage for collaborating with a professional art dealer on any project from the beginning.

Who are some designers that have influenced your work, and how?

I love Alexa Hampton's work. I met her in North Carolina at the High Point Market and she was as lovely in person as her beautiful work. I often buy her furniture collections from Hickory Chair for my projects. Her respect for architecture, proper proportion in a room and grasp of color serve as an inspiration to me.

Jeffery Bilhuber is a favorite as well. Last year I attended a luncheon where he spoke. His passion exudes from every single detail in his work. He is not afraid or conventional and he captures his client's personality like a painter would in his subject matter. When I make a bold design decision, I often think, well if he can do it - so can I.

I have a passion for collecting interior design books. It is relaxing for me to be surrounded by the works of so many talented and inspiring designers.







What are some trends we should look out for in design? Any particular colors?

I never want to design around a trend because it leads to complacency and good design should last the test of time. "Fresh" is my trend word for today. Neutral palettes are still strong with grays, creams and touches of blue, but without balancing the neutral color with personality and a hint of boldness, it can fall short. Organic is a new concept for me in a home. I am using "organic" as a tactile feeling from layering linens and cottons in upholstery and designing rugs with mohair, jute or linen. Lacquer is making a big comeback in my world. I love the freshness of shiny gloss and when paired with the right color in a room, step back - it looks amazing.

How does your home design reflect in what you wear?

Being approachable is important to me. I like to wear a more uniform look at work and add fun accessories. When I am designing a room, I always tell the client to add the art and accessories to their budget. It's like getting dressed and going out without your shoes or makeup. If the accessories are missing from a room, then the room is not ready.

Who is your dream client and why?

Miuccia Prada is my dream client. I met her when I was a buyer in Milan. Every runway show that she orchestrated was a visual work of art. I would love to work in Europe again on a project and I can envision the perfect villa now.



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