



Studying the Classics

Kathryn Long of Ambiance Interiors
on why good design matters.

Kathryn Long, ASID, thinks that comfort is king, and that she just may be its head consort — i.e., the queen. Long recently showed *Carolina Home + Garden* around Ambiance Interiors, the design studio she founded in 1977 and which today encompasses two floors of a beautiful, historic Charlotte Street house.

The space is filled with whimsical touches such as jars of buttons on the windowsill and, in the kitchen, mosaic tile made from her mother's pottery. During the tour of her studio, she emphasizes the importance of making the most of your space with smart planning.

by Mackensy Lunsford . photo by Matt Rose

“Your relationship with your friends, your family and your home all go together. Having a comfortable environment can change your life.”

What is your specialty?

Large project, small project — it really doesn't matter the size. I start with space planning: does the room work for you? How far away are people from each other in a conversation area? That sort of thing. From space planning, I go to the selection of the furnishings that are the right scale and proportion. I think that's a big difference between somebody who just decorates and somebody who's an interior designer.

How did you get into design?

When I was about four, our house burned down on Christmas day. The only thing that was saved were my building blocks that a fireman pulled out from under the Christmas tree. So that's what I had to play with as a little girl. I loved playing with my building blocks, and I used to make little rooms — I sort of naturally created spaces with these blocks.

My mother gave me these little china dolls, and those were my first clients — I would have them walk around the rooms. Then when I was maybe seven, I started drawing house plans on the back of church bulletins because I was bored during the service. My mother noticed that and bought a lot of blank pieces of paper, and I got a drawing board and ruler and I made up that a 1/4-inch scale equals a foot, and

drew house plans. I still have hundreds of them. I would put furniture in, do landscaping, the whole thing. I really started early.

What is the most innovative project you've done?

One is Tupelo Honey in South Asheville. Hospitality design does kind of release your creativity in ways. You can go a little bit wilder, get a little bit more creative with things that people might not want to live with on a day-to-day basis. It was a very fun job.

The residential job that was the most innovative was the Orecks' home up in Burnsville's Mountain Air community that was published in *Carolina Home + Garden* last year. The clients were really into art and working with local craftspeople and artisans. They just had so many great ideas, and it was great fun to work with them. Lots of artists and artisans worked on that house.

What are some recent design trends?

I must do things in a classic way, because there are rooms in North Asheville and Biltmore Forest that I worked with clients on over 20 years ago that still look pretty good — though it may be time to call me in for a fresh-up! A good design can last 20 years, and there's no reason why it

shouldn't. But there are more resources now, different resources — more color possibilities, different types of fabrics and prints. One trend is toward more woven fabrics. We have so many cool, interesting woven textures compared to what was around in the 1980s and '90s. We used to have a lot of florals in our sample books, but now it's more woven textures.

The other big trend is thinking green. We have such great-quality, extremely low- or no-VOC paints. I think that in a few years, the rest of the U.S. will be following California in that we won't have oil-based enamels anymore.

What are some good tips for working with a designer?

Doing some homework to know what you want is extremely helpful. Have magazine pages of rooms that you like and even rooms that you don't like. A couple should sit down and spend some time together so they know they're on the same page; or, if they're not, they should be able to communicate that so the designer can kind of be a psychologist too and work with both people. Sometimes I've said I charge extra for marital therapy.

What are some of clients' biggest mistakes?

Running out and buying something on

sale just because it's on sale. People need to make a plan first. For me, that means starting with a space plan. I really think a designer can actually save money for you by keeping you from making mistakes like buying furniture that's the wrong scale for your space, or the wrong color. Scale and proportion is important.

What's a good tip for revitalizing an outdated room on a budget?

Oftentimes you can simply rearrange what you have. Change the accessories. Look around. Is there not some bookcase that's kind of junky-looking? Clean up, straighten up, lighten the load, simplify. Maybe re-cover a nice piece, repaint the walls. Those are all easy things to do on a budget. Check out the lighting, too.

Any parting words of wisdom?

Comfort starts with space planning, and I almost feel like I'm becoming known as the comfort queen, because that is so important to me. That could be good advice to a client, too: figure out what's comfortable, down to fabrics and color.

Our homes are so important to us, and I think this cold, dreary winter we've had has probably made people think about that. Your relationship with your friends, your family and your home all go together. Having a comfortable environment can change your life. It truly can. I've seen it happen. ■

Kathryn Long, ASID holds degrees in Interior Design and Art History (from East Carolina University and the University of Georgia, respectively) and has also studied at the American Center in Paris. Contact Long at kathryn@ambianceasheville.com or at 828-253-9403, or visit www.ambianceasheville.com for more information.