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Go behind the scenes of our cover shoot with Laurel Brown, plus, meet all of the designers up close and personal in our video interviews!



TOP

DESIGN

by SHAYNA MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHS by MARTHA BUSSE

FASHIONABLE FEMME: Designer Laurel Brown's office at Brownhouse is stylishly outfitted with a ponyskin rug and retro prints.

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We've all seen the design shows on HGTV—but how does stuff like that play out in real life? Do Madisonians subscribe to “Design on a Dime,” want orange walls or their home made over in forty-eight hours? Not exactly, say local designers. But we are becoming savvy about what we want and how we want it in our homes. So forget HGTV and read on for what our expert designers say are their personal styles, home splurges and most outrageous projects.

LAUREL BROWN

owner of *Brownhouse*

You've probably seen or heard of something designed by Laurel Brown or Brownhouse—be it Cornbloom's at Hilldale, any number of private residences, or the new luxury apartments called “Lucky” under construction in the old University Square site. Clients use Brown because of her approachable nature and eye for style—“I love your shoes!” she says as I walk into her office (she's wearing snakeskin print heels herself).

Tell me about the Lucky project. It's a multi-use development with housing and retail. There are 364 units. It's an enormous project—it's on a scale I've never worked on before. It's so much fun. It's when you get to take your twenty-five years of experience and put it all to use—it's really exhilarating.

We're also designing the food court—there will be a nine-vendor food court that's going to look like no other food court you've ever seen. The housing, retail and food court phase will be done in August 2008.

What kind of client hires Brownhouse?

[We don't do] a one-room redo—we like to work on a larger scale, like a custom home. Or a client might just want to completely redo the home. We're starting to shift to more residential; it gives us more of a creative outlet. I love working on that kind of stuff.

What's been your favorite project to work on?

Gorman & Company's headquarters in the old Oregon school. I went to school in that building in the sixties; I grew up in that town. To be involved in a renovation project in that town was really fun. There were the lunch trays and chairs—stuff was stacked up because the school was being used as storage. Gary's [Gorman's president] office was in the old art room—I remember that room! It was a really, really fun project.

Where do you like to shop for furniture and the like?

High Point, N.C. It's not because I don't like things from around here, it's just that it's Grand Central Station down there for furniture. It's kind of like going to a mega, mega mall for furniture shopping. You're saving forty percent off.

What furniture lines do you like?

Swaim and Marg Carson. Marg Carson is very Old World, large scale and very decorative. Swaim is high end, urban and clean. It looks like something you'd put in a New York City condo. Both lines have the most amazing finishes and selection.

What does your home look like?

It's an English Tudor. I definitely tend to err to the more traditional—but I love to work in the different styles. I inherited this home when I married. It's a beautiful home. I needed to keep the interior consistent with the outer structure.

I like the house to be filled with things you collect when you travel. We culled interesting pieces: artwork, sculpture,

furniture and decorative items. We have things from everywhere—we spent a month in China and Southeast Asia last year. We brought home some beautiful pieces like a handmade silk screen and a half-size terra cotta soldier.

Do you have a favorite item from your travels? Murano wineglasses. We walked around the factory [in Italy]. They're one of a kind. They're probably my most cherished things to collect.

You say your personal style is more traditional. What if a client wants something totally different?

We figure it out. We try to deliver the best of what that is. Interior design gets a bad rep for that—and some [designers] do get locked into that. It's much more fun to work in different styles, though. To do the same thing over and over again, I'd die of boredom!

What do you tell clients if you don't agree with their ideas?

We deal with this all of the time. First and foremost, my job is about diplomacy. You learn really quickly that you don't bash anyone's ideas. I believe my job is really to educate my clients; I mean, it's making them understand the ramifications of going down a certain path. I use my experience to educate them as to why what they might want to do isn't a good idea.

What makes something well designed in your opinion?

Really good design stands the test of time. Getting the scale right is huge. It also must engage the senses and be tactile. It's all in the details. If people can walk into a space and say, “Wow, I really like this”—they might not know why—but the reason for that is that all of the details were addressed well.

Do you watch any of the design shows or read shelter magazines?

I don't watch any. They de-professionalize the industry and make it look like anyone can do it, they make it look easy, and it's not. We do get *Decorator* magazine, *Interior Design* magazine and *Hospitality Design* magazine.