

McMILLEN COOLER!

Interviews by DOUGLAS BRENNER

McMillen has been the beacon of traditional decorating for eight decades. But the American home is changing fast, so now there's McMillen Plus, a division aimed at younger tastes. Here, three generations of McMillen designers reflect on what people used to want, what they're asking for now—and a few things that never change.



BETTY SHERRILL
Joined McMillen in 1951

"When I started at McMillen, clients liked French furniture. *Period* furniture. Louis XVI. Directoire. Mrs. Brown had a show of French modern furniture, which was very new. Clients didn't so much go for it."

"In the early 1960s we all liked Woodson wallpapers and Paule Marrot fabrics. Then they were unavailable for so long. Now I see that Lilly likes them. I also see that she likes ikats. She used one for the tablecloth at a benefit this year. Hot pinks and oranges—those were colors of the sixties."

"No one's asked for a complete 18th-century English drawing room, or anything like that, in 20 years or more. But I imagine they will again."

"I don't like fancy curtains. *Draperies*—I hate that word."

"Nowadays, at least in all the big houses being built, the downstairs is made up of five or six huge rooms. Each one has huge upholstered sofas, each one has a huge TV, each one has a table and chairs you could eat at, each one has a fireplace, each one has a bar and refrigerator, each one has a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. Real estate agents call one a living room, another a family room, another an eat-in kitchen, and another a media room. But they all look the same to me, and either the family settles into one and leaves the other four empty, or else they rattle around in the house looking for their cell phones and go to restaurants. And how do you furnish these rooms? Even if you have a zillion dollars, all these big rooms just end up looking like hotel lobbies. I hope houses in the future will be smaller,

and if they are large, that there will be more variety in size between the downstairs rooms."

"I hate to see these fancy bathrooms. I mean, I like a nice bathroom, but I've never had a marble one. I'd rather buy pictures and furniture."

"Some decorators fill big rooms with big furniture that people cannot possibly talk across. How could that be good decorating?"

"Don't propose a scheme that is too dependent on perfection. Imagine what the room is going to look like with people in it. Because people take up more space than furniture. Is the room going to be ruined if people wear the wrong clothes, or if someone gives you a flower arrangement you don't like?"

"Have a collection. Collect *something!*"



ANN PYNE
First McMillen job: 1970

"McMillen Plus is not about giving younger people a watered-down, cheaper version of what their parents have. It's a bold kind of approach to decorating. It's 'This room is going to have authority and presence, and nothing's going to get in the way of that.' None of that, 'Oh, maybe people won't like it.'"

"In your second or third house, you have children, they mess things up, so you need practical fabrics. You've collected too many books, so you can't have a very spare-looking room. You entertain 12 people at a time, so you have to have seating groups. But in your first house, you can have a lot of look."

"I like aggressive decorating."

"The first room I decorated for somebody else was the library I did for my

brother in the eighties. Yes, it's *comme il faut*. But it can gobble up the mess. And it's cozy. You come into a room like *this* [pointing to a photo of a pristine bedroom], and put one paperback on the bed, and the room's over. It's dead."

"I still have my black chintz living room from the eighties. I love chintz. I'm just waiting for its return. I can't believe it's been so trashed. First of all, it's a happy fabric. It's also a forgiving fabric if you have other things in the room. But it just got so overdressed, so gooped up. Now no one seems to want floral chintz. They all wanted it then, they all don't want it now."

"Just about every client I have fights their space—they don't want to give in to it. Clients think I'm imposing my will. I'm not. I feel the space has a will."

"Most Plus clients don't have 20 x 30 living rooms where they can have four or five seating groups.

My son's rental living room looks like a tunnel. It dictated a long sofa. That's a Plus thing, not a 45-year-old thing. Forty-five-year-olds don't want to sit on the sofa—as my mother says—like monkeys in a row.”

“Regular macho-idiot guys have incredibly strong tastes in the aesthetics of interiors now. For instance, my son, who wants a long sofa from which to watch a big TV while maintaining the prone position, also says things like, ‘Mom,

with it and bought it the next day. But it turned out to be a piece of junk. Still trying to do what her boss recommended, my mother bought a pair of 18th-century French fauteuils, in 1960. Unfortunately, they haven't increased in monetary value one bit. But the sofa bed my mother had made at De Angelis in 1953 has been in our apartment for 40 years, making it 56 years old, and my grandmother's 72-inch sofa, which was chosen by Sam Hughes

in its fight with the unique disposition of the client. No two rooms and two people ever produce the same combination.”



LILLY BUNN WEEKES

Joined McMillen in 2008

“I'm 28, so I know what people in their twenties and thirties think is cool, fresh, and young. A funky-shaped headboard. Lacquer lampshades. Painted floors in fun

“Younger people want deeper sofas, things you can really sit in. Things are not quite so fussy and small and uncomfortable as maybe they have been in the past.”

“The really good things last forever. Like, we still use Porthault linens in modern apartments.”

“You don't want the whole living room facing the TV. What will people think? You don't want to look like couch potatoes, even if you do

1. ANN PYNE'S GUEST COTTAGE, 2007
2. DINING ROOM FOR KIPS BAY SHOWHOUSE, 2009
3. BREAKFAST ROOM/SOLARIUM, 1975
4. ANN PYNE'S SON'S APARTMENT, 2008
5. BETTY SHERRILL'S APARTMENT, 1968
6. AMBASSADOR WHITEHOUSE'S LIVING ROOM, 1930
7. MRS. BROWN'S DINING ROOM, 1935
8. LILLY WEEKES'S LIVING ROOM, 2008
9. LENOX HILL NEIGHBORHOOD BENEFIT, 2009
10. ANN PYNE'S LIVING ROOM, 1982



that room is banal.' I can't imagine guys I grew up with making statements like that.”

“Any kind of wood, any color, men go, ‘That's beautiful.’ And I'm like, ‘It isn't beautiful. It's red, and it looks like a slab of raw steak. The color is wrong for this room.’ But they don't see the color. The idea takes over. Or people with water. They'll say, ‘I have a water view.’ And I say, ‘Yes, but who wants that view?’ But their mind says it's water, so it's a good view.”

“I hate the phrase ‘the unexpected.’ Usually, part of the reason it's unexpected is, it's wrong.”

“Mrs. Brown always said that young clients should buy one good piece of period furniture. My mother and father did just what she told them: Walking home from El Morocco in 1951, they saw a painted breakfront in a window and fell in love

of McMillen in 1948, has been with us for 30 years, making it well over 60 years old. So here's the point: Buying good period furniture is quite dicey, but buying a well-made upholstered sofa of classic design and average proportion—72 to 84 inches long—is a good investment, and a safe one.”

“What surprises me? People still want to hide their TVs. Thank God Lilly and Christine's clients don't feel that way.”

“The legendary Mrs. Smith, who started at McMillen in 1929 and is now 105, told me, ‘You can tell an amateur decorator because they always spot a fabric around a room, thinking they are giving the room balance.’”

“Everybody has a story in mind when they open the door of your house. But a room that is well done confronts their expectations. And that uniqueness comes from following the unique shape of the room

patterns like checks and herringbone. Scribbling on the ceiling. Faux finishes. Anything mirrored. Patent leather on chairs—in bright colors. People want a lot of bright color. Everything is purple right now. Grass cloth, I love. I could do an entire house in it.”

“Younger people like everything. And that's what's confusing. Most of them want a dance between old and new.”

“You're not stuck with things like you used to be. There's no forever. You're going to buy two or three dining tables in a lifetime. People know they can buy something on eBay or Craigslist—and if it doesn't work, sell it the same way and get a new one. You can sell it, you can buy it. You don't feel as tied to things.”

“Most of our younger clients collect art and photography rather than objects. Those things are easier because you can hang them.”

watch TV all the time.”

“I've actually started to like floral chintz again. I've got stacks of it on my desk. I haven't done anything with it yet, but I'm kind of sitting on it, thinking. I get a little scared off by all this modern stuff, just color-blocking everywhere. I think it might be nice to have something a little more feminine in decorating—if I can find a client who actually wants to do it.”

“What do younger clients not want? Anything chintzy. Any floral patterns. They put their hands up and say, ‘Ew, looks like my mother's house.’ People say that about leopard print a lot. Same thing with wood. For the most part, with any kind of wood, anything that looks Victorian or country, they're like, ‘Could we lacquer it?’”



CHRISTINE GRACE

Joined McMillen in 2009

“Younger people are staying away from Oriental rugs. Lately it's geometrics, patterns, bold color.”

“My clients want to take more chances with color. If there's a color they feel very drawn to in fashion, they may try to bring that into their interior. If you feel that you could live happily with hot pink for the next five years but maybe not the rest of your life, if you think it's chic and you love the way it makes you feel, that's what it's about.”

“People actually say, ‘I think I'm a Charlotte kind of person,’ as in *Sex and the City*, ‘and I see my home looking like hers.’”

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