

KARI WHITMAN: ECO-FRIENDLY DESIGNER *to the* STARS

BY SOPHIA BENNETT

Actor-turned-interior-designer Kari Whitman has had a list of celebrity clients since she started her firm over 20 years ago. While shooting the film "Men at Work" in 1990, she befriended Emilio Estevez, who costarred in the film alongside Charlie Sheen. He was so impressed by her taste and design acumen that he recommended her when a friend was looking for an interior designer. One job led to another, and she launched her own business in 1994.

Since then, Whitman has designed spaces for Kristen Bell, Melanie Griffith and Antonio Banderas,



Virginia Madsen and many other actors and musicians. She's also worked on several high-end commercial projects, including the Park La Brea apartment community in Los Angeles and the 414 Light Street apartments in Baltimore.

Although "designer to the stars" is one of her monikers, she's just as well-known for designing for people dedicated to environmental sustainability. "I'm very much a tree hugger," she quipped during her interview. Her love of Mother Nature dates back to a childhood spent in Boulder, Colorado, a green-minded town where many people were committed to preserving the environment in their community and the planet as a whole. She's always carried that mindset into her work.



The living room of this Dallas estate has inside-mounted double-paneled drapes. The top panel provides light-blocking and privacy, while the sheer panel underneath adds to the windows' aesthetic.



This dining room at a Dallas estate has inside-mount drapes with metal stitching.

REUSE & RECYCLE TO GO GREEN

Whitman says recycling and reuse are critical to her green design philosophy. Both allow humans to utilize fewer raw resources such as oil, metal ores and water. Reusing existing products can also help designers and their clients get surprisingly high-quality products, oftentimes at a lower cost.

"Structures back in the day were made so much better than a lot of our structures now. You can't even get 8-way hand-tied furniture anymore," Whitman says. "When I did Jessica Alba's house, we used the bones of an old couch. We cut the arms down a little bit, changed out the legs, recovered it and you'd never know it was the same couch." She ended up with a beautiful, high-quality end result that didn't require cutting down a tree to build the frame.

Utilizing upcycled fabrics and furnishings, antiques, family heirlooms and collectibles can also make a space feel more personal, which is something Whitman sees as a major shift in decorating philosophy. "Everybody is really about being themselves and expressionism," she says. "So especially in places like Los Angeles and New York, the nightstands don't have to match. It's about expressing who you are through your home. It's about art, thinking outside the box and mixing old with new." The latter, she added, is a big trend that won't go away anytime soon.

SOURCING GREEN PRODUCTS

The other important component to green design is sourcing eco-friendly products. "You have to make sure products are certified, which is hard because it's hard to get certification," Whitman says. She looks for goods that have been approved by Global Green, an environmentally focused nonprofit.

When there is no certified choice, "You have to do some research. We really focus on making sure the companies we're working with are ethical, that the products we're using are made ethically and that we're not taking from the earth more than we're receiving for the house," Whitman says. That includes asking questions about what makes the company's products sustainable and where they source their materials.

As the effects of climate change become more apparent, Whitman says people are increasingly interested in green home products. That's truer in certain parts of the world than others, though. "In New York, most people don't care," she says. "Colorado is super green. L.A. clients have been pretty green. Canada is by far the

greenest country. A lot of Europe—Germany, Scotland and the Danish communities—is very focused on green."

In Whitman's experience, people who are offered both an eco-friendly and non-eco-friendly product are going to go with the greener option as long as she can explain why it's green and why it's better. Depending on the situation, she might not even bring conventional products to clients. "I just had a royal family who really wasn't green, and I just showed them green products," she says. "Now they are green and they don't even know it."

That's getting easier all the time because there are now a wider variety of products that are beautiful, high quality and just happen to be made with sustainable materials. "There are a lot of fabrics that are made with hemp or bamboo now that feel like silk," says Whitman. "They have new hemp and bamboo carpets that are unbelievable. They feel just like a silk carpet but they're much better for the environment. One of my favorite companies is PaperStone, which makes these countertops from recycled paper. They're absolutely gorgeous."





"I like to use a net fabric and line it with solid white velvet so that it gives depth with an illusion of two separate tracks. This creates movement in each piece of the fabric," says Whitman.

TRENDS IN WINDOW COVERINGS

When it comes to choosing window coverings, Whitman is big into sheers. She credits Philippe Starck, one of her greatest design inspirations, with helping to start the trend. "The hotel I just did had these high ceilings that I love, so I did these 40-foot white flowing sheers," she says. "They bring a softness to a space, especially if you have big windows. I'd say they work best with taller rooms and bigger windows because they're so dramatic."

She also likes sheers for modern spaces. "I don't like my modern spaces to feel cold. I want them to feel contemporary and comfy."

One fun touch for a room with sheers is to paint the wall with an accent color that will show through the draperies and add interest. Another idea is to source fabric with thin lines of brass or other metallic thread running through it. It's available from several

companies, including Ramtex, Inc. and Pollack Fabrics. Anytime she does sheers, she adds an electric shade system that can be used to darken the room when needed.

For rooms with shorter ceilings—those in the eight- to 10-foot range—Whitman is more likely to source flat roman shades, which are the only style she likes. "They should always be inside the window, not outside."

Roman shades are also hung on motorized systems for easy raising and lowering. Whenever possible, Whitman uses motorized systems that are solar-powered, such as those offered by Savant and Somfy. They add a green touch to shades of any color, size and style.



KARI WHITMAN'S WALL MAKEUP

"When most people decide to paint, they go to the store and buy six different colors of green and see which one they like," says Whitman. "Then what happens is you have all these paint cans sitting in your garage because paint is really hard to recycle."

That problem led Whitman to develop a product called Wall Makeup. The kit comes with eight colors that can be stirred into white paint to create different customized shades at home. Designers or homeowners can mix up a range of colors

and test them until they find the perfect hue. Instead of throwing out several test cans, all you have to dispose of is the paint samples. Leftover bottles of paint and color tints can be saved for future projects. ✕

Wall Makeup kits are \$39.95 plus \$14 shipping and handling. Purchase them online at wallmakeup.com.