



Breezy and Bright

JULIE NIGHTINGALE DESIGN

text: JULIE NIGHTINGALE | photography: JANE BEILES (JANEBEILES.COM)

Designer Julie Nightingale's neutral and soothing palettes are a perfect pairing with her easy, elegant style.

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DESIGN

TELL US ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY TO BECOMING AN INTERIOR DESIGNER:

Growing up in Texas, I definitely played around with interior design as a kid—I was always rearranging my bedroom and painting it different colors. I went to college at Tulane in New Orleans, where I majored in English and minored in studio art. After graduation, I moved to New York City, having no real career direction other than I wanted to do something creative. I ended up in the fashion industry; I worked at Calvin Klein for several years in their showroom, and then did some PR for fashion and beauty. But it was more sales and PR than the creativity I craved. So in my mid-twenties, I went back to school to get my graduate degree in interior design at the New York School of Interior Design. I completed the two-year program, and completely fell in love. I stayed on the semester after, working as a drafting teacher's assistant and just really loved it. Through my drafting teachings, I received a lot of freelance jobs doing drafting for larger companies, which led me to branch off on my own as a freelance drafter for a few months. Before long, I started getting my first clients for complete interior design projects.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE WHEN YOU TACKLED YOUR FIRST INTERIOR DESIGN PROJECT FOR A CLIENT?

My first project was a bachelor's one-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side. He really gave me full rein to work my talent. That led me to his parents, who bought a three-bedroom apartment that needed a major gut renovation and required construction management. That experience led me to contractors and a team of people I would continue to work with for the next three to four years in New York. In 2002, we moved out to Rowayton, Connecticut. After decorating a neighbor's house where we live, I worked off of referrals for eight years. It wasn't until last year that I finally photographed some projects, got my website together, and started getting some press. Now everything has sort of taken off!

HAVE YOU NOTICED A DIFFERENT DESIGN SENSIBILITY IN NEW ENGLAND COMPARED TO NEW YORK?

There are different facets of each location to take advantage of in regards to design. In New York, it is all about working within a confined space and taking advantage of as much light as possible—which is extremely different from where we are. In Connecticut, there is a lot more of an indoor/outdoor relationship; how the house relates to the environment around it is important here. In New York, you are doing the opposite. Unless you have a great view and maybe a terrace, you are usually creating your own cocoon away from all the hustle and bustle. It is a different point of attack, and the style is different. New York is a little more streamlined and contemporary. For me, it is a different clientele as well. In New York, I did a lot of bachelor apartments; that was my niche when I was starting out. Out here, I do family houses with kids and pets.

HOW DO YOU STAY ORGANIZED WHILE JUGGLING MULTIPLE PROJECTS?

Lots of Post-it notes everywhere! I am very old-fashioned. I have a giant red Filofax that weighs thirty pounds that I keep my life in. Everyone who knows me knows my red book! I am a visual person. I like to write things down. I use my iPhone and computer

as the necessary electronics. But I have a lot of paper. Design is still a tactile job. You can't do everything on the computer. You need to touch the fabric. You need to do the room sketch. I feel so much more connected to the actual process that way. I use paper and pen, and I keep really good files and systems in place—or at least I try to. I have an office in my house on the third floor, and I come up here and escape into my little nest where I keep everything. I find it manageable to have two or three projects going on simultaneously. Because projects take different ebbs and flows throughout the process, I prefer to have a little spacing between starting one and starting another. Most of my projects are full-scale interior design jobs that take about nine months to complete. If we get into construction, then it obviously takes longer. I work best when I am busy. When you've got multiple projects and you're going into the city, you can multitask as well—to an extent!

WHO DO YOU ADMIRE IN THE DESIGN WORLD?

I have three: I love Victoria Hagan for her fixed simplicity and pared down palette. On the other extreme, I love Kelly Wearstler projects. I think her color and materials in exuberance are just so gorgeous. She is just so talented and brought a whole new direction. And lastly, Tom Scheerer. I just got his new book (*Tom Scheerer Decorates*); it is an amazing mix of old and new, traditional and modern. His style is more of what I try to accomplish with my projects—I take a little bit of the old and the new, and that balance helps to keep the design fresh. For me, it is all about that balance and respecting the more traditional architecture and the environs of Connecticut where I live.

ONCE YOU'VE SELECTED A DIRECTION FOR THE DESIGN, WHAT IS YOUR PLANNING PROCESS LIKE?

First thing I do with any job is go to the project, and feel what I think the furniture arrangement should be in the space planning. Even if the client has plans for me, I need to go stand in that room to see where it feels right to place the furniture. From there, I measure it out, and go back to my desk to create floor plans for each space (which are



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had bought for the original house, we really had to grow from there since this was a much bigger space with many more bedrooms and living spaces.

WHAT WAS YOUR CLIENT LOOKING FOR IN TERMS OF AESTHETIC AND FEELING OF THE SPACE?

The second house has an open plan architecture (designed by Roger Bartels, who is quite a well-known architect around here). The space was cavernous feeling; there wasn't a lot of warmth to it. It felt quite cold, open, and big. For a single guy living alone with his high school- and college-aged sons staying with him part time, I wanted it to feel intimate and cozy for him—much like his first house. I wanted to make it feel cozier for him, but obviously be able to handle forty of his sons' friends. But it also had to be elegant and sophisticated so that whatever happen within my client's life, the house would still be appropriate. I darkened the floors and painted the walls a taupe gray color. From there, I provided some contrast and started working with layering textures—incorporating lots of sisal rugs, art, and furniture until we created more coziness throughout the house.

HOW WAS THE ART CHOSEN?

The art collection was key in both spaces and really set each home apart from being just another great beach house. We hired Elizabeth Parks, an art consultant in New York (www.parksfineart.com). She worked with the client and me to really build a contemporary collection that reflected this very personal connection between the client and the art. We started off with pretty simple rules for him—no sailboats and no landscapes since he was coming from a traditional background—and educated the client about the contemporary art world and its emerging artists. As we progressed beyond the abstract and the figurative, it really became what spoke to him. For example, on the stairwell wall in the foyer, there is a square collage made up of hundreds of matchbook covers. One matchbook cover had the name of the company where the client had his first job as a kid. He was instantly connected to that. We took a step back from it and liked the overall punch of color. It has some red with some pattern that worked well

just rough sketches with the furniture shapes and sizes drawn in). That is what I work off of throughout the process. It really helps for me to see it in plans. From there, I start to pull the paint colors, fabrics, and wallpapers to see what works where. There might be a great fabric that you want for the living room that doesn't work, so you can use it in the family room instead. There is definitely symbiotic relationships going on. It all comes together layer by layer.

WHERE IS THE MOST INSPIRING PLACE IN THE WORLD THAT YOU'VE TRAVELED TO? WHAT MADE IT SO THRILLING?

I think I am most inspired while sitting at my desk and looking out my window at Long Island Sound—looking at the sand, the sea, and the sky. Those are really my favorite

colors—grays, beiges, blues, greens, and all these really subtle colors. I am inspired by the ever-changing light that occurs across the water and the fog. I love to travel all over the world, but I would say that connecting to my environment here is truly beautiful.

WHAT DO YOU FIND THE MOST FULFILLING ABOUT INTERIOR DESIGN?

I treasure the relationships that I build with each of my clients. I think the home is sacred. It is so important for all of us to have an environment that makes us feel happy, healthy, relaxed, and safe and secure. I encourage people to do what they can—whether it ends up being simple or extravagant—to make their house feel like a place where they want to come home to; it should be a real reflection of their personality. That is what I try to give

my clients; I love creating these homes that they fully enjoy every day.

TELL US HOW THIS PROJECT CAME ABOUT:

The house to the left of me was purchased by my client—a single, divorced guy whose teenage boys stay with him part time. I completely decorated his fairly small three-bedroom house, and he loved it! It was a great working relationship. The next year, the house on the other side of me came on the market, which was about three times the size as the one he was living in and located on the corner with a lot more space for his boys and his boys' friends who would all gather at the house. He ended up buying that house on the other side of me. We had just a good time working together and picking things back up again. Although we transferred everything that we



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for the neutral stairwell. It was also important to go to the galleries and talk to the representatives in order to find out the meaning behind the paintings and whether the client had a connection to them or not. Learning the stories behind the pieces was the ultimate deciding factor. He now has this really edgy art—a mix of paintings, mixed-media collages, and photographs. He has everything from Ed Ruscha to Robert Mangold, Michael Dweck, Harry Burns, LeRoy Grannis, and William Powhida.

SUM UP THE THEME AND INSPIRATION BEHIND THIS PROJECT IN A COUPLE OF SENTENCES:

I don't think there is an overall theme other than keeping it light, bright, and comfortable. I tend to work in a neutral palette. I am drawn to pale, cool colors. I also find it important to bring the natural elements indoors; tied throughout, I always have natural elements in a room, whether it is a sisal rug or some baskets or a horn sculpture. In this case, the art (and sometimes the accessories) then punches up each room and gives it a different personality.

DESCRIBE YOUR DESIGN STYLE:

If I needed to sum up my style, it would be easy elegance. That is the look that I go for with my clients—elegant but also comfortable. Generally, I am much more neutral in my design style. I love soft, pale colors. But I like the pop of color that great art and accessories add to a space.

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT EXEMPLIFY AND HIGHLIGHT YOUR FIRM'S TALENTS?

I pride myself and my firm on creating unique interiors for each of my clients. If you



look on my website and see my different projects, there is definitely a common thread—I have elements that I like to repeat—but they are all quite different. I try to have the client's personality come out in the project so that it feels like their space is unique to them. I think this project was successful in that it is an elegant, sophisticated space that would work for a man and a woman, or just a man. It doesn't scream bachelor pad. It is a reflection of him, especially with the personal art.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE STYLE SECRET?

Don't try to match everything up. A room looks much more sophisticated if it is a bit of a mishmash. Take the work of Michael S. Smith, a great decorator whose done the White House. You look at his rooms, and nothing matches; but it all works. When you stop focusing on having everything match, the room will look more evolved over time. As long as you are finding great pieces that you love, it will all pull together.

SHED SOME LIGHT ON YOURSELF OUTSIDE OF THE DESIGN WORLD:

I live in Rowayton with my husband and my three children. I have a ten-year-old daughter and six- and eight-year-old boys. We love to travel together. My husband and I race sail boats competitively, and we travel around North America a couple of times a year and race in the nationals. That is our passion. I also play tennis, love art, and love to chase my kids around.

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