

EYE FOR DESIGN

Inspire owner tracks trends for 2009

BY LIBBY MCMILLAN
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Savvy locals picked up right away on the darling furnishings, décor and gifts boutique fronting West First Street in downtown Fort Myers. Just across from High Point Place, the cozy showroom called Inspire does exactly that. Its owner, Karen Benson, inspires clients across Southwest Florida with her successful interior design aesthetic.

The youthful Benson is actually a long-time fixture on the Fort Myers design scene. While still fresh out of college, she became the on-staff interior designer with Parker Mudgett Architects.

"At that time," she says, "we were the only firm in town that had a designer."

Ms. Benson got involved in drafting, planning and doing construction drawings, she explains, as she unrolls detailed renderings of current projects. Now with her own successful design studio just steps from Inspire, Ms. Benson still creates floor plans, elevations and perspectives for her clients, before moving to the selection process of goods like cabinetry, countertops, wall and floor coverings and furnishings. Husband Lowell Benson is moving his architectural offices to a space in between the store and studio, so very soon the Bensons will provide a one-stop experience for residents craving change.

Ms. Benson's interior design business is 75 percent residential projects, but she began in commercial design and still loves it. "I've done a ton of retail stores; over 50 locally," she says, citing projects in the Edison Mall expansion, Royal Palm shop-

ping center, and Fort Myers' prestigious Bell Tower. "Most of my business is word of mouth," says Ms. Benson, who is often hired to envision spaces being remodeled.

"I want to be a client's advocate," she says. This approachable designer stresses that she'll work within any budget, even consulting for an hour or two, to reassure homeowners they're on the right track, or give constructive suggestions. She also conducts numerous design seminars throughout the year at High Point Place.

My favorite thing to do residentially," she says, "is to start when someone is still in the planning stage. I do space planning; I get involved with lighting design, cabinetry and built-ins before the construction is ever started. And that's where the architectural experience has helped."

Ms. Benson revealed how and when she learned what would be coming into vogue. "When the fabrics come in," she says. "Fabric reps are my best friend. Their companies have already paid the money to a color marketing group. They've had their designers looking at Fashion Week in Europe. The new fabric sample book fits exactly with the trends for 2009: organic, handmade, global."

"The handmade look is big," explains Ms. Benson, showing new examples of furnishings and fabrics that emulate an imperfect yet appealing sensibility. Sustainability and green design are a big influence on design at the present; this is a trend that may well continue for some time. "Also, what I've heard," reveals Ms. Benson, "is that when times are tough, people return to their roots, and the handmade style makes them



Karen Benson, in front of Inspire, her new furnishings and accessories store in downtown Fort Myers. COURTESY PHOTO

feel comfortable."

Many of the furnishings and accessories at this fall's High Point market were of organic materials, or sported organic shapes. Retro Glam is also big, with several lines paying homage to a look not unlike the abode of a 1930's starlet. Swarovski crystals are popping up on pillows and lamps. Some striking lines are blending Glam with a contemporary bent, resulting in pieces which will stand the test of time. Ms. Benson also pointed out a host of gorgeous pieces that seamlessly incorporate both organic and metallic elements; metallics remain hot this year, as do animal prints.

This year's soon-to-be-hot colors are also revealed in Ms. Benson's new fabric samples. Earthy palettes that harken back to comfort are present, such as the earthy 'Napa Valley' palette of browns, greens,

deep blues and plums. "And the 'global' trend is keeping red, white and black a hot combo," she says.

Not sure what style would really suit you best? "A person's home interior usually holds with their fashion sense," Ms. Benson says. "You'll generally wear what you're comfortable living in."

Ms. Benson travels for inspiration, reads piles of magazines, and pores over photos her clients bring her of looks that they find appealing. "A lot of designers have signature styles, and you go to that designer for that look," says downtown's easy-going, one-of-a-kind creative force. "I don't ever want to be that designer."

For more information about Karen L. Benson & Associates, call 334-4111 or go online to www.klbinteriors.com, or e-mail Karen@klbinteriors.com. ■

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