

THE METROPOLITAN BUILDER

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Dialogue with a Designer



**BATHS**
OF AMERICA
FINE BATH & KITCHEN GALLERY

Kendra Benson

Kendra Benson Interiors | Houston, TX



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BATHS OF AMERICA opened its doors in January 2005 when brothers Ali and Zeeshan Sultanali decided to start selling plumbing and tiles to the Houston market. Baths of America focuses on customer service and partners only with brands offering quality products and customer service. In addition to plumbing, Baths of America now provides door and cabinet hardware, major appliances, cabinetry, and countertops. It has turned into a one-stop shop for designers, builders, and architects, offering the latest designs and trends in the market.

This BATHS OF AMERICA speaks with: Kendra Benson, Allied ASID, a Houston native, who discovered her passions for construction and design in her teen years and decided to attend The Art Institute of Houston, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Interior Design in 2009. She then studied under some of Houston's top designers, such as Jane Page Crump of Jane Page Design Group and Teena Caldwell of Twenty-Two Fifty Interiors. Kendra eventually moved into an administrative position for The American Society of Interior Designers Texas Gulf Coast Chapter, where she came to know many industry partners and designers across Greater Houston. In 2019, she started her own company, Kendra Benson Interiors, and has designed 10+ homes as the lead designer with

Echo Custom Homes, a company of Houston natives that serves the needs of the evolving Houston culture. Kendra recently became the 2022-23 President-elect to the board for The American Society of Interior Designers Texas Gulf Coast Chapter and will serve as President for the 2023-24 year. On top of running her own business and serving on the ASID TXGC board, Kendra also coaches middle school and high school cheerleading at her Alma Mater, Lutheran North Academy.

BATHS OF AMERICA: What motivated you to enter interior design?

Kendra Benson: I grew up in a construction family - my grandfather was in construction, my dad is currently the COO of a large commercial and industrial concrete construction company, and my brother is the Director of Project Management for that same company. In my teen years, I constantly rearranged my bedroom, updated my bedding, and even organized and rearranged my friend's rooms during sleepovers. But when my childhood home flooded in 2001 during Tropical Storm Allison, I decided Interior Design would be my career path. We had to gut and remodel the entire 1st floor of the home, which overwhelmed my mom, so she relied on my eye to make final decisions. Before college, I worked at an interior



design boutique specializing in baby bedding and furniture, among other things. I didn't know what I was doing, but I quickly learned how to pull fabrics and finishes together. That job helped me confirm that I wanted to move forward in the field of interior design.

BATHS OF AMERICA: How has the field of interior design changed since you graduated?

Kendra Benson: Technology and media have been the main changes I've seen since graduating with my degree in Interior Design. In my final year of school, 3D modeling was just introduced into the Interior Design world but was mainly used in commercial design. Anyone can create a 3D image of a space if they want. The virtual reality technology that is being done now is also insane. Clients can walk through their fully furnished home using VR before the home is even built!

Media has also changed since I graduated. HGTV was becoming popular, Instagram hadn't even launched, and Facebook was pretty new to the public. Before these media outlets, Interior Design was something you only saw in high-end magazines and was more of a luxury than a commodity. Media has changed Interior Design by making it accessible and acceptable to a broader spectrum of people. Now, everyone can see thousands of photos online to get inspiration, see DIY tips and tricks, and even purchase products directly from those photos.

While media and technology have helped the industry grow and become more commonplace, it has also hindered the profession. Client's now think they don't need a designer because they saw an influencer DIY something on Instagram. They believe that they can narrow down their design style and make all the purchases because they have access to thousands of photos online. While some people can do those things, most end up spending way more money and time than needed and hiring a designer to "clean up" what they've started. The moral of that story is to hire a designer from day one to at least consult you through the process. I always tell potential clients, "I'm here to help you make this house YOUR home, not mine."

BATHS OF AMERICA: How can an experienced interior designer help a custom home builder or a remodeling contractor with their building or remodeling projects?

Kendra Benson: This is my favorite question because it's what I specialize in. Many people think that Interior Designers are here to pick paint colors, select sofas, and fluff pillows. While we do indeed make those selections, we offer so much more than that! Interior Designers are trained in all aspects of the building process. While we are not framing, electrical, plumbing, etc., experts, we have ample knowledge of each field. The building and remodeling processes can be very overwhelming, even to a construction professional. Take my brother, for example, he builds large buildings like skyscrapers and stadiums



every day, but the process of building his house was very overwhelming due to all the little details that went into it. Interior designers make selections and act as the liaison between the builder and the client. We know what to look for during the building process and what questions to ask; we speak the same language as the builder. We understand the cost, time, and quality products and can help ensure that the job is done correctly. We can help you stay on track with making selections and ordering products, so the project runs smoothly and you stay within budget. Designers are also helpful in the building and remodeling process because we can suggest revisions early on to avoid costly change orders. I had a client recently that hired her own contractor and already had the idea of how she wanted to remodel the kitchen and master bathroom. She initially hired me to only help with selections, but soon realized that she was unable to answer some of the contractor's essential questions and ended up bringing me in to help answer those questions. We also made a few minor changes to her original remodel design, which helped open the space even more and make it more functional.



The main thing I hear from clients when someone suggests hiring a designer to help them with their new build or remodel is that it's an extra cost they don't need or can't afford. Builders and contractors are not detailed and are not designers. They will not tell you that a door is in an awkward spot, lights need to be moved, or plumbing isn't in the right place – they will build whatever is on the plan and not even blink. Then, in the end, you wind up spending more money to fix the problems than if you had hired the designer, to begin with. Many people might ask how I find an excellent designer to work with me on my project. Ask the builder or contractor if they have worked with a designer before. Most of them have a list of designers they work with and trust. Also, don't be afraid to interview the designers. Working with a designer equates to a relationship. You will spend a lot of time with that person over the following three months to a year (or more), so you want to ensure your vibe.



BATHS OF AMERICA: What has been your most challenging project and why?

Kendra Benson: This is a hard one... I think that all design projects have their challenges. Most of my large remodel projects have been challenging in some way, but they are my favorite. Having to take something that already exists and reconfigure it within the current bones of the structure

is always such a fun and challenging puzzle. The main challenge I find in remodels is trying to make a difference without removing structural walls. Typically I'm not particularly eager to get engineers and permits involved due to the time and red tape, so I do my best to work within the support walls. This may initially stress the client, but they eventually come to appreciate the time and money saved from doing so and of the ending results.

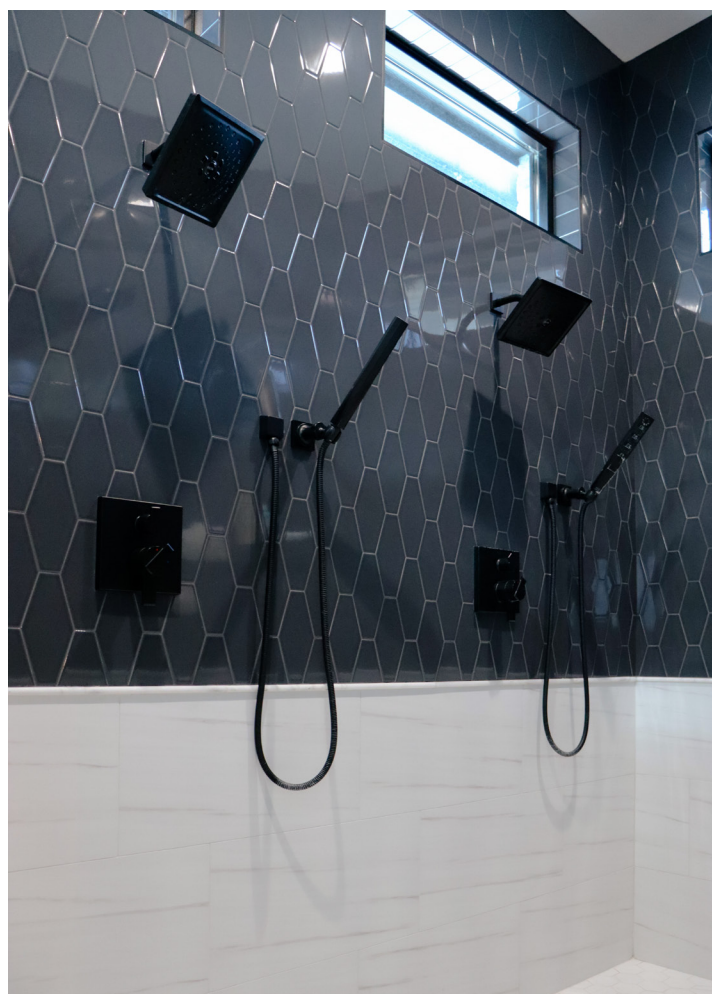
BATHS OF AMERICA: How do you begin the materials selection process when working with builders' and remodelers' clients?

Kendra Benson: It all begins with the clients. Inspiration photos help me to narrow down a look and style. The clients usually have an idea of what kind of look they want for their home, so I help them bring all the best and budget-friendly pieces together to achieve that look. Clients always want to start with tile and countertops, but I always begin with cabinets and plumbing and build from there. It's hard for many of them to visualize that, but it always comes together in the end.

BATHS OF AMERICA: What are some common mistakes made by builders and homeowners?

Kendra Benson: The main common mistake is not hiring a designer. The designer doesn't have to be there to add elaborate changes and details but can act as a consultant and a liaison between the builder and homeowner.

A super common mistake builders/architects make is not planning space for the furniture that is going to be in the room. The fireplace may not be centered correctly in a living room, making for poor furniture planning. Maybe bedroom windows are too low to the ground or in locations where a bed should go – no bed wall. Perhaps the kitchen layout isn't functional. One complaint I hear the most from people building new homes is that the closets are too small and/or shallow. Clothes take 21-24" of depth when hanging – that's a lot of space! While designers can maximize that hanging space based on their layouts, some clients still lose the precious space they thought they had. To avoid mistakes, hire a designer early in the process – that goes for builders and homeowners!



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