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DIALOGUE WITH A DESIGNER

INTERVIEW WITH CARLA ASTON, ASID, RID



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Morrison Showrooms know that dreams, reality and inspiration make a house a home. They also know that an interior designer or interior design firm often become an intricate part of this process. Design professionals should be committed to creating individualized and functional designs to meet the lifestyles of their clients' families. Morrison works to inspire these ideas in its conveniently located showroom in the heart of Houston. Morrison offers many brands and designs, all exhibited in unique settings with interactive displays. Whether it's appliances, plumbing, hardware or lighting, they have brand to fit every budget and a style to fit every design. Contact Joann Ontiveros 713-861-2343 for more details.

This month Morrison speaks with Carla Aston, ASID, RID, owner of Aston Design Studio. After graduating with a degree in design, Carla spent nine years in the Dallas area employed by architectural and design firms working on all types of corporate, hospitality and high-end residential projects. After having children, she then followed her husband's work overseas and lived in Australia and Norway. Carla said she was so lucky to be able to travel and enjoyed observing different cultures, architecture and styles of living which broadened her perspective on design.

Since 2001, Carla has owned the studio of her dreams, Aston Design Studio in The Woodlands, where she designs all types of residential interiors. She loves to help clients create meaningful, beautiful, functional spaces to nurture their lives and loved ones.

Morrison: *What motivated you to go into the interior design field?*

Carla Aston: When I was in high school, I took home economics classes. We had a section on interior design and within that period there was a competition for home design, sponsored by local furniture stores. We created floor plans, sample boards, color schemes, etc. I ended up as one of the top finalists. As finalists, we had to arrange a vignette in one of the furniture stores, and then we were judged. I ended up winning first prize and got a small monetary award. I fell in love with design and the whole process involved. I went on to major in interior design in college.

Morrison: *How has the field of interior design changed since you graduated?*

Carla Aston: It's always been competitive and it's not a



high-paying job. You either make it big or you struggle. It's just hard to validate your experience and expertise with something like interior design. Everyone sort of thinks they can do it. That part has never changed. What has changed has been the way designers do business, market themselves, and make money. The internet has impacted our whole business, enabling clients to have more access to products and information, which can be good and bad. It's great that clients have exposure to good design and information, but it can overwhelm and take them off in random, different directions many times.

Morrison: *How can an experienced interior designer help custom home builders or remodeling contractors with their building or remodeling projects?*

Carla Aston: I find many builders and remodelers have to spend a lot of time up front with clients, helping them with decisions, if a designer is not involved. This process really isn't a contractor's expertise, and it takes a lot of extra time that the contractor is not getting paid for. Designers are there to make the contractor's or builder's job easy, letting them focus on what they do best, building the project. We're the ones working directly with the client on design; we're the ones helping guide the

decisions to get the client to their overall design goals for their project. Then, we develop drawings, specifications, etc., that serve as the road map for the contractor so they can proceed full steam ahead with decisions made and a plan for the project.

Morrison: *What sets you apart from other designers?*

Carla Aston: I have a lot of experience in construction and tend to detail things to death. That really leaves no questions for the contractor or builder about what is to be done on the job. I worked for a large architectural firm at the beginning of my career, working side-by-side with gifted production and design architects, who produced amazing construction details. I understand how materials are put together, how cabinetry is built, what decisions need to be made on the job to get the project done. We produce complete sets of drawings with finish schedules, specifications and notes, so that there are few questions when it's time to build. We don't just stand on a job site and wave our hands around describing in words what we want or deliver pictures for the contractor to copy.

Morrison: *What has been your most challenging project and why?*

Carla Aston: The most challenging projects are where the homeowners really are unsure of what they want and have difficulty making decisions OR if the homeowner is too set on certain aspects of the design and doesn't want to hear new ideas. There's a happy balance in between that is a good fit for a designer/client relationship. Understanding what the clients' goals are and being able to communicate them, then being able to grant some artistic license to the designer to create a unique space just for them, is really the best relationship for both parties. It utilizes the designer's strengths and gets the most out of their talents for the client.

Morrison: *How do you begin the materials selection process when working with builders' and remodelers' clients?*

Carla Aston: I always begin by looking at floor plans. Laying out furniture, seeing where the vistas are through the home, identifying focal points and places where the most impact can be made with expenditures is somehow more apparent when viewed in the floor plan. Then I take to the elevations to bring that space up to become a volume to comprehend. At that point, you can decide,

based on the architecture, the volume, the visuals from various vantage points where it would be good to create impact. You can then see where to have pattern, where it would be appropriate to create detail, where an expensive material might be best enjoyed or noticed, etc.

I just worked on a kitchen remodel where we are doing some cabinet modification, but basically keeping what they have. We're doing new paint on the cabinets, new countertops, backsplash, lighting. When I elevated the main wall of the kitchen, the focal point, I realized that one odd cabinet at the end (an upper cabinet with a microwave) was hanging there, disrupting the symmetry of the rest of the wall. There was a central hood with adjacent cabinetry and then symmetrical windows on each side. It became apparent that the end cabinet could be easily removed and a microwave drawer installed in a lower cabinet, then freeing up that space for a more impactful design.

At that point, I knew I wanted to tile that whole wall around the cabinetry and windows, and a herringbone pattern would perfectly accentuate the height of the ceilings and bring a subtle tone-on-tone undulation to that wall. Then, I looked for the appropriate tile to use in that pattern. It's being constructed now and will be an amazing transformation.

That's typically my process; however, I can be inspired by a material or client preferences as well.

Morrison: Speaking about staying current, how to you keep yourself up to date with all the design trends happening in the industry today

Carla Aston: I attend industry shows like KBIS every year and frequent all of our local showrooms often. I am really plugged into what's going on in design nationally, with lots of social media industry contacts. I write a design blog and am connected with other design bloggers and industry leaders, vendors, and designers.

Morrison: What would be your recommendation for "what to do first" in a decorating project when working with the builders and/or homeowners?

Carla Aston: I think homeowners need to decide what their end goals are and step back and really look at the value of their property and their long-term plans. One thing to consider is how long they anticipate being in their home. If they plan to be there five to seven years,



then the approach to that job is more for the here and now. Remodeling for someone who is going to stay for 20 years really should be addressed more with eye on the future. Budgets are also limiting factors and must be considered from the start. I really like making the design of the home fairly cohesive and where the quality level is dispersed throughout the home in appropriate levels. Then they should start looking at style, creating idea books and collecting images of what they like, keeping in mind budget constraints and allowances.

You may contact Carla Aston Design Studio at 26202 Oak Ridge Drive, Ste. A101, The Woodlands, TX 77380 or at 281-364-6633. You may read her blog at <http://carlaaston.com/designed>.



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