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resident



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the great indoors

Interview by Judith Wilson

Juliette Byrne is a designer on a mission. Soft-spoken yet with a precise manner, immaculately dressed but with a hands-on approach, she clearly practises what she preaches when she says that it is the 'quality of the work that matters.' With an ever-growing portfolio of prestigious residential commissions, and offices on Cheyne Walk, her company, Juliette Byrne Interior Design Associates, has seen a steady rise since launching in the late 1980s. 'Clients come to us because we offer a highly personal service,' she says. 'Communication is vital – they are involved with choices every step of the way.'

This spring promises to be a particularly busy one. Juliette has just landed a commission for a 'very contemporary' residential job in Dublin, and will be shuttling back and forth from London. The project is a lateral first-floor apartment in a Victorian villa in the grounds of a ruined castle, and is 'a complete gut job'. Juliette is already devising a rich, luxurious scheme along strong, clean lines. 'To compliment the subdued, soft tones of the city, we'll make the flat sumptuous and cosy with jewel colours and exciting finishes, such as mohair, suede and hardwood veneers,' she says.

As a designer who began her career working for a property developer, it is no surprise that Juliette relishes working on projects from scratch. She is as comfortable handling budgets and schedules as she is creating schemes: she studied interior design at Chelsea School of Art. 'I never forget that clients want value for money: we are there to advise them on budget, as well as discovering their tastes,' she says firmly. Working on renovation jobs means she can indulge her love of bespoke fittings, from integrated entertainment systems to high-tech lighting. Over the years, she's built up a team of specialists dedicated to the task.

Currently, Juliette's halfway through the design of a family house in Regent's Park, where the owner has a spectacular collection of Tang dynasty horses and military robes. 'I asked product designer Keith Wrightson to create Perspex cases with fibre optic lighting – the look is crisp but exotic,' she comments. Although Juliette willingly undertakes traditional interiors, her current work reflects a more contemporary design aesthetic. At the Regent's Park house, Christian Liaigre sofas sit cheek by jowl with macassar ebony tables from Rabih Hage. And at a house in Walton Street, for which she's doing her third revamp in 18 years, the story is the same. 'Everything is fresher, with cleaner lines,' she says. 'I've gone back to the bones of the property, which is exactly how I like to work.'

In a career that has spanned 25 years, Juliette has seen many trends come and go. So does she see a major change now? 'Clients are tiring of the monochrome look and want to invest in rich, sophisticated finishes,' she says. To this end, she'll source unusual surfaces, from a decorative marble to a walnut veneer, and likes to use beautiful wallpaper, or a paper-backed silk, to create a feature wall. She comments that there's a change, too, in the way living space is organised. 'Clients think nothing of sacrificing smaller bedrooms in favour of a vast master bedroom, dressing room and en-suite bathroom.' It has also become more popular to use a second bedroom as a multi-functional home office/media room. 'Many of my clients regularly work at home, so a peaceful environment is crucial.'

Clients may flock to Juliette's company for beautiful, streamlined spaces and efficient project-management, but it is refreshing to see that she isn't an egotistical designer. On the larger commissions, she will often team up with fellow interior designers Catherine Pawson, or Henrietta Holroyd, to create the perfect mix of skills. 'But whether we're working on a small rental property or an entire house, attention to detail is paramount,' she concludes. 'The choices are high quality – and we encourage that.'

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