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# Soft modern with a twist

Jill Abelman  
creates highly  
personalized  
urban environments

BY ERIC SHELLHORN

Jill and Marc Abelman in their >  
downtown interior design firm





The accomplished interior designer winces perceptibly as she recalls the look and layout of her first apartment.

"It was a little guest house in Long Beach California, probably about 700 square feet total," she recalls of the humble digs she rented in the early 1980s. "I had these two mauve sofas—I'd never do anything in mauve today—and handpainted pillows and a black ebony upright piano. Oh, and there was an art deco bar. It was fun."

Fun enough, apparently, that a former beau once prophetically remarked, "You should do this for a living." Abelman, who at the time was working as a singer in a Top 40 cover band that toured around the West Coast, leaped at the idea.

"I immediately decided to enroll at a design school in Orange County, and as soon as I went through orientation, I said to myself, 'I'm going to be doing this forever,'" she remembers.

Though she's careful to distance her current work from the aesthetic that shaped her formative Southern California space, Abelman, who co-owns the downtown interior design firm, Inside Style, with husband and business-development director Marc, notes that a few hallmarks of her style were evident even then.

"There was no clutter and no kitsch, but I used a lot of bold colors throughout the house," she says. "I like big, bold statements. When you look at my portfolio, you might describe what I do as 'soft modern, with a twist.' There are comfortable textures, warm lighting, lots of books. To me, a space should beckon you to come sit."





These days, the spaces she creates are also beckoning a fair share of clients—anywhere from a dozen to 15 at a time, she reports. Abelman generally limits herself to residential design, though since moving the firm's offices to 1119 South Main St. in the downtown arts district in September, she's taken pains to overhaul a cavernous 1940s retail space that had been largely neglected for years. The building comprises a storefront, generous office space, a central work station that Abelman refers to as her design "laboratory," and a receiving area that may one day double as an event space.

Sometimes the work is relatively routine: Abelman is adept at helping clients tackle the basics of modern home design, from choosing paint colors and carpet to furniture or a new kitchen.

At other times, though, clients with urgent needs and relaxed budgets will call with unusual requests. In the fall of 2008, a well-heeled, globetrotting couple enlisted Abelman to utterly upend their

overlooking the Strip. They gave her just 90 days to complete the job.

"It was a little crazy," Abelman recalls. "We met for the first time on October 1, and they needed the space completed before the end of the year. They were big entertainers, and they wanted the space to look like a modern version of a vintage Las Vegas nightclub. I was sending pictures to them in Europe and Dubai and trying to figure out what they'd want."

In the end, the "modern Zen" motif she selected for the space delighted the clients. The most outré element, she says, was a three-foot-high wooden platform she laid over the penthouse's existing travertine flooring to afford anyone sitting on the couches a panoramic view of the Strip. "The client was pushing me to go over-the-top, and that was it," she says.

Abelman says the process of helping homeowners arrive at design schemes that reflect their preferences and personalities is an inexact science, but that she uses

cues—the way clients dress, behave and speak, for instance—to try and tease out an aesthetic that will make for a comfortable home.

This highly personalized approach is worlds away from her last corporate design job, in which she helped create interiors for model homes built by the large, publicly traded Richmond American Homes.

"What I missed when I was doing the models was that direct interaction with the homeowner—that chance to earn what I call a standing ovation of one or two. Now, I have that, and I'm enjoying every minute."

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