

# Being Betsy

With a mix of modern elements and antiques, designer Betsy Brown crafts a Birmingham home for herself in which the ultimate luxury is comfort

Interior designer Betsy Brown is, at once, a classicist and a modernist. The Birmingham-based designer favors clean lines and hard edges, but manages to temper rooms with highly crafted details and well-chosen antiques that result in comfort. "I really look for interiors to be relaxed, to make you feel like you're on vacation, as if the world went away and all you have around you is super comfortable, totally relaxed space," she says.

The objective is the same when she designs her own rooms. "Unlike some designers, who find designing for themselves so easy because they know themselves so well, I find the opposite to be true," Brown confesses. "I feel that I can get inside the heads of my clients very easily, but it's almost as if, as my own client, I don't exist. I have a hard time knowing who I am."

Nonetheless, her home in Mountain Brook, Alabama, a classic 1940s bungalow situated on a scenic hill overlooking downtown Birmingham, manages to distinctively clarify something of her inner essence — and rings true to how she lives at the moment. "It's funny how the phases of your life influence what you're attracted to at any given

time," reflects Brown. "When I was young, I loved everything modern and very tailored. I loved John Dickinson and Billy Baldwin and Angelo Donghia. But then, when I was pregnant with my first child, all of a sudden things that were extremely warm and detailed and nestlike started to appeal to me and my home began changing shape," she explains. "After my first child left home, that urge to build a nest started going away and I went in the opposite direction. I went more severe and felt as if I could have lived with almost nothing but a chair and a table and a light fixture. That, too, has softened up now and I've started coming back to my true nature, which is cleaner and more minimal," she reveals.

Still, pulling the pieces together to get to this point took some time and coalesced around a happy conclusion after she decided to enlist the help of some architect friends. "I bought the house

Right: Most of the walls in Betsy Brown's home in Mountain Brook, Alabama, use Benjamin Moore's Simply White, a perfect backdrop for a twentieth-century French cast-bronze urn and a collection of black and white art in her entry.

INTERIOR DESIGN BY BETSY BROWN  
ARCHITECTURE BY BAIES CORKERN STUDIO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER VITALE  
WRITTEN BY JEAN NAYAR





The floor lamp, table lamp and chair are a pair of nineteenth-century inspired designs by Gortman & Gortman. The sofa is in Holly Hunt fabric and features a custom piece by Betty Brown. Shade fabric is Classical House.



A tufted wool and silk rug adds graphic pattern underfoot in the living room. A Joris-Moreau table painting is the focal point. The fireplace is made of limestone. Walls use Benjamin Moore Emily White.

*"Editing is critical because it adds power to a space. The more confusion you can edit out, the more emotional and powerful a space becomes."*

*— Betsy Brown*



before the recession to renovate and later sell because it had a vacant lot next door that I wanted to build on, but as time went on it just didn't seem important to have a big house with my children gone," she explains. So, after starting the renovation efforts on her own a few years ago, she called upon the Birmingham-based architects Paul Bates and Jeremy Corkern to assist. "They helped me distill what to change and what to keep," she says.

Given their history of compatible collaboration, the designer and architects swiftly overcame the mostly minor obstacles. "When we do things for ourselves, we tend to get caught up in perfection and can't step back and look in a rational way or in a way that keeps things honest," says Bates, adding that the design values he shares with Brown contribute to their easy working rapport. "There's an intellectual stimulation she gives me that teaches me things," he adds.

Clearly, the appreciation is mutual. Among the suggestions from the two architects that Brown drew upon to transform the interiors were aligning doors to create a clear axis from one room to the next, replacing old windows with character-building new ones to capture more light and views, and tweaking a range hood in the renovated kitchen to make it more sculptural. "I tend to do things in a more masculine manner," explains Brown, noting the original hood had straight lines that accentuated its mass. "Paul and Jeremy suggested modifying it with slight curves that made it lose weight and become a prettier object in itself," she adds. Other architectural gestures that were introduced to lend substance to the home include a system of cross beams on the ceiling of a new sunroom, thoughtfully detailed ebonyzed bookshelves in the living room, and new doors and hardware throughout.

Brown further unified the rooms with "simple materials that don't feel competitive or pretentious," coupled with a black and white palette. Often the designer looks to a client's wardrobe for cues on color, noting people tend to choose hues that make them look good and feel comfortable. The palette she has grown to prefer for herself, however, was inspired by her mother, who was a passionate antiques dealer drawn to black and white objects. "All my life I've tended to dress in black and white because of memories of my mother's choices that feel familiar from my childhood," Brown says.

Against the backdrop of mostly white and occasionally black walls, the rooms in her home are a stimulating mix of contemporary furnishings and evocative antiques — including a Chinoiserie cabinet and a cherished pair of nineteenth-century English Regency chairs given to her by her mother — that converge in artful balance under Brown's careful eye.

"The things we love, really, are what make us feel comfortable," she says. "But sometimes they have to be reframed and put in a context that's palatable — editing adds power," she says. In the context of her newest home, Brown's knack for drawing striking contrasts with classic and modern elements has also yielded an intriguing path toward perceiving a new layer of her own inner dimension.

Right: A pair of contemporary leather chairs from Donghia offer energetic contrast to a nineteenth-century French walnut dining table in the kitchen. The gentle curves of a new range hood subtly soften the otherwise hard lines of the room.





With the main bedroom, the look was to make it feel  
 clean and calm. The white linens, the light  
 wood, the large windows and the natural light  
 all help to create a sense of peace and  
 relaxation. The bed, the chair and the  
 table are all from the same collection.



This page: A Baroque chair in the guest room is paired by a Maitland-Warwick pair of polished woods or English Chippendale cabinet. Right: The day bed chair can be used as a nineteenth-century French piece of table. A conical pendant is by Posa (modern).