



Designer Sheila Bridges, in yellow, in her childhood home

Designer Takes

14 Designers Share the Childhood Memories That Still Shape Their Work Today

From blue chip art and custom furniture to living off the grid and hunting for antiques, these inspirations shaped designers from an early age

By Andrew Nodell

January 30, 2020

Have you ever thought about how certain childhood scenes influenced your point of view on decorating? At AD PRO, we were curious about what memories helped inform the work of some of our favorite designers. Whether they grew up surrounded by treasured family heirlooms, appreciating the surrounding landscape, or learning directly through the eye of a design-savvy relative, these industry insiders share the ways their childhood homes helped to ultimately shape their design aesthetic.

Paul Fortune

“In Wales, we had a very basic rustic 18th-century farmhouse setup—positively primordial by today’s standards, but we had running water and an Aga [cooker]. As kids in the 1950s, we’d no need for anything else. There was no electricity, so we had oil lamps at night to read by, or you went to sleep when it got dark. Dinners were cooked on the Aga or the open fire in a huge inglenook. We all slept in a loft on sheepskin-

covered bunks with heavy linen sheets, eiderdown coverlets, and our corgi dogs. Still my favorite way to sleep! Outside the windows grew ancient lilac bushes that scented the evenings. Owls hooted in our dreams and cooing doves woke us in the mornings. The experience was of complete security and comfort. It was real. This is now available as a 'lifestyle' choice, but then it was just our life. There was no contrivance. I don't necessarily espouse the rustic style in my work but I will always remember the feeling that this house gave us. And that is what I have always tried to make present in my work. The feeling that you are home. A warm fire, a delicious meal, a cozy bed—what more does one need?"

William Cullum, Jayne Design Studio

"We had a massive antique dark mahogany breakfront in our dining room which was a perpetual source of interest for me as a child. It held all sorts of sparkly things—silver, glass, and porcelain—the doors were locked and the drawers were so full that they were too heavy for me to open. I always loved it when my parents had parties and the contents would be arrayed on the dining table to determine what would be used. At some point during middle school, it inexplicably migrated from the dining room to the living room. I don't remember how I know this, but one of my parents read in a magazine, or one of his books, that [Mark Hampton](#) explicitly thought that breakfronts should never be in a dining room and so there it lived until the house was sold. It's now in my mother's dining room, so I guess it was my dad who really cared what Mark Hampton had to say."

Brigette Romanek

"Being raised on the south side of Chicago by a single mom, I lived between two houses: my mom's and my grandparents'. One thing I remember more than anything else at my grandparents' house is the feeling of comfort and the feeling of being welcomed and safe. My mom's house was different. It was welcoming, but really focused on style. She loved all of the latest modern furniture pieces; she had murals painted on our living room walls, beds custom-made that were so high that we had stairs to the beds. It was so fun. I was so proud of her style and aesthetic that I wanted friends to come over all the time just to enjoy it. Being a singer and touring around the world, she'd bring home interesting and unique pieces, from France, Sweden, anywhere she traveled. It really brings back sweet memories. Put those homes together—stylish, warm and inviting—and that's my design style. I call it 'livable luxe.' My mom brought the luxe and my grandparents brought the livable."

Alex Papachristidis

"The thing that was unbelievable about my childhood home was my mother. She was an aesthete and exposed me to the world. We traveled together and she loved French furniture and fabulous clothes. I was the youngest child by nine years and we once went to Greece for the summer and stayed for two years because she liked it. Everyone says their mother was Auntie Mame, but mine really was. She loved beauty and exposed me to museums; we went to Rome, and Greece, and the world. I think it had an enormous influence on my love of beauty.

She mixed French furniture with contemporary at our home on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. She always loved gold and, I've never really thought about it, but many of the things I love. There were always velvets and fabrics in the home. The cutest thing was, we were close but she always said to me, 'How could I possibly have such a bourgeois son?' She was much more of a free spirit."

Mally Skok

“My parents married when they were really young, and right after the wedding they moved to Serowe, in Botswana, to live with my English grandparents, who were with the foreign service. Sadly, my dad died when he was just in his 30s [leaving behind] my mum with four young children. We had hardly any money and lived a lot by the kindness of friends. Our house was small but always pretty—we never gave up.

Those days cast the die for my get-on-with-it attitude toward decorating. I hate to throw decent things away. I value things with a history and try to fold them into my clients’ projects. I love windows with curtains, lots of layers, and comfort is a huge priority to me. Life is precious, I don’t waste too much time worrying about the smallest details. I know that sometimes my clients feel that I am being a bit flip—my ‘just choose one, they’re all good choices’ answer can rattle them—but I feel it’s so important to keep things in perspective. Decorating is a fun and happy pursuit, these are good things to be worrying over, make your house lovely and then go out and live your life!”

Charles Zana

“My childhood home was extraordinary, a real collector’s home. My parents were constantly changing the decoration and moving objects from one place to another. There were works of art and decorative objects everywhere. I remember opening a closet and finding a Picasso ceramic amongst my mother’s belongings. I have always kept the collector’s spirit. My father collected Picasso and Jouve ceramics. As for me, I collect Sottsass ceramics. I like to mix different styles and eras.”

Sheila Bridges

“I’ve had the unique fortune of growing up and knowing only one family home in my lifetime. It was an old five-bedroom fieldstone house in Philadelphia with a carriage house. My parents loved decorating and embraced all of the latest style trends from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, including colorful wall-to-wall and shag carpets and an eclectic mix of modern furniture mixed in with a few antiques. They entertained often and usually in our living room. This large room had painted wood-paneled walls and navy blue wool carpet, and there was a pair of [Milo Baughman](#) upholstered armchairs, glass tables, and funky lamps purchased from a popular store called J.B. Van Sciver Furniture Co., where they often shopped. Since entertaining often centered on music and both of my parents played the piano, there was a Baldwin baby grand on one side of the living room and comfortable seating on the other. Everything was flexible and could be moved around for entertaining.

There is no question that my parents’ love of decorating and bold choices influenced my own aesthetic. I still own several pieces of furniture and art that I grew up with, including the chairs, floor lamps, and that modern Lucite grandfather clock designed by George Nelson in the early 1970s for the Howard Miller Company.”

Elizabeth Cooper

“There are a few styling elements in my childhood living room that I’d tweak, but my mother wasn’t adhering to all of my remote directions in terms of styling! Almost all of the pieces in the room were my maternal grandmother’s—with whom I was very close. The sofa actually belonged to my mother’s grandfather or great-grandfather and I’ve always thought it had such a beautiful shape to it. I have

wonderful childhood memories of these pieces in my grandmother's own home and also love that my family has lived with them since my mother inherited them. One of my very first 'design projects' was working with my mother in selecting fabrics to reupholster the sofa and a pair of chairs. It was my initial exposure to both the significance of retaining family pieces and repurposing/updating them to work in a different context."

Robin Rains

"My father was a contractor and he always had plans lying around the house, which intrigued me as a child. I often visited job sites with him and developed a love and respect for construction and the process of creating something from the ground up. We moved a great deal as a child because my dad was always building another home for us, requiring new decoration each time. My mother loved crafts and interiors and she always had a great eye and a keen sense of design—we always had a project going, whether it was macramé, painting, or sewing. Our projects were always displayed proudly in our homes. The art of creating something beautiful was so joyful for my family, and I think I became a designer because I saw firsthand how our surroundings enhanced our life.

We had a lot of family heirlooms, books, and many collections that were passed down from my grandparents and great-grandparents. This gave me a sense of family and gave value to the importance of living with unique heirlooms and collections. It's one of the reasons I have an antiques showroom today."

Heather Hilliard

"My parents lived on a gentleman's farm when I was very young, where they turned an old barn, formerly used to house black Angus steer, into our house. Naturally, there were a lot of exposed wood beams and rustic detailing. My mom made the rough-hewn stone mantel and troweled a plaster wall with a second fireplace on the lower level, and old timbers were used for the stair handrail. My parents were very creative and had a vision. When I was 10 or 12, we moved to an old stone house with a carriage house, and my mom was always doing house projects and painting furniture. Growing up around all of this design work piqued my interest from a young age and certainly influenced my career path in art and design."

Sara Hillery

"When I was [young] my parents bought an old double row house in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and turned the two houses into one by taking out walls. When you realize early on that you aren't stuck with the boundaries you've been given, your creativity can really flow and be boundless. My dad was always drawing up house plans and designs, and my mom was into antiquing and crafts. She's the storyteller of the family, and she loved telling us the history of certain pieces and at times connecting them with our past: 'My grandma used to have something just like this!' I remember her dragging my sisters and me to every antique place by the side of the road during a family road trip, and I really grew to appreciate the hunt."

Catherine Austin

"My love of design as a child was sparked by an incredibly unique and special Christmas gift when I was five years old. My grandfather was a master craftsman and made me a dollhouse that allowed my imagination to run wild. It was a family affair to bring the dollhouse to life. My great-aunt created the window boxes with miniature flowers, and my grandmother cut shingles for the roof and lined the walls

with floral and damask wallpapers. My mother made miniature Chippendale and Sheraton antique furniture for the formal rooms in the house. She even created a Christmas tree with tiny gifts she individually wrapped, using a toothpick to create the bows. The next year, my grandfather added electricity to the dollhouse so the fireplace flickered, Christmas lights twinkled, and little chandeliers and lamps illuminated each room. This handmade dollhouse led to a lifetime love of decorative arts, architecture, and interior design.”

Phillip Thomas

“One recollection that had the greatest impact on me during my childhood was my parents’ love of collecting and searching for treasured items to add to their collections. What I loved most about their collecting was how they displayed them in our homes—each object bursting with meaning and each interior telling a very personal story. That is what I hope to accomplish with each of my clients’ interiors: spaces that are not only beautiful but also spaces that are truly about the people living within them.”

Elizabeth Roberts

“I lived in two houses in Marin County, California. A cottage-like one belonged to my dad and stepmom, in Mill Valley. It is tucked under the redwood trees at the base of Mount Tamalpais. The other house belonged to my mom and my stepdad and is located in San Rafael. Though San Rafael is located only 10 miles away, the microclimate is drastically different. Typically it would be sunny and about 10 degrees warmer in San Rafael. Both houses were located at the base of mountains, so I spent a huge amount of time outdoors, climbing trails. The entire interior of my room at my dad’s house was lined in redwood. I think the cozy and eclectic feel of my homes definitely informed my sense of design.”