

Q&A with Celebrity Interior Designer, Windsor Smith

Written by Katie Lambert

Meet L.A.-based interior designer Windsor Smith. While designing homes for celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow, she also recently launched a line of furniture with Century, and has her own innovative lines Room in a Box and Room in a Flash, which make it easy for anyone to access beautiful personalized interior design services.



Interview Video:

KL: Well, again, thank you so much! I'm so excited to have the opportunity to chat with you today. Tell me a little bit about what led you to become an interior design professional.

WS: Well, it beats Welcome to McDonald's! Can I take your order? I basically knew pretty early on that I am unhireable. I had to carve out a profession that I could enjoy and be a full-time mom and also have something that I love that was aesthetic and beautiful, and creative. And, that's how I kind of stumbled onto it.

KL: What was your first big break?

WS: Oh, that's an interesting question. I never really think about that. My first big break was probably that I had sold a business and had the opportunity to go shopping. My objects of desire were for architectural elements for my house. I was building a house at the time, and so I went to Europe. I always think that, that was my first big break because I realized that there is a whole world of beautiful things out there and um, that we just had to go looking for them. I was sort of like, little piggy sorting for truffles in the countryside of France. And, so I think that's when I realized that getting out of, you know, where I was and into a new environment that was challenging, and interesting. And, um, that is sort of what led me into this industry. Just wanting to find treasures; put them into architecture, into homes; into houses; into rooms.

KL: Wonderful! Describe your typical clientele?

WS: My typical clientele is, you know, definitely upper tier for my design business, but I'm passionate about everyone having beautiful rooms.

KL: Are there any particular projects in your past that you recall that really stick out to you?

WS: Oh my gosh, there's been so many. They're like your children.

KL: Sure.

WS: You fall in love with every single one of them. And then of course you have to leave and they stay in someone else's house. And so it's a little odd. (Chuckle)

KL: Do you get visitation rights? (Chuckle) So, what gives you the inspiration to create? A client calls you, says, "Come to my home." What from there?

WS: It's really sort of a process by Braille, in a lot of ways. You have to meet the client, spend some time, and sort of get a sense of who they are and what they need in the interior. And I love that process. It's very intimate. I think that is why I love my profession. You're creating a home for someone. You're in the inner sanctum of the family. I think it's an awesome responsibility, because it's more than just pretty rooms. It's about setting up people for success in their lives by mapping, by just the way that you use rooms. Some of the old paradigms don't really work in the way we live and that we co-exist as families now. So, formal dining rooms we don't use. We want to be in that kitchen, so our kitchens should be more beautiful spaces, not just utilitarian spaces. No matter how nice the house is, everybody is going to stay there. So, I'm an advocate of knocking down walls and making sort of great room kitchens that people can co-exist in; that you can linger after dinner and not feel like you're hanging out in the kitchen. So, I'm a big fan of paneled, beautiful glossy kitchens with old mirrored walls. And, you know, bring out the silver and the china and just live with all of it. I don't like the idea that you have wedding china and that you slip it into a little felt bag, and it goes under the... (chuckle) I know, have you done that?

KL: No! (chuckle)

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WS: And how often do you pull that out?

KL: Not very... (chuckle)

WS: Never! If you look in my cupboard in my kitchen and you see my china is stacked up, and I eat on it every day. I bring people in and part of the whole lifestyle piece. It's how I like to live. I encourage that. So I think that designers can lead people to that, because it is so easy to get into the mundane and get into your busy life. And, if you put beauty around you; and you put smart design around you, it will navigate you to all the things that you need.

KL: Makes sense. Do you have any specific tips or specific ideas for modern, busy families, in terms of functionality when designing?

WS: Definitely! I think that with our children now, we have to be really careful because they're sort of migrating into their rooms, plugged into different devices. And so, they're very busy maintaining their 800 friends on Facebook. Meanwhile, they're not going down to the corner store, or dime store with their friends and really getting the nuances of language and, you know, personalities and friendship and all those things. A big important thing for me is that I'm bringing kids back to the center of the house. So, I try to create homework centers, and creative spaces near the kitchen or the center of the house, so that we can govern what they're doing, but at the same time keep them interactive in the family unit. I think it is super important. I think we can get far enough down that path that we don't have a road map back. So, I'm seeing that as a trend and I'm trying to pull them back to the center of the house. And then also I've realized, I always joke that I'm part anthropologist, because I've been doing this long enough that I'm around families and I see sort of how design does either make their family life better, or not. And I've noticed that over time the people who've shared, the husbands and wives who've shared a bathroom or closet space that interact with each other early in the morning or at the end of night have longer marriages or are still together.

KL: I love that part! Next question: What are a room's most important elements?

WS: A room's most important elements, you know, color and light, I think. You know how the light comes in. I'm always hyper aware of lighting, and light. It's funny it comes in a place where our indoors are outdoors. It's beautiful every day, and that's maybe four to six rain days a year, if we're lucky. And it's nice and cool, so it's not a place where you can't be inside and outside even in the middle of summer. And so our landscape is part of our interior space. So I think I'm hyper sensitive to light in different times of day. So I think an important element is, understanding the light and the day the light is in the room, and I think color, decorum and texture. All those elements are really important. Scale, scale is really important too. Understanding the sizes of things; how many chairs you can fit in a configuration, and, you know, what the footprint is.

KL: Gotch you! Perfect! What is your go-to wall color, the color where you feel goes well with most situations?

WS: Oh boy, I have so many! I think right now I love Benjamin Moore's Nimbus. It's a real go-to color for me. It's kind of a soft, soft gray. And then I've always been a huge fan of a color, it's also Benjamin Moore. It's called "Revere Pewter." And it's that color that you just can't quite define it. It's kind of a dirty white; kind of a sandy white, but it doesn't go beige; it doesn't go pink and it doesn't go blue. It's just, just perfect color.

KL: And it's something that you use pretty often?

WS: I use it on woodworking and paneled rooms. I also like deep saturated colors like deep, deep indigo, navy blue, almost black. I use a lot of colors like that.

KL: Is there a signature Windsor Smith look?

WS: Definitely! It's right here at Pension Furniture.

KL: (Chuckle)

WS: But I know I think I have an optimistic elegance about what I do. I'm definitely a traditionalist, so all of my designs, both in the interiors that I create and the furniture that I design has an elegance to it that is very traditional, but I'm definitely, you know, not wanting to get left behind on the new. I'm doing everything with the new spin, cleaner finishes. This table, for example, was a piece inspired by a piece that was a wood piece and that the vertical rods were not in Lucite, and so that was kind of a way to kind of mix these glossy, fun, new materials, but in an old school, kind of oval little tea table. And so I like mixing those concepts, I like the idea of a turn-about sofa, or something like a tete-a-tete that you'd sort of find in an old hotel lobby, The Hotel du Cap or something. Oh, I like the idea of taking these kind of old elements and covering them in linen, like the more casual, more approachable for today's person.

KL: Wonderful! And that brings me perfectly into my next question. What current trends do you wish would go away and what older trends that you think might make a comeback?

WS: Oh my gosh! That's such a good question. Ok, which ones do I wish would go away? Maybe bold, harsh print, like really strong in-your-face, I don't really love that. I wish the bright bold colors and primary colors would go away and take a long vacation.

KL: (Chuckle)

WS: I love soft, diaphanous colors. I love, you know, neutrals and colors that sort of lay gently on top of each other. I think that the form is what

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should stand out and not the, you know, the strong, strong color in your eye. I like the idea of everything sort of laying on top of each other in a more graceful way.

KL: What are old designs that you wish would make a comeback?

WS: Well, it's funny because I think old designs are constantly making a comeback. I guess probably I love pairs of things. I love great hallways that have pairs of consoles and chairs, or urns. I love the ideas of pairs and things or something. It's really soothing and appealing about if there's a pair of something. I think immediately we all like pairs. And I love the idea of a resurgence of mid-century lighting elements and influences coming back into our lighting. I also love the idea of Serge Monier, a kind of mid-century, modern piece with an old decadent, Georgian crystal; Waterford crystal chandelier. That combination of things is what's exciting to me. So, I love the idea that the new is converging with the old.

KL: How do you handle fads when you're designing?

WS: Well, just like everyone, a good fad can be good. I don't have any problem with a fad. But I think whenever there's a fad, if it's a color, the idea of strong print or something like that, don't do it on the wall. Do it on a pillow, kind of think about things long term. Since I'm more classic and more traditional, I generally don't get hijacked too easily with fads in a big way. But I do think that it is fun to have, you know, sort of something really snappy and new. I would just say relegate it to a pillow, or a lamp shade, or something that when you tire of it, which you will, because that's kind of in the DNA of a fad, then you're going to be able to move it out easily, and it's not like you're taking all the tile work out of your bathroom.

KL: Right.

WS: You know what I'm saying, so I wouldn't do it on the tile, but I would do it with a small rug.

KL: Have you worked with a Southwest design that we typically see here in Arizona?

WS: You know I haven't a lot, but through Room In A Box we had, well actually a famous baseball player, Evan Longoria. So he used Room In A Box, he and his lovely girl, Jaymie Edmonson. They used Room In A Box to create a baby room for their baby that was coming. And so it was interesting to see, and that expanded Room In A Box to do the entire house. But it's here in Scottsdale and it was interesting because the colorations were so different. You know, dealing with the kind of desert brown and these kinds of umber shades that are designed to sort of make the house go into the landscape. I kind of come from a place where we want to pop the house and pull it forward, so my innate sense is to not go with all of the colors that are around, as much as I want to draw the architecture forward. So, I think I'm a little bit of an anarchist when it comes to doing desert design because I just am coming from a different place. But that's been my only kind of real desert experience is being involved in that project, kind of at an arm's length.

KL: Tell me about Room In A Box. It is so exciting to me! I was visiting the Web site and I found it very, very easy to use, and I'm probably going to buy everything. (Laughter)

WS: (Laughter) I love that!

KL: Tell me a little bit about it, your inspiration for the idea.

WS: It was really about demystifying the design experience for everyone. I felt like, you know, the design centers were sort of like these spooky places that only the elite club of people can go into. So, I wanted to get to everyone. I wanted to create a design service that would get out there into the world of people that would probably not have the resources necessarily to hire a designer, or some that have the resources, but really didn't want to have that type of relationship with a designer. That maybe they wanted to take more ownership of the design, so imagine sitting in a room with me and saying, you know, well, I really don't like that table. I'd like to substitute this table. Well, designers are like, what do you mean? We are using that table. So now, well some people you created the blueprint or the design for them, then you can value engineer that piece. They don't have to be modest about if they don't want to spend as much on something that maybe a designer would specify because of their resources. So it allows the end user to be able to value engineer without shame, and also be able to take ownership if they want to alternate that piece out for something that they seem to really love that they've seen in their travels. They should certainly be able to do that, where a conventional designer relationship doesn't really promote that. In the same way as giving someone the blueprint and owning the specification, and then saying, God bless you, now run with it. You know they can either elect to click through to exact specification, or they can decide to value engineer the various pieces along the way. So it just kind of became an answer to; a solution to a problem, and the problem was more and more people want great design, but more and more people also want a less conventional methodology to get there.

KL: Great idea! Fabulous! I'll be running home to get back on the Web site as soon as we're through here. (Laughter)

WS: (Laughter) Thank you! I love that!

KL: What should homeowners focus on when staging a home for sale? Is there anything in particular that is usually overlooked?

WS: Oh I think it's so important because I think you have to create a place filled with creativity and imagination. I think people underestimate it and actually, ultimately, it costs them money. If you're positioning your home for sale, you have to address it in a way that you make it a place that people desire to live in. You get much more money per foot on a finished home, or a home that people can feel that they can slide in and set their toothbrush down,= than you do on a home that, you know, that things are stuffed in closets, and things are stacked up on tables. It signals to the person that's coming to buy the house that the house is not very big because there aren't places to put things. So I think that a lot of times people make the mistake of not really taking the time to edit and eliminate things; clean and fresh paint everywhere makes everyone

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feel better. You may spend a few hundred dollars, or a few thousand dollars, but you will more than make that money up on the end because of the way people feel about it when they come through will be that they want to be there, and so they'll pay you more for that.

KL: I couldn't agree more. What's the next big thing for Windsor Smith?

WS: Well, the next big thing is spring 2015, which being so far away, but it's really not far away at all. I'll be launching a line; a beautiful line of lighting and accessories and small pieces of furniture for Century Home. I'm very excited about that! And also, I have a book coming out with Risoli 2015 spring. So it's going to be a big, big spring for me, high point will be a very big event for me next year

KL: Wonderful! Anything else you'd like to share?

WS: Uh, just www.ws.roominabox.com.

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