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Styemakers at Home

Esteban Lopez • Barbara Rourke

Plus: Greg Koch's Beer Bash • Posh Pet Boarding • Garden with French Accent



*Co-owner of Bells & Whistles
turns spaces into modern miracles*

A Passion for Design

Story by Jennifer Davies • Photography by Eduardo Contreras & Nelvin C. Cepeda

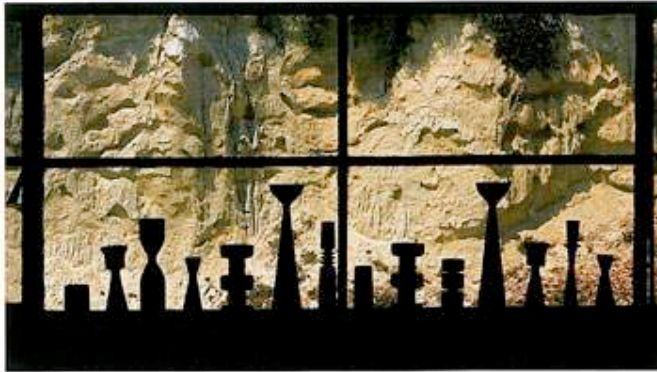


Barbara Rourke drew on her self-taught design skills to create a modern yet homey vibe in her Mission Hills apartment. Glass panels in the kitchen (left) complement a glass table and Bertoia side chairs.

For Barbara Rourke, who has helped create some of San Diego's coolest hangouts from Starlite Lounge in Mission Hills to the Gaslamp's Aubergine nightclub, her passion for design was clear from the beginning.

"I redid my Barbie playhouse every other week," Rourke recalled, with a laugh.

As she grew older, Rourke would paint and repaint her room and constantly rearrange the furniture. She even helped her dad pick out paint colors for the house they shared.



A collection of wood candlesticks is silhouetted against the sandy canyon wall outside Rourke's bedroom window.

"I decorated the house," Rourke said. "Well, as much as a 12-year-old can."

Now as part of the three-person design team of Bells&Whistles, Rourke uses her design skills to craft memorable public spaces with a modern aesthetic.

While Rourke, 30, took several semesters of furniture-making classes at Mesa College, she is for the most part a self-taught designer who eschewed art or design school. She moved to California from New Jersey on a whim some 10 years ago, working in retail until the design business began taking off in 2001.

"I've never lived by what all the other kids were doing. I never cared about what you are supposed to do," Rourke said. "I didn't want to go to college to sit in an office. I never did it. In the art field, it can sort of put you in a box and make you think in a predetermined kind of way."

MODERN AND WARM

Being open to new ideas and learning to translate each client's personality into each space, Rourke said, has been critical to the success of Bells&Whistles.

"We try to make that space be that person," she said.

For Disconnected, a North Park hair salon, Rourke and her partners went with a more forceful feel with bright red salon chairs and other bold red accents because



Rourke is drawn to vases that play with shape and volume, said Jason St. John, her business partner in Bells&Whistles.

of the owners' approach to life.

"Everything in there is cutting edge. There are a lot of hard edges," she said, explaining that the owners of the salon "are who they are and don't apologize for it."

When it came to the Starlite Lounge, it was the film classic "North by Northwest" that inspired the '60s feel and its warm wood and cork interiors.

The challenge of that space, said Rourke, was to make it stylish and sophisticated but a place "where the punk rock kid who goes to the Casbah is still going to feel comfortable." The Starlite Lounge



is co-owned by Tim Mays, the owner of the Casbah; Matt Hoyt, a filmmaker; and Steve Poltz, a well-known local musician and songwriter.

The Starlite Lounge made such an impression on Martin Wollesen, director of university events at University of California San Diego and artistic director of ArtPower!, the school's arts program, that he pushed for Bells&Whistles to be the design firm for the Loft at UCSD.

The space, which is set to open officially in September, is a unique on-campus venue that will offer a wide variety of en-



Rourke, who scours resale and thrift stores for vintage finds, discovered this 1960s lime green desk at Gala Furniture in University Heights. On it are antique cameras and pieces from her vase collection.

tainment from jazz ensembles to rock bands to spoken-word performance to food and wine tastings.

"It looks like no other venue on the UCSD campus," he said. "Or any other campus for that matter."

Wollesen said he was drawn to Bells&Whistles because the Starlite Lounge was such a comfortable environment.

"It had an interesting way of being a modern design aesthetic while still being warm and inviting," he said, something

that was key to the Loft's mission of creating a sense of community on the expansive UCSD campus.

Wollesen was also impressed that Rourke and her partners designed and built much of the furniture and lighting pieces at Starlite.

"They were artisans that were designers," he said. "It's a fairly rare combination."

The result, said Wollesen, is a modern space with a variety of seating options

with a green and white color scheme coupled with eye-popping lighting pieces like a stainless steel orb of a chandelier, made by the Bells&Whistles team.

MINIMAL BUT PLAYFUL

While Rourke has been busy translating her clients' personas into public spaces, her own home is a representation of her personality as well.

At her Mission Hills apartment, Rourke tends to gravitate to well-made mid-



A selection of books and wood trays becomes an impromptu plant stand.

century pieces she finds at resale shops or thrift stores as well as some furniture of her own design.

The furniture is made from a variety of materials — from metal Bertoia chairs to a warm wood coffee table with glass top to a lime green wood desk with unique silver drawer pulls. The 1960s desk caught Rourke's eye while she was shopping at Gala Furniture in University Heights.

"I like mixing things up. I like the juxtaposition of old next to new," Rourke said. "I have plastic next to glass next to wood."

She couples those furniture pieces with bold wall colors and collections of earthen ceramics, framed photography and abstract artwork, including a green and black photograph by her boyfriend, Christopher Duzan, that was blown up and affixed to canvas.

Aside from a few family photos, most of the pictures are by Duzan, a fledgling photographer who uses unusual lighting and soft focus on seemingly mundane subjects such as an escalator or a fluorescent bulb.

Unlike many modern spaces with a certain cold starkness, Rourke's home is playful, with the photographs framed in a mish-mash of styles and sizes, rather than



Rourke, who is always on the lookout for vases to add to her collection, switches out different pieces to create displays in her apartment. Above the couch are framed photographs by her boyfriend, Christopher Duzan.

all stainless steel frames.

"I'm still a minimalist. I don't like to see everyday things out in the open. I don't like to see a stack of bills," she said. "But I still have a collection of vases on every surface of my house."

She picks up different shaped vases all in beige and brown hues. Rourke said she is constantly rearranging the pieces, rotating vases in and out as she adds to her col-

lection during visits to thrift stores, swap meets, garage sales and antique stores.

Just don't ask her to pick a favorite vase. "They're all my babies," Rourke said.

Still, when it comes to her furniture, Rourke is partial to the walnut platform bed that she recently built with Duzan to pair with a walnut dresser she found at a thrift store and refinished.

"I absolutely love it," Rourke said of

the dark wood bed, which contrasts nicely against her bedroom's rich twilight blue walls. The room is also complemented with Rourke's collection of wood candle holders and a wax and acrylic painting she did a few years ago.

ORGANIZED

Rourke calls her personal style eclectic, but Jason St. John, one of the three partners in Bells&Whistles and her ex-husband, said it is much more than that.

"It is very well thought out and controlled but definitely eclectic and quirky," he said.

In terms of the business, Rourke's sense of style and her organized mind are key to the design team's success, St. John said.

Although the three partners don't have set roles, there is a give and take in how they approach new projects, Rourke said.

She and St. John typically scout a space and then brainstorm about the approach, trading and refining their different ideas.

Then they pass it by Jason Lane, whom Rourke describes as a genius when it comes to construction. "He tells us if it's possible," she said.

That's how the process worked when the team came up with the near-iconic hexagon entrance to the Starlite Lounge.

"We had hexagons on the brains," Rourke explained. "Jason St. John was like, 'Let's do a hexagon doorway,' and I said, 'Why don't we make it a hexagon hallway?' Jason Lane was like, 'Yeah, we can do that.'"

St. John said Rourke essentially serves as a project manager on all the jobs because she is so organized and focused.

"She can foresee a problem before I even can perceive of it," he said.

But when it comes to her home, Rourke said she has taken a more laid back approach.

"My house has been growing more organically," she said. "I didn't really start out with a plan." 🌿



The hand-made walnut platform bed is one of her favorite pieces of furniture. "I absolutely love it," Rourke said.

JENNIFER DAVIES is a Union-Tribune staff writer.