

The Profile

TRAVEL IN DESIGN

A chat with Ben Small

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As I enter Bittners, the feeling of fall is in the air. Ben Small walks into the showroom and warmly greets me. He begins to tell me about all the new, magnificent pieces that have arrived for the fall season, from the antique handmade French rosewood chest to a Ralph Lauren safari camp chair made of hand-forged iron and leather. We settle down in a comfortable room, off Bittners' side entrance. The room is set in white and coral tones with a grass cloth wall as the backdrop for a beautiful antique, parquet-inlaid cherry chest, circa 1750 made in the Northern Italian/Southern Germany region. An unusual lamp, featuring a 1600s woodcarving mounted on a contemporary base, sets the mood for our casual conversation.

Ben's design knowledge is very apparent. As we begin to talk, I marvel at his extensive travels and how they have shaped his passion for design. We start to talk more about his life, his love of design and his impressive portfolio of work.

How did you get started as a designer?

As a young boy, I was captivated by architecture. I would go through construction sites and talk to the workmen. The design and building environment was exciting to me. Often, I would sit and draw out architectural plans for homes. A local builder even took one of my plans and used it to build a home. My creativity flourished with my love of design, construction and building.

Who was your mentor early on in your career?

Thomas E. Kruse, who developed the design business at Bittners. His design work is still seen in many homes throughout Louisville today. Here in my office at Bittners, I still have his architectural furniture drawings, which were used by the master craftsmen to create custom-made Bittners' furniture.

What drives you everyday?

My clients and their desire to create a beautiful, comfortable home inspire me everyday. As I work with my clients, I love creating spaces that fit their lifestyle, even down to the minute details of a room. Having the ability to create for others the ambiance they enjoy is what drives me. From this, I have developed wonderful, close friendships through the years.

How have your travels inspired you?

In design, you can never learn enough. Over the years, I have traveled extensively throughout Europe, including France, Germany, England, Italy and Spain as well as Ireland, Scotland and Austria. I have bought numerous antiques throughout Europe. My travels have also included Russia, Australia and Egypt. Each unique destination has been a wonderful learning experience in lifestyle design. Today, Bittners is much more inclusive of all styles of furniture design from around the world.

What trends do you see in design today?

First, as I tell all my clients, "Don't follow a design trend, follow your heart." Whatever makes you feel good and comfortable in your home is your personal choice.

Second, I am seeing a very modern, white-on-white composition where white runs from the walls and intricate woodwork to painted white floors. It is a very clean palette and wonderful for displaying artwork and intricate fabrics.

Third, as a designer who works with clients throughout the country, design and color choices vary by region. When living in a "gray" zone, with lots of cloudy days, beautiful yellows and corals bring a bit of "sunshine" into your home. In a sunshine state such as Florida, we use glass walls, vistas and beautiful gardens along with very soft, light colors to accent the magnificent views of the ocean.

What do you see is the future of design?

In the future, I foresee a greater push with "green" design where your complete home will be environmentally friendly. We will use more natural, less synthetic fabrics that do not destroy the environment. Cushions will be made out of recycled or natural materials. More recycled wood from local buildings or country farms will be refurbished. Reused flooring and mantels from older, decaying homes will be the norm. These elements will make your home not only eco-friendly, but full of history.

Along that same path, we will see the mixing of antiques with very high end, modern décor. A beautiful hard-line wood antique contrasted in a white-on-white room makes a very dramatic statement. Mixing the very modern with the very old is simply chic.

What are the design strengths of Bittners?

Bittners is by far the finest design firm. So many wonderfully, talented designers work here at Bittners. Bittners offers true "full-service" design from design concepts and architecture to Bittners-made custom furniture and accessories. Our master craftsmen can create spectacular furniture pieces from any era including tables, desks, chairs and beds to custom wood wall paneling and crown moldings. Our design studio has more resources than any other firm. Our showroom boasts over 10,000 square feet of beautiful furniture, lamps, chandeliers, pillows and gifts set up in vignettes to make it easy to visualize the piece in your own home. We have the latest trends in fabrics, the best "finds" in Louisville and beautiful antique pieces from around the world.

Who has inspired you over the years?

My dear partner, Michael Judd, has been my inspiration for over 23 years. We have worked together so well as a team, both at work and at home. He instills in me to learn, create and improve every day of our lives.

Here at Bittners, our President Douglas Riddle has truly inspired me along with the other designers. It is a thrill to work with a visionary who is a step ahead in the design world. He truly inspires us to be better designers and is what makes Bittners successful.

What are your career highlights?

By far, joining Bittners and getting to work with my wonderful clients throughout the years has been the highlight of my career. I am grateful that each and every day I get to create and design for these great people who, over the years, have

become my close friends.

One of my most proud career highlights is that I was presented with the "Wood Mosaic" award for designing a custom parquet floor. I am also thrilled to have designed many of our local and prestigious country clubs.

What is your design philosophy?

It is quite simple – that I make a home comfortable for the client, not for me.

What is the best advice you have ever received?

That advice came from Owsley Brown Frazier who said, "Always go for the gold."

What type of community service are you involved in?

Currently, I am on the Board of Trustees with The Speed Art Museum and on the University of Louisville Board of Overseers. I have been on numerous boards throughout the years from the Historic Homes Foundation and Broadway Series to the Louisville Ballet. I also volunteer with Historic Homes.

What is one thing that people are surprised to know about you?

I was in a square dancing contest.

Q&A with BEN SMALL

Favorite restaurant: La Tour d'Argent, Paris

Favorite book: "Gone with the Wind."

Hobbies: Traveling and antiques.

Favorite film: "Auntie Mame."

Memorable vacation spot: Australia and New Zealand

Favorite artist: Claude Monet

Best wine: Opus One

Favorite sports team: University of Louisville

Best Broadway show: "Phantom of the Opera" performed in New York, London, Los Angeles.

Philosophy: "Life is a banquet, but most people starve themselves."



Ben Small, Executive Vice President, Residential Design
Photographer: Josh Merideth
Hair design: Stephen Lewis
Makeup: Jill Higginbotham