

The Style of Life

by Tanya G. Brown

It is a given that working in interior design industry requires multidisciplinary talent. First and foremost is the expected; creativity. It is the ability to “see” in a 360 degree view, height, width, depth, and the volume of space all at one time. It is the ability to see what is there or not there and envision what could be. Melinda Hartzell Grubbs (LA’74) has that gift and has been bringing visions to life for more than 30 years.

It also takes organization, business skills, and experienced confidence in risk taking, especially when competing in the luxury home marketplace. She believes designing and building custom homes that clients love and call their own also requires an understanding of psychology, team building skills, and clear communication.

California-based designer Grubbs has balanced her creative vision with an uncanny ability to discern and reflect back what her clients want from their homes. She works to translate those visions and desires into homes that are functional as well as breathtaking.

“How people’s skill sets and their areas of giftedness play into their different personalities, their jobs and their lifestyle, heavily influences my work,” Grubbs said recently, speaking from the office of her design firm in Newport Beach, California. “In my initial visits with new clients, I ask a lot of

questions. How do they live? How do they like to entertain? How many children do they have living in their homes? What are the children’s special needs? What are the clients’ interests? Do they need separate offices, a sport court or a studio for art, a massage room, a gym with steam and sauna facilities, a wine cellar? How important and how large is their collection, whether it be wine, or cars, or art?”

Her ability to step inside the minds of her clients and deliver results beyond what they hope and dream for has solidified her position as a sought-after interior, architectural, and furnishings designer. Her work has been published in design and luxury home magazines, including *M* magazine, *Luxe Interiors+Design*, *Orange County* magazine, and *California Homes*. In 2008, a photo of one of her works was chosen as the cover image for *Designed in Orange County*, a publication of the

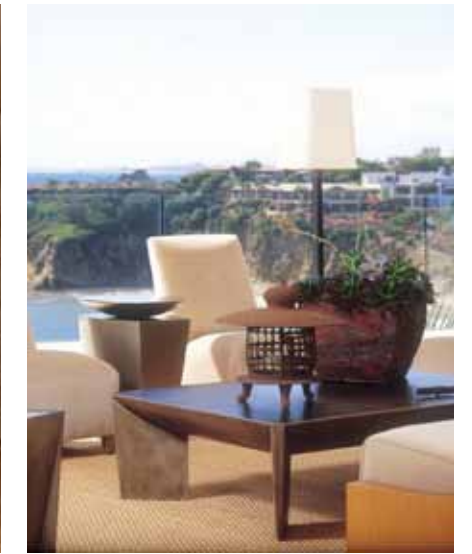
American Society of Interior Designers.

Christian Light, a southern California architect from C.J. Light Associates, has worked with Grubbs on homes for over a decade. Her commitment to detail and her thorough understanding of the entire process of home building — from drafting plans to moving in furnishings and accessories down to the last monogrammed towel — sets her apart, he says, from others in her craft.

“With Mindy, I am such a fan of her aesthetic,” Light said. “She takes ideas and then she elaborates on them and comes up with something more unique and interesting for every project. She does things a notch more creatively than most.”

Grubbs credits her Midwestern roots, particularly her time at Purdue University, with giving her the basic tools she needed to build a career she enjoys every day.





Our homes are not only where our hearts reside; they also reflect our personalities, our travels, our mindset, our experiences, and how we desire to reflect our lifestyle. Our homes reflect the lives we lead.



 **MELINDA GRUBBS**
interior design



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A solid standing

The only child of a Purdue mechanical engineering graduate, Grubbs said some of her fondest childhood memories involved the Boilermakers and the football games her parents attended with her, making the drive from their home in Ohio.

Always a creative person, she won a full scholarship to a fashion institute, but turned it down to attend her father’s alma mater.

“I felt like coming to Purdue was something I needed to do,” she said. “It was a little overwhelming at first, coming from a small town in Ohio, but I loved the environment, the beauty of the buildings, the classical way it was laid out, the football team, the marching band — just the excitement of it all.”

After two years studying general ed courses in what was then called the School of Home Economics, she found her calling in an interior design course that focused heavily on drafting. She enjoyed the creative process and the hands on appeal of thinking through her hands and sketching out her ideas precisely.

During her undergraduate career, she was partnered with a West Lafayette designer through a co-op program. The time with a mentor helped her better understand how a designer functioned, how to shop for furnishings, how to take notes when visiting show rooms,

follow up with vendors, and be exposed to what a design career truly entailed.

“Purdue gave me a solid standing,” Grubbs said. “I had to take public speaking, which has come in handy when you have to give presentations to four or five people at job site meetings every week. I didn’t see the point of the math back then, particularly the statistics. I see it now. The whole business management part of a solid interior design program is extremely important.”

She believes that students considering interior design should take as many business classes as their schedules permit. “Many of the people you are going to work with as clients are from the corporate world,” she said. “You need to know your position as the creative and the support of other trades that are implementing your scheme, but also be able to hold your own with some very bright and accomplished individuals. You have to be prepared with substantiating paperwork and always have answers to their financial questions.”

Designing lifestyle homes

Upon her graduation from Purdue, Grubbs worked with a design firm in Dayton, Ohio, for several years. In 1985, she and her family moved to California. After nearly a decade with other firms, including Country Life

Designs in Corona del Mar and Summerhouse Designs in Newport Beach, she struck out on her own in the mid-90s.

The press she has received for her designs, many of which include homes with stunning ocean views, are well deserved, according to her clients and colleagues. Her jump into her own design business also coincided with another new venture for her — designing homes literally from the ground up. Greg and Vida Knapp became acquainted with Grubbs as neighbors when they bought property in the Laguna Beach area where Grubbs designed her own dream home with help from Chris Light several years ago.

After seeing the inside of Grubbs’ home, Greg Knapp said he and his wife were keen to contract with her on their new home.

“She came in from the very beginning,” Knapp said. “She had worked with the same architect (Light) several times before and they really made a great team. The most important thing was that Mindy spent an incredible amount of time with us determining just how we wanted our house to function.”

The process, which included a year of planning and entitlement, plus two years of construction and furnishing, lasted about three years from start to finish. Knapp said having Grubbs

involved from the onset made a huge difference in the finished product.

“We wanted to have an entertaining house,” Knapp said. “One of Mindy’s principle strengths is that she will spend the time to understand how you live your life, and her design is tailor made to how you’re going to live in the house.”

The Knapp home, which looks out on the ocean, features several touches that Grubbs worked hand in hand with Light to achieve, including sliding glass doors that open and fold away into the walls and covered outdoor areas that allow parties to flow from indoors to out seamlessly.

“We don’t have a decorative style house,” Knapp said. “It’s not over cluttered, over designed. Everything in it serves a purpose. It’s very clean and simple and comes off very well.”

Light said Grubbs’ willingness to work on homes from the outset makes the homes they do as a team his favorites. “It’s a more holistic approach,” he said. “The architect, the designer, the landscape designer, the builder, we’re all on the same page.”

Clients often are happier as well, having been able to take ownership in the process from the beginning. Grubbs said being a part of a house from the onset allows her to spot problems that clients might not notice, such as the need for electrical plugs placed

in the middle of the room, possibly in concrete floors. Careful positioning allows needed outlets near end tables that will hold lamps, while still keeping unsightly cords hidden beneath sofas or other furniture. Having detailed plans as early as possible, even during framing, saves unnecessary work and anguish later, she said.

“You always need plans. You need to know if you need the plumbing here or there, so you don’t have to do it twice after the tile is in,” she said. “I’m really good at seeing the end, and I know the steps to get there. Clients can get frustrated when they don’t have all the answers. That’s what I’m there to do.”

A team effort

Ann and Nancy Youngman hired Grubbs to help with a home that was nearly built when they bought it. A Tuscan style, three-level home, the Youngmans bought their property more for the ocean view than the house itself.

Nancy Youngman enjoyed working with Grubbs on the house, saying the designer was able to pull the home together in a way that she and her husband could not have envisioned.

“Three levels is a lot to get your arms around,” Youngman said. “Plus, our other home was very traditional. I felt like I was going from one extreme to the other. Mindy was able to take

the floor plan and create a design that made me feel comfortable.”

Grubbs created sitting areas, choosing fabrics and textures that softened the Tuscan style of the home.

“My husband had to have an area where he could lay down and watch TV,” Youngman said. “Mindy just made it feel like a comfortable home, which was so important to me, because I’m very traditional. She’s good at lighting. She’s good at details. She’s just good at everything.”

Grubbs is quick to point out that her associates, including her drafting team, her business manager, and her design assistants, contribute greatly to her success.

“You’ve got these people you work with who understand your esthetic, who understand their part of the craft, and help you get the needed result,” she said. “I don’t do it all by myself any more. I can’t. But I understand it because I did it all early in my career. I love coming together as a team to create a beautiful space. Seeing the finished project is always such a pleasure. It’s that feeling of release and pleasure — the ahhhh of life!”

Tanya Brown is a freelance writer.

For more information about Melinda Grubbs and her designs, visit

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