

By MICHAEL HARRIS
Portrait by MARTIN TESSLER

Robert Bailey Solo Artist

Robert Bailey's elegant, richly layered interiors reflect the designer's natural optimism and love of warm, coastal modernism.

Rebirth of Warm
"The thing about being a designer that really gets me the most excited is constantly working to do better," says Robert Bailey. "It's a never-ending pursuit."

Certainly not, no," say Robert Bailey. "No doubts. Zero." I've just asked Bailey whether he ever wanted to be anything other than a designer. From his perch on the 26th floor of the Hudson tower in downtown Vancouver, this year's Interior Designer of the Year (designer-dashing in thick tortoiseshell glasses and a tight sweep of silver hair) runs his two-man studio with the confidence of someone who's been in this game a long while, and the energy of someone relatively new. In fact, Robert Bailey is both. Bailey grew up in a mid-century home in the secluded woods of North Vancouver's Deep Cove, where he often took it upon himself to fix his mother's décor—rearranging it on a regular basis. "My mother would come in, see that it

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was better and leave it that way,” says Bailey. “I guess I was a bossy child, in fact. My mother seemed to look to me for approval and direction on matters of interior design.”

When an aunt, a fashion editor at *The Province*, hired an interior designer to do her Kerrisdale apartment, six-year-old Bailey realized there was a potential career in all this. “It was über chic, with gilded lamps, purple velvet dining chairs, gold silk sofa,” he says. “The kind of thing a little boy could get excited about.” When he graduated from Douglas College’s Interior Design program in 1979, however, few Vancouverites were getting pro help with their interiors. “There simply wasn’t as much wealth, there wasn’t a large class of people hiring interior designers,” says Bailey. “You basically had Robert Ledingham, who blazed the trail for modern interiors in Vancouver, and that was it.”

Bailey was emotionally tied to his hometown, though, and eschewed the chance to move to a larger centre in order to work. For almost three decades he worked on commercial interiors at Architectura, a large, 140-person firm, instead. “A lot of retail work, a lot of airport work.”

Then, eight years ago, Bailey felt he had a chance to pursue his original dream (“my original, naive dream,” he calls it). When he left Architectura, he had a multi-residential project to work on but that job fell through just two days after he opened his new office. “It was a bigger risk than I realized.”

Working on the interiors of Vancouver’s finer homes appears to have been his fate, though. In the years since Bailey jumped ship, he’s developed a strong following and an impressive portfolio. There’s a compelling breadth to the work itself, but there is a through-line: Bailey is always invested in quality and refinement. Judge Sandrine Lejeune of Ledingham Design Consultants noted his “flawless detail-



High Design For a residence in the Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver (above and left) Bailey created a space that manages to feel intimate, despite its size. “It’s a space that you would feel comfortable in alone or as a group,” he explains. “Rather than create isolated separate groupings—which you could do in a room that size—we wanted one conversation space with sumptuous materials.”

Inspired Elegance A home in Deep Cove, B.C., (right, far right, and previous page) was designed to be both modern and family friendly—indoor/outdoor, dog- and kid-friendly, but with a refined palette. The dining room (right) is one of the few closed-off rooms. “It’s meant to really celebrate dinner as a separate occasion,” says Bailey. “The feel was that of a private room in a restaurant.”



Photographs by Josh Dunford

Q&A

What was your first design?

A Lego bungalow.

What’s the greatest misconception about your job?

That it’s a job. Being a designer is all encompassing—it’s a life.

Name a perfectly designed object.

The Verner Panton chair. A single material design that perfectly expresses and performs its purpose (to be a seat).

What everyday object needs a redesign?

Media remotes (I can’t believe that they are designed).

What current object is destined to become iconic?

The Steelwood Chair by Magis. It embodies all the history of classic bentwood chairs, in a new but familiar way.

Name a designer who deserves more attention.

Ward Bennett. He was a master of modern elegance, and his refined poetic furniture is both rich and spare.

What’s your favourite city?

New York. It’s the original modern city: a mecca for art, design and fashion. I love how authentically urban and alive it is.

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ing, sensuous choice of materials, textures and colours.” And Calgary designer Douglas Cridland was happy to find that “while others may choose the right fabric or the right carpet, Robert’s work truly shows you the layers—the work—that goes into making something great.”

Bailey strives to make his work reflective of the West Coast without succumbing to what he calls “cedar-infatuated” clichés. “I think you can take Carrara marble and make it West Coast,” he explains. “I think we can create an abstracted snapshot of this location. One that’s interested in the particular light of this region—there’s a sea haze here, a muted quality.”

There’s another West Coast quality that creeps into Bailey’s work, and that’s his abiding optimism. “You have to be an optimist to be a designer,” he told me. “You have to believe that things can always be better, that there’s a way to improve someone’s situation. You have to believe that life is about constantly trying to get it right.”

Next steps? Bailey and his sole employee, designer Massimo Lanaro, are moving into a new place, a raw white box of a space that will soon take on its own Bailey form. It seems that one of the city’s finest boutique firms has, at last, come home. But Bailey himself is far from satisfied. “I’m never going to stop working,” he says. “I will be carrying around swatches until the end.” *ML*

Sophie Burke Global Ambassador

After working around the world, Vancouver designer Sophie Burke brings international influence to her designs.

This year marks the introduction of a new memorial award to be given annually to an interior designer in honour of Robert Ledingham, longtime Designer of the Year judge, who passed away in May. Ledingham, a trailblazer in the field of interior design (he received more than 30 awards for his work), prized mentorship for up-and-coming designers. In keeping with the spirit of his work, this new award celebrates the work of emerging designers.

Vancouver’s Sophie Burke is our inaugural winner, and judge Sandrine Lejeune, who worked at Ledingham’s firm, couldn’t be happier. “Sophie displays great artistic sensibility paired with elegant restraint,” she says. “Certainly her worldwide experiences lend strength and maturity to her designs.”

That globetrotting of Burke’s includes early days at Terence Conran’s architecture and design firm in London, where she worked on the interiors of restaurants in Paris, Tokyo and Delhi. Today, grabbing a latte at Vancouver’s chic Beaucoup Bakery in white jeans and fluorescent toes, she’s still talking about her travels. “It’s New York, Chicago, all through California; I think travel is always what inspires me. I go out into the world and see things and want to bring them back here,” she explains. “You have to travel to realize how many new, different ways there are.”

Burke’s own firm was launched in 2004, when she returned from London with her husband to build a family in Vancouver. She now has three children and a growing business



that includes two full-time designers working alongside her at Sophie Burke Design. “I’ve enjoyed keeping it small,” she tells me. “My clients expect me to be involved at every step. And instead of growing larger, what I like is getting to that point where you can make sure every project is a good fit.”

That care in choosing projects is paying off. “Sophie’s interiors feel effortlessly authentic and elegant,” noted judge Kelly Deck. “I love her restrained use of materials and the subtle whimsy she incorporates in each home.” There’s a worldly mixing, too, of high and low styles, of old pieces and new.

Burke is now working to shake up the aesthetic she often encounters in Western Canada. “We have a lot of craftsman houses here, and people tend to do with them what others have done before.” Instead, Burke incorporates that “whimsy” that Deck refers to: for example, using a bird cage chandelier (just what it sounds like, complete with handmade birds) sourced from England. Or sandblasting local fir to give a Whistler home a sophisticated shift from the ordinary “château” vibe.

Like Ledingham before her, Burke is not content to repeat the status quo. What we’ve seen from her suggests a deep commitment to bringing the best of the world back home, and making it her own. *ML*

Vintage Glamour
Burke’s work often pairs modern with more rustic pieces (like the dining table, above), and elements of whimsy. “I get that from London,” she says. “You’d stumble on a 100-year-old building with beautiful modern furnishings inside.”

ONE TO WATCH

Amanda Hamilton

“Sometimes I think that interior designers are merely facilitators for seeing our clients’ projects come to fruition—a medium to express themselves,” says Calgary designer Amanda Hamilton. That may be overly modest: though Hamilton credits her best design ideas to stepping back and letting the client guide the creative process, there’s evidence of her fresh, feminine touch in each of her projects. Her recent work on the Aspen Estates Residence, an upscale residential property, showcases her work best. Hamilton worked with the clients to create a stylish home for a family of four that would reflect each of their personalities, blending neutral tones and contemporary architecture with signature pops of yellow—design that masters the fine balance between standing out, and standing the test of time.— *Veronika Bondarenko*

