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Everyday luxury

Designer: 'Small things mean a lot'

By Jura Koncius
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Barbara Barry is a Los Angeles interior designer known for her exquisite taste and her stable of home furnishings created for firms such as Henredon, Wedgwood, Kallista bath products and Tufenkian Carpets. She's also a life coach of sorts.

When Barry, who has been on Architectural Digest's list of 100 top designers, visits clients, she sometimes rolls up the sleeves of her silk blouse and organizes parts of their home. She removes the labels stuck on fresh fruit ("I prefer it natural, like from the farmers market"). Or she rearranges the fridge, lining the drawers with white linen dish towels ("The lettuce looks gorgeous on them"). She might fill jelly jars with fresh mint, tarragon and cilantro, and line those up on the shelves as well. Berries, she says, look better in beautiful bowls. "Small things mean a lot," says Barry, who has taught many a client her well-ordered ways.

She opened her design company in 1985 and has made a career of believing that luxury is using beautiful things every day. Her furniture has velvet-lined drawers. Her teacups have a shape she researched to be the most comfortable for holding in your hand. She prefers colors in a restrained palette, which means lots of pale greens and soothing blues.

In October, she will be opening a Barbara Barry store in Moscow. She was at the Henredon showroom at the Washington Design Center recently to talk with designers and customers about her new furniture and accessories.

Q: These are tough times. What can we do to give a lift to ourselves and our rooms?

A: It makes a difference if you have nice sheets or drink tea from a beautiful cup. You can understand that as hard as life can be, it can be balanced with simple pleasures.

What important details do people overlook in their homes?

A: I have built luxurious homes from the ground up, but if the cabinet knob falls off, it's a failure. Clean out a closet. Take everything off your furniture and polish it. Throw out what you have around your kitchen sink: the grungy sponge, the soap pump with the label on it, the dead plant, scrub brush. Replace them. You can tell so much about people when you look at their sink.

Can you share some favorite places to install wallpaper?

A: I like wallpaper in closets. The coat closet, your bedroom closet and even in the pantry. It can make a rather boring space feel very special. It can be a personal luxury, like having a beautiful lining in a jacket.

What are some of your favorite paint colors?

A: For walls I like pale green (Moon Shadow by Benjamin Moore) or pale taupe (Coastal Fog by Benjamin Moore). For trim I do off-white (White Down by Benjamin Moore). My own living room is Donald Kaufman's DKC-8. It's sort of a gray-celadon. I call it the color of water in the bathtub.

What is the best finish for bath fixtures?

A: Plumbing is not something we update all the time, like a pillow. It should be timeless. I go for nickel, which always keeps its freshness. Nickel is the classic finish on boats. It adds sparkle, and it's like a bit of jewelry in the bathroom. I don't want to see bronze or brass.

You have designed a lot of sheets. What is your theory for bedrooms?

A: Your bed should look like you've moved into the best hotel in town. Buy the highest-quality bed linens you can afford. I prefer to use lightweight duvets with covers. No top sheet: enjoy the sensuous feeling of down all around you.

What about towels?

A: I use only white or ivory towels. In the guest room, I use a blush color. I don't like monograms.

Why?

A: Because you already know who lives there.
