

AT HOME ON CAPE COD

From The Ground Up

Remodels • New Builds • Interior Design

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Creative ideas for affordable housing

THE HOUSE WHISPERER

Donna Elle & the art of spiritual design

PET PROJECTS

Designers give pets special status

SPRING/SUMMER 2023



The House Whisperer

Interior designer Donna Elle focuses on the spiritual connection between the client and the home

BY CAROL K. DUMAS

DON'T ASK INTERIOR DESIGNER DONNA ELLE ABOUT TRENDS.

"I don't pay attention to what's trending," says Elle, who's been an interior designer for 35 years on Nantucket. "I truly pay attention to the client's personality and the way they are going to use their home and who they are."

Since moving to the island as an 18-year-old, Elle has forged a creative career path for herself that continues to evolve, even now, as she is perched at the top of her interior design career. She's been working on her first book, which focuses on "spiritual design," her guiding light.

Her clients have included owners of countless private homes, including David Rubenstein, whose grand home was a getaway for presidents and celebrities; and luxury hotels like the Wauwinet Inn, where in 1989 she was hired to do window treatments and upholstery and continues to maintain a business relationship with Nantucket Island Resorts. She also updates the décor in The White Elephant Residences often and designed the décor for the cottages known as the Boat Basin. Recent projects include a five-story Back Bay brownstone in Boston and the interior of

Donna Elle Design
9 Nobska Way
Nantucket
508-228-7320
donnaelle.com

a new women's clothing store in downtown Nantucket called Alice Walk.

Career path

Elle's path to becoming an interior designer was not a straightforward one.

When she was 18, a friend invited her to the island from the Western Massachusetts hamlet of Easthampton, a rural area in the Pioneer Valley, where she had grown up and was the town's Junior Miss in 1973.

"When I got off the ferry and made my way to the foot of Nantucket's Main Street and turned to my friend, 'Do people really live here?' I said."

Elle was smitten with the island's natural beauty and close-knit community and in 1974, she moved to the "faraway isle" full time. It was the first of many fortuitous career moves for Elle.

From 1976 to 1983, she taught Home Economics and substituted at Nantucket High School. In 1983, she opened Threads, a fabric and dressmaking and bridal gown design shop.

Interior Designer Donna Elle is working on her first book, which focuses on "spiritual design."

OPPOSITE: PHOTO BY WENDY MILLS



The design intention of this seating area was to create a colorful but cozy corner perfect for summer mornings that mimics the natural landscape surrounding the home. Fabric by F Schumacher was used in the banquette's seating cushions and toss pillows and in the roman shades. A local woodworker made the pedestal table.



MATT KISSIDAY

“Priscilla of Boston and another designer would send me their dresses for alterations,” she recalls.

She made countless prom dresses, bridal gowns, and bridesmaid dresses over the years. She was also the tailor for the iconic Murray’s store downtown (home of those Nantucket Red pants). She also had an upholstery workroom, working with designers from New York and Washington.

Elle is the kind of person who seizes opportunity while always scratching her creative itch.

The 1980s was a booming time for building and real estate on the island. The rich and famous, tech industry millionaires, movie stars, and musicians, among others, started buying property and building or renovating existing homes for seasonal use. Elle sensed the change around her and decided to change her career course to meet the needs of the new homeowners. She enrolled in an interior design certificate program at Rhode Island School of Design.

“My career exploded,” she says, after completing her first project.

In 2016 Elle’s daughter Katie Lou Williams joined her staff and grew into her role today as a senior designer. Williams, who is “computer-aided proficient,” also does much of the buying and sourcing for the interior spaces as well as conceiving

the concept boards. Mother and daughter developed the Nantucket Coastal Collection in 2005, a product line of home furnishings, bedding, and seashell-motif hardware.

Above: Built in the 1600s, this fish cabin in the Nantucket village of Sconset was modernized in a way that encourages simple Nantucket living while honoring its rich history. Below: Donna Elle and daughter Katie Williams confer over plans for an interior design project.



MATT MULLIGAN/HAWK VISUALS.



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD: DAN CUTRONA

This basement-level family room was designed with family and fun in mind. The custom bedding and pillows in the built-in bunk beds are designed using F Schumacher fabric and trim, while the red, white, and blue color theme is playful, coastal, and quintessentially New England.

The art of spiritual design

So what is spiritual design?

Elle insists that her design aesthetic comes from her clients, not from her own likes and dislikes. It all boils down to the initial first meeting where Elle confers with the clients to devise three descriptive words of how they desire to feel when they come home.

“It could begin at your street, an intersection, or your front door, where you begin to feel desirous of how you are recalling a positive feeling being created,” she explains. “It’s as if you were an invited guest in your home where lights, carpets, and objects were well-designed that assured a sense of belonging, nourishment, and safety that would melt away your outside stresses. What is so simple is that you could repurpose a mirror from the attic or add a modern-looking bookcase for familiar collected objects as you were greeted and cherished in your own entryway.”

She and the client come up with descriptive words, such as soothing, eclectic, timeless, loved, welcomed, connected,

seen, evocative, cherished, honored, nourishing, beautiful, safe, held, accepted, joyful, protected.

“It becomes a litmus test,” she continues. “The more the client reveals who they are, the more intuitive the process. I act as a channel and receive downloads of what’s going to work and what’s not in terms of surface finishes, lighting plan, color palette, and I build that path. I envision very specific professional avenues in search of the ideal furnishings, textiles, case goods and accessories that work into the harmony of who they are.”

The ultimate goal is to awaken and create the connection between the clients and their families and the home and for them to resonate with the dimensional space created in honor of their lifestyle.

“If it’s a sensation of peace, safety, and security we prefer and you are not capturing this experience, the goal then is to modify one design element to experiment with effects. We can become numb to the placement in our interiors and not realize how our homes bear an extension to our personal



The open concept of this main living area was carefully designed by Elle to ensure that there were ample opportunities for intimate gathering amidst the open floor plan. The use of natural materials in the fireplace surround and hanging pendants in large scale add a grounding effect that gives balance to the pitched ceilings. The custom upholstered dining chairs create a softness against the vintage state and saturation of the dining table, which was sourced from West Barnstable Tables.



This private master suite and adjoining private balcony features a wool carpet and a chenille-upholstered, king-sized bed. The room is topped off with open exposed ceiling rafters that highlight 6-inch V groove boards.

lives. The right interiors can provide a more elicited response than not. Paying attention to the details of layout and placement of a table and lighting can bear a significant effect on our moods and emotions.”

For corporate clients, there are some rules. Fabrics have to be durable, for example, and hospitality codes have to be followed. “That keeps me in a channel.”

Pandemic challenges

When people were confined to home during the pandemic and working from home became the new normal, Elle experienced a new boom in her business.

“All my clients came out of the woodwork and wanted updates and renovations to meet the parameters of new needs for multifamily living and makeshift offices,” she says.

Also, many former clients’ families had grown over

the years, or their lifestyles had changed, perhaps to being retired or becoming full-time residents instead of summer people. They have been seeking her out to redesign spaces to accommodate more seating, reshape interiors into open floor plans, and incorporate performance fabrics into new furniture now that grandchildren were among the frequent visitors.

“I’m an empathetic and clairvoyant person. I’m in tune with interpreting clients’ homes. Upon meeting with a client either on the job site or at a table over blueprints, I begin the sculpting and framing process in my long-held, experiential voice of how the house is going to vibrate a feel and a look,” she explains. “Is she all about patterns? Masculine? Feminine? How much can I push the envelope? Is the space open or closed? Where is the energy of the flow, and where are the dead ends? It all matters.

“It’s not the next photo on Instagram. Over the years, I’ve become the house whisperer.”

DAN CUTRONA



thank you
KAM Appliances for fully
donating all appliances
for Habitat Cape Cod
home builds!



Habitat for Humanity
of Cape Cod

KAM
Appliances

