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Interior designer Summer Thornton on entrepreneurship, taking risks and never saying never.

BY MARISSA BERGMAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHANIEL SMITH

Summer Thornton's name has become synonymous with stunning interiors and a precise attention to detail. She first broke into the business working at a high-end textile company and under several other interior designers. Since opening her own firm, Summer Thornton Design, in 2007, she has taken the hands-on approach of interior design to heart. She often works with a homeowner's architect, aiding in the design of the exterior stone and ironwork, custom doors and cabinetry and one-of-a-kind furniture pieces.

Describing her astronomical ascent to one of the city's top interior designers, Ms. Thornton says, "I always knew I wanted to open my own firm. I studied entrepreneurship and small business ownership in college. It just started sooner than I had planned. I was between assisting jobs and started taking on my own clients while working for another designer part-time. Eventually, it got to the point where I needed to be full-time with my own clients."

The monumental success of her namesake firm wasn't guaranteed. "I never expected the firm to grow so much," she admits. Somehow, despite going into business right in time for the recession, she managed not only to survive, but thrive. And while she humbly shies away from talking about her business prowess, Ms. Thornton admits, "Our business definitely has its ups and downs; it's cyclical, but it doesn't necessarily correlate with the market."

THE SHECONOMY OF INTERIORS

There's no denying that more and more people are investing in hiring an interior designer. So what makes it worth the cost? Ms. Thornton outlines both the creative and practical cost-benefits.

Creatively, a designer helps clients narrow down the millions of overwhelming interior options. More importantly, "it's worth having a professional to interpret your taste and style, because you're not exposed to this field every day," she notes. Yet, it is arguably the practical worth that speaks most to busy clients, often juggling jobs and families.

As Ms. Thornton explains, "People don't necessarily understand how much time it takes to create a thoughtfully designed space." Her firm is highly involved with project management and streamlines the process so that clients only speak to their designer, instead of the various parties involved – from painters to electricians to woodcutters – in completing a renovation.

But what is it about Summer Thornton Design that has Chicagoans begging for more? That fun, fresh and quirky spin on classic luxury with a personalized touch. The design process begins with a lot of listening, mentally curating the client's aesthetics and functional needs. From

there, "our goal is to take their style and make it the best it can possibly be." And if the designers can't find that perfect, specific item for a project, such as upholstered pieces or dining tables, their solution is to make it themselves...with the help of local craftsmen. Ms. Thornton is particularly proud of this aspect of the firm. "If clients have the time and patience, creating something truly special for them is always exciting," she explains.

"We don't want something to look entirely purchased from a showroom," she adds. "We love mixing vintage pieces into our designs and making something that speaks to clients and tells a story." As such, it's hard to label the design firm with a distinctive style...and that's entirely intentional. While clients can expect the use of lots of colors, patterns and bold contrast, each home is exceptionally tailored to individual and unique preferences.

WORDS TO LIVE BY

Ms. Thornton's firm embraces a series of tongue-in-cheek mantras, but how much do they apply to this interior guru's personal life? It seems as though Ms. Thornton subconsciously worked her own values and habits into the essence of her company.

Never say never. In terms of design, this one's pretty self-explanatory; tastes change and evolve, so it's not surprising to find yourself drawn to a style you never thought you'd like as time passes. The real-life application is similarly obvious. "There are certain things that we stick to as our core principles as we grow, but you're supposed to change and allow yourself to experiment," says Ms. Thornton.

More is more. "That definitely applies to my life," she immediately quips. A self-identified maximalist, she loves visual stimulation, which is how her personal home is decorated. "My home is where I can experiment," she says, referencing the contrast of her Victorian building with an enormous eight-foot-tall Lucite and glass light fixture from the '70s in her dining room. And now it's applying to her toddler daughter, as well, who's learning to layer with accessories, piling on her necklaces like a fashionable pro.

No great room was ever designed without taking a risk. Expect the unexpected at Summer Thornton Design, where they love to push the envelope. "The perfect place for clients to be is excited but a little nervous," observes Ms. Thornton. "If you're not a little uncomfortable, you've seen it before." She feels the same way when making personal decisions: "I'm a 'jump off the cliff then figure it out' kind of person." It's a good thing, too, or Summer Thornton Design might not exist today. ■



Summer Thornton