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Renaissance WOMAN

Chances are that a rug you've walked on, building you've occupied, or hotel or spa you've visited bears the work of the Irish-born, New York-based designer named Clodagh



Clockwise from top left: A dining room Clodagh created in a New York condo. Clodagh works from a studio in New York. Her sense by Clodagh27 faucet, for Watermark Designs.

In addition to paint, fabric, wood, and metal, other materials in Clodagh's design arsenal include such concepts as feng shui, chromotherapy (using light and color to influence mood), biophilia (incorporating nature into living spaces), and wabi-sabi (celebrating the inherent aging of things). Whatever she designs, though, is something sure to endure. *MILIEU* met with Clodagh in her New York studio loft.

You began at seventeen designing clothes. Your work now includes interiors and buildings, furnishings and gardens. You curate art collections, do photography, create products for Ann Sacks, Dennis Miller, Du Verre, Watermark and Visual Comfort. You work as a founding board member of the Thorn Tree Project, which helps children in Kenya. How do you define yourself?

How about "difficult Irish woman"? My first answer is that I'm a designer. I hate the words "interior designer," "decorator," "architect." I work with total design. If I don't know how to do something, I hire somebody who does and then I'll orchestrate it to get it to where I want it to be. At the firm, we're multipurpose. I never want to deny myself any experience, any chance for growth. When someone calls to do something, if it's interesting, we'll do it. As a designer, there's a sensitive side to me, but if I want something, I can go on the offensive.

And what is it about those labels that so annoys you?

I was brought up in Ireland by very strict parents. Everything was categorized, and everybody had a place in the world. We were downwardly mobile aristocracy —

WRITTEN BY DAVID MASELLO



Above: Clodagh wanted the interiors she designed for Tucson's Miraval Spa to reflect the experience and feel of the surrounding Arizona desert, as evidenced here in one of the changing rooms. Below: Whether it's in her design work or volunteer work with The Thorn Tree Project in Kenya, Clodagh prefers to be involved in every aspect.

which is a very bad thing, because if you're going to be like that, you need to have tons of money. You'd hear people say how such and such a person went to a certain school, which meant that they represented something. Or you'd hear how someone's not one of the Smiths of County Cork but one of the Smiths of Galway. So I realized when I left school just before I was seventeen that I didn't want to go to university or ever be put in a filing cabinet.

Is there something you most like to design, that always fires you?

When Eartha Kitt was asked who her favorite lover was, she said "The one I'm with." I just came from doing what I consider to be a wonderful building, The Abington House, at 500 West 30th Street, a 391-unit apartment complex designed by architect Robert Stern. We're doing all the interiors, and I think it's one of the best things I've ever done.

You're often thought of as a guru of design. Why is that?

I have all these mantras I'm always quoting. I should have T-shirts printed with them. "Everywhere you walk, everywhere you look, I want you to see something beautiful." That might be one of them. My subtitle should be: "Life-enhancing minimalism." Why do you think I shortened my name to just Clodagh? Here's another: "Everything you need, but nothing more than you need."

When choosing objects for a project, do you always seek out the new?

I don't really have much need to look in the rearview mirror, except to learn something. So I might choose an old piece that maybe feels like it has a new purpose. At the Miraval (Resort and Spa in Tucson), for instance, I've used a 200-year-



old Pueblo door from New Mexico as a focal point. I like to use Japanese antiques because they're very spare and they resonate; they have that very wabi-sabi quality which I like.

Tell us about your use of feng shui. Do you really believe rooms have some inherent energy?

I wouldn't use it if I didn't. I don't use anything unless it's authentic. I was brought up in Ireland with its ghosts and spirits and shades, bad-luck

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things and good-luck things. I've always consulted integrated-medicine healers. I'm very interested in the Druids and how they placed things, configured openings in chambers so that the light of the summer solstice hit a sacred rock. We've also gone into biogeometry, which is about the effects physical shapes have on the human body. I'm conscious of elements like uplights, which energize you, while downlights depress you if there are too many of them.

What are your favorite architectural styles?

There's a book called *Architecture Without Architects*, which should tell you something about how I feel. I lived in Spain and loved the old farmhouses there and how a family builds on another room when the couple gets married, then keeps adding on a room with each child. I love the volumes that result because somebody needed them. That why's they are there and for no other reason. I love the architecture of Tadao Ando. I like Charles and Ray Eames because of their interest in the anatomy of objects. They didn't make something unless it could be useful. I like sexy architecture, and Gordon Bunshaft's 9 West 57th Street is sexy. I vibrate to the works of (Richard) Serra because I love steel, metalwork, concrete. I like muscular materials, with the counterpoint of glass. Good design endures. A word I don't like: "trendy." Say something I've done is trendy and it will straighten my curly hair.

Is there advice you give to young designers?

Find out who you are. Develop who you are. Intern with designers you admire. Offer your services. Do it for nothing. Just go in and say you want to help. We have a very strong relationship with our interns. We show them our contracts, the protocols we've established. I also tell them not just to look at design. Go into a restaurant, pull it apart and put it together again. Perform an emotional audit on spaces. Find as much joy now as you can. There's no savings account for joy and it doesn't earn interest. And it helps to be a nomad to be a good designer. Designers always need to expand their perceptions of the world.

Any activities apart from work that you pursue?

I am profoundly interested in landscape design. I really love going to nurseries. I remain intrigued by healing landscapes, how plants can foster wellness and healing. That's fun for me. After all, I was born in the country, born, in fact, in Oscar Wilde's ancestral country home. I also work with the Samburu people of Kenya furthering Thorn Tree's mission to help educate their children.

Are you designing something for yourself now?

I just bought a really ugly little house up in Beacon, New York, which I'm hoping to turn into an attractive little house. It dates from 1800 something. It has 300 yards of creek in front of it, and that alone will help me figure out how to make the house right. I may be a nomad at heart, having moved many times, but I do get warm, fuzzy feelings still about Ireland, where I grew up. When the plane comes in over Shannon or Dublin, I feel goosebumps. ■

The snowshoes my brother bought at the auction? Hang them on the wall, beside the prints of Chief Joseph my sister gave us after her divorce. Finally, we can unpack the records we've been storing for decades, the 45s and 78s and LPs holding the soundtrack of our lives. Open the windows, crank up the speakers — the mice won't mind.

If a neighbor stops by, or a friend drives up from the city to spend the night, there will be soup on the stove or chicken on the grill. Nothing fancy. No fine china or polished silver, no carefully creased napkins — those are back in the city, in our townhouse with its oriental rugs, custom-designed bookshelves, white marble backsplash, and jewel-toned palette. We love our townhouse, as we've loved every full-time home we've created in the decades since we bought the cottage. But we've never wanted to replicate those homes, especially here, where our other selves prefer muted earth tones and eclectic furnishings, many donated from family members wishing to leave their signature on the cottage they've grown to love: a niece's metal sculpture, a sister-in-law's quilt. And from my mother, a writing desk my great-grandfather built 100 years ago, salvaging four ornately carved legs from a grand piano someone had dismantled and left behind.

In our mountain cottage, nothing matches but everything fits. Strange how that happens when you free your other self to make the design decisions. My other self keeps surprising me, as does my husband's. Twenty years ago, when they'd had enough of the dark paneling, our other selves whitewashed the cottage walls. Ten years ago, they ripped out the carpet and installed wood floors. Then they knocked out a partition in the narrow hallway to let light into the unfinished basement, which is now a bedroom and study with a half-bath and casement windows (salvaged, of course) opening to a view of the trees we fell in love with thirty years ago.

The trees have doubled in size since then, but our cottage hasn't, unless you count the basement renovation that amped our living space to a total of 800 square feet. Recently, vacation houses have sprouted up around us. Massive homes, with huge, vaulted entryways, granite countertops, master suites, tables that seat twelve, wine cellars, and patio doors showcasing million-dollar views. All are stunning, inside and out, but after a few hours, we can't wait to get back home. Tomorrow, or the day after, we'll have to leave for the city, and though it takes us only ninety minutes, max, to clean the cottage and pack up the car, we don't want to waste a moment.

Not long ago, a friend asked advice about buying a second home. I'm not big on advice, so I shrugged off the question. But if she asks me again, here's what I'll say: Everyone's dream is different. But if you buy a second home, buy it for your other self, the self that needs something your full-time home can't give. If your full-time home is a five-acre country estate, your weekend retreat might be a studio apartment in Manhattan. If your full-time home is a studio apartment and your dream is to prepare elaborate meals for twelve, find a vacation house with the biggest kitchen you can afford, and sign on the dotted line. ■