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The Layered Designer

Interior designer Sara Bengur samples colors, textures and fabrics from her diverse past to make beautiful environments today.

by Brooke Eaton | FNC iMag

I didn't picture scones. Big, fluffy, crumbly scones. And tea. I hadn't thought of that, either. I had only seen pictures of Sara Bengur's work, an [eclectic collection](#) that appropriately conveys the expanding arc of a young interior designer, but this was my first time meeting her. Her generous use of color, and knack for mixing patterns instantly caught my eye, but it was the layering that got me. The inspiration for all of those layers must come from somewhere, and I wanted to know how she got so many different looks to go together so well. So on a rainy Tuesday morning, I headed to what I imagined would be a spacious, trendy office--perhaps a loft with big, butcher block tables, tall windows and lots of light. No, I certainly didn't picture scones.

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Walking into her office, a.k.a. a one-bedroom apartment in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, the subtle aroma of herbal tea greeted me and the cheerful, yet subdued sounds of a Brazilian vocalist played softly in the background (picture Ella Fitzgerald, in Portuguese). Warm reds, oranges and yellows surrounded me on the walls, the fabrics, the furniture. Inviting decor aside, it was her friendly offer for breakfast that created a relaxed, comfortable vibe, making her "office" feel more like a home. If I didn't know better, I'd guess this was a disguised marketing tactic, but I believe her inclination to offer breakfast is what makes her such a successful interior designer, and not the other way around.

Following her own philosophy, her space very much reflects who she is not only as a designer, but as an individual. "I've never been into the cookie cutter," she says as we sit at a small, mosaic-tiled table in the center of the room. "It's exciting to feel that someone's interior represents who they are as a person." Bengur, along with her two employees, works from her living room/office, meeting with various clients, architects and vendors in between. Currently, she's working on houses in Cambridge, Mass., Martha's Vineyard, Maine, the Hamptons, Manhattan and a vacation home out West, in addition to a non-profit project she's heading up in the Bronx. Her collective approach to design allows her to work on all kinds of houses in different geographies. "One constant is that I really love color and fabrics and textiles so you'll always see a very interesting combination of patterns and textures in my work," she says. "I rarely use the same fabric twice and I'll incorporate some antique textiles and custom rug designs, so that way you kind of create this wonderful atmosphere of layering." Where most would create a busy bustle of prints and patterns that would scream chaos rather than calm, Bengur has a way of mixing and matching without making you want to go crazy. Each color, pattern and fabric goes together, but comes from a different place, creating a truly unique aesthetic.

Much like the layers she creates, Bengur's international upbringing influences her varied approach to styling an environment. Her father an Economist for the International Monetary Fund, Bengur was born in Washington, D.C. (and spent her first seven years there). Once her father retired, he moved his family back to his native Turkey, where Bengur spent her early adolescence. "They were very impressionable years," she says about her time in Istanbul. "It was a beautiful experience, just the energy of the city, the colors, the textures, the smells--everything was so exotic. The sheer beauty and the quality of life there is amazing--the fruits, the vegetables, the people." Bengur's trademark use of Iznik, or bright, patterned tiles is a direct nod to her Turkish roots, as is her choice in rugs. "Artwork for Turkey when I was living there was really the rugs, the tiles and the textiles." By the time Bengur was 14, political tensions were escalating, and her family moved back to the United States, this time, to Mt. Desert Island, Maine, where she had always spent summers. "That was really tough because I went from this big, major city to this small island," she says. She credits her appreciation for more traditional design to her time in Maine. "I got to see a lot these beautiful summer houses that had kept that "Old New England" style. At that time people hadn't really brought the city aesthetic up there yet, so it was just fantastic. I have that in my mind when I do work up there."

After graduating from Colby College with a degree in Economics, Bengur moved to New York City to wow Wall Street. But instead of schmoozing clients at swanky bars, Bengur found herself meeting all kinds of interior designers and architects. Deciding to forgo finance, Bengur enrolled at the Parsons School of Design and worked for a few designers before going out on her own. Looking back, she concedes her eagerness often outweighed her ability: "I was green!" she says with a smile. "I really jumped into it. But I had some very patient, wonderful clients, so I just started evolving."

Her career continues to grow: Since 1994, Bengur has been designing for clients from the Caribbean to Connecticut, with each project infusing her collective spirit and bold color schemes, often using pieces that clients already have and incorporating them into the design. "I work with clients on how they should use things, perhaps reinventing an old family piece, so it's really trying to stretch their imaginations and think outside the box" she says. "I like to encourage my clients to try new ideas that may be outside their comfort zone, but in the long run I know the final design will give them lots of joy!"

For Bengur, feeling good is what design is all about. In 2001, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. "My whole life changed," she said. "It's a moment in your life when you think 'What am I doing? Who am I? I was reassessing everything and ironically, it gave me so much freedom. I started really focusing on things that matter." It was while she was recovering from surgery she came to an understanding. "I realized your environment can either help or hurt you. My home really helped me heal."

Not only did the experience help her grow as a designer, but she has been able to take what she learned and help others. In 2006, she and eight other designers worked to create a home in the Bronx for women and their children living with HIV/AIDS, called Woodycrest House. In May 2009, Marcello Manor will open in the Bronx, which will provide permanent housing for victims of domestic violence. Working closely with future residents on the design of the common room, Bengur has worked to create a soothing, yet sophisticated environment. "It's really amazing to meet them," she says, "They are very strong and intelligent and have been thru a lot. I'm really happy to be able to give them a little bit of what the rest of us take for granted."

Above her diverse portfolio of work, and enthusiasm for design, perhaps the biggest selling point for Bengur is the self-evident happiness her own home exudes. Despite all the layering in her design, there really is nothing to hide. This is who she is. And by sitting in her serene living room, surrounded by walls of bookshelves, re-purposed furniture and treasures from her travels, you'd never guess how busy she was. Heck, I almost forgot about all the projects I have on my own plate. But then again, it's difficult to get past the scones.