

THE INSIDERS

JULIETTE ARENT AND SARAH-JANE PYKE DESIGN THEIR HOME INTERIORS AROUND THE LIVES THAT WILL BE LIVED IN THEM, FROM THE FLOORPLAN TO WHAT'S ON THE BOOKSHELF.

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Life – the rituals, the routine, the everyday. It may not sound like a particularly inspiring place to start when setting out to create beautiful spaces full of beautiful things, but that is exactly where interior design duo Juliette Arent and Sarah-Jane Pyke begin on their award-winning residential projects.

“People don’t come to us asking for a particular look but for the experiences they want to have there and how the house will function,” Arent tells WISH in the Arent & Pyke offices in Sydney’s Surry Hills. “We find that we are essentially designing around routines, people’s daily tasks, and that becomes the strongest part of our briefing phase.”

It was this desire to add life into design that propelled Arent and Pyke to go out on their own a decade ago. It was a time when interiors were very monotone and minimalist – bare and cold – and this was a trend that did not appeal to either of them. “We both really wanted to inject spirit and life into interiors,” says Arent. “When I was going through design school, it was very pared back, extremely minimalist, which I could appreciate aesthetically but it didn’t appeal to me emotionally. There was a very particular look and [our aesthetic] was a reaction to that.”

Arent and Pyke also recognised an “entrepreneurial

spirit” in each other when they met working at a Sydney interiors firm. Arent studied design and Pyke studied interior architecture. They soon figured out they liked the same things and enjoyed working together, and they had a conversation about going out on their own. It also helped that they were in their early 30s and fancy free. They didn’t have families or mortgages as they do now. “We knew that if it didn’t work, we would just have to cover the rent. It was not as pressured. It had a very free feeling to it,” recalls Arent.

Their first major project was renovating a terrace in the beachside suburb of Coogee. The pair had to think about how the spaces were going to be used, furnish them and dress them accordingly. The client was a busy family with three young boys.

“It is interesting that our first house was a family home,” Pyke says, given the duo have become renowned for creating beautiful family homes across the country and even the world (they did an apartment in New York a few years ago). “This was a family with a very active life and it was all about getting that to work, creating spaces for teenagers to grow into. We had to think about how these boys were going to grow up in this house. We still get a Christmas card from them every year. Their boys are six feet tall. It’s really a thrill to get that in the mail.”

The pair believe the key to their success is spending a lot of time with their clients. They meet numerous times before the project has even begun, to get a strong sense of the individual and what they want for their home. “We also look at people’s art, look at their objects, things that they have collected over the years,” Pyke



Sarah-Jane Pyke, left, and Juliette Arent in their Surry Hills office



Opposite page, the Alex Hotel in Perth, a rare commercial project for Arent & Pyke; above, a home in Double Bay in Sydney's east

explains. "Also a lot of people usually do have a scrapbook or a pin interest board and so then we have a cue into a particular aesthetic as well."

Arent and Pyke are also very careful not to let their client's homes become "showrooms" of designer furniture, so they mix it up with vintage items and custom-made pieces along with family heirlooms. Artwork from all over the world also features strongly as does colour and texture. Each project takes from 12 months to three years to complete and they collaborate closely with builders and architects and often rethink/redesign the floor plan. They basically do everything from designating living spaces to styling the house down to the very last book.

But the pair find it hard to boil down their work to one style without using the dreaded "e" word of the design world – eclectic. "I would say that my aesthetic is contemporary. We are often referring to the work of mid-century architects and designers," says Arent. "We are looking for something that is not over-stylised," adds Pyke. But then Arent concedes. "Okay, it is eclectic," she says, laughing. "It is warm and contemporary. It is introducing texture with materials, fabrics, rugs. It is a layered approach to furniture and design."

Layered is perhaps a good word to settle on to describe the projects Arent and Pyke have done over the past 10 years. Each space has a variety of colours and palettes, from the artwork to furniture to the rugs to the colour of the walls. Unexpected combinations of materials somehow work and create vibrancy and personality. Just one example of this is a house in Double Bay in Sydney's eastern suburbs that the pair were hired to turn from a somewhat masculine environment (aluminium windows and glass balustrades) to a family home imbued with life. Arent

& Pyke reconfigured the living spaces and introduced blue and green hues to the white palette along with warm wood furniture and flooring.

"Anyone who has ever come to my house is, like, wow," says Claire, the owner of the Double Bay property. "The girls are amazing. I want to do another project with them but I can't sell my house as I love it too much." Claire (WISH is not using her surname) says Arent and Pyke were a pleasure to work with. "Their eye is amazing," she says. "I had loved a lot of houses that they had done and had been following them for some time. The girls are just so easy to get along with, easy to explain your ideas to, and they have a fabulous eye for what works. They also have a really good team there of women who seem to work together beautifully."

This amazing eye of both Arent and Pyke began in their childhoods; they just didn't realise at the time that it predestined them for the world of interiors. Arent's first ever project was her bedroom as a teenager. Even by this age, she had already had very definitive ideas of what she wanted her personal space to look like. "It was all about mood lighting and natural materials," she recalls. "I always wanted a seagrass rug on my floor and my Dad said, 'Sure, but there is carpet, so why do you want a rug?!'" For Pyke, it was a family renovation that spurred her love of architecture. "I just became fascinated with buildings and I wanted to understand everything about them. My family did a renovation on our home when I was 15 and I used to come down every morning and talk to the builders about absolutely everything."

Both had a brief stint in commercial work before deciding they wanted to focus on something more personal – the home. "I think it is partly a scale thing, because it is smaller and you are able to connect with



Top row, a penthouse at Darling Point on Sydney harbour; Figtree House in Bronte



the end user, the client, really knowing what you are making is for someone that is going to experience it every day," explains Pyke.

That said, they recently ventured back out into the world of commercial design when approached to do the interiors for the Alex Hotel in Perth. "The client actually sought us out *because* we were residential designers, not hotel designers," says Arent. The owners didn't want the usual formulaic hotel rooms but instead wanted it to "have some sense of place" and be more like home for guests. The pair well and truly met the brief with the project, getting rave reviews and taking out the hospitality categories at the Australian Interior Design Awards and the Belle Coco Republic Interior Design Awards in 2016.

They both really enjoyed the experience but aren't in a rush to return the commercial world unless "it was that sort of brief again" says Pyke. Instead they are

focusing on expanding their blog, In/Out, which they started five years ago. Featuring stories on interiors, travel, fashion and art, it provides a glimpse into what inspires them. "It's a particular mix of things that we put together that informs our design world," says Arent. They are also collaborating with other creative types, including on a homewares line with Melbourne soft-furnishings company Kate & Kate, and are in the process of designing a furniture collection.

But for Arent and Pyke, their work on houses will always be their first love and top priority. And, again, it is the life inside the homes they work on that they enjoy the most. "It is always the lovely clients that are the best," says Pyke of their favourite projects over the last decade. "I have just come from a site and the husband just loves the architect, loves the builder and loves all the things we have been choosing. That, for me, is always the greatest thrill." **W**