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# Hemispheres

APRIL 2022




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# Be So

Design maven Kelly Wearstler  
believes a space should be  
sophisticated, eclectic, and—most  
importantly—personal



# Bold

By Sahar Khan

Kelly Wearstler, the reigning doyenne of California interior design and a longtime fixture on the AD100 list, describes her style as “free-spirited,” but it can lean a bit more toward ’60s acid trip than the laid-back earthiness the adjective conjures in contemporary design circles. Take, for example, her work at a pied-à-terre in New York City’s Soho that features floors crafted from geometric patterns of bleached and ebonized waxed walnut, red leather ruched “soufflé” beds, and a decoupage screen with twisting serpents (a print she sells through the Rug Company). It’s a visual cacophony, yes, but one that makes visceral sense, and it’s emblematic of how Wearstler’s work—she’s also the creative eye behind Proper Hotels, along with hospitality darlings such as the Avalon Hotel Beverly Hills and the Viceroy Santa Monica—walks a tightrope between overwhelming maximalism and just-right pizzazz. The difference lies in her curatorial finesse.

“Your interior says so much about who you are as a person and how you live,” says Wearstler, 54, calling from the Malibu home she shares with her husband of nearly 20 years, real-estate developer Brad Korzen, and their two teenage sons. (The house, done in varying shades of sand, suggests a love of “grand gestures,” as Wearstler notes in a home tour video for *Harper’s Bazaar*, in which the lynx-eyed designer introduces viewers to an oversized resin cornucopia, an 18-foot ficus tree in a two-story entrance, and a cast-bronze,

onyx-topped sconce that creates “an earthy light that’s very sexy at night”.) “You can go into somebody’s house, and you get to know so much about that person,” she says. “It’s all about how the clients really live, [or] how the operator wants to run the hotel.” Wearstler helps them realize the how.

Wearstler came to design naturally. She grew up in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where her mother was an antiques dealer who frequented vintage fairs and flea markets, often with Wearstler and her sister in tow. (She says she still has paintings and vintage scarves she picked up from the markets.) After studying graphic design and architecture in New York

and Boston, the beach-bred Wearstler—she’s an avid surfer whose wavy, honey-colored hair looks meant for surf and sand—sought out sunnier shores in Los Angeles, where she planned to look for work at an interior design firm. A chance offer to decorate a room in the Venice Beach home of a friend of a friend led to her doing the entire house, and word of mouth brought in enough clients for her to quit her waitressing job and start her own studio in 1995.

Around that time, Wearstler met Korzen, who asked her to design his home and then do a model room for the Avalon. She had never done a hotel before but won the commission to renovate the property, thanks to

**This page:** a geometric staircase at the Austin Proper Hotel; **opposite page:** Wearstler at the Downtown L.A. Proper



Joyce Park (portrait); The Ingalls (staircase)

B

Y

pistachio-green, Mid-Century Modern designs inspired by the 1948 building's rounded shape. That led to her work on the now iconic Viceroy Santa Monica, where she revamped Hollywood Regency style with an infusion of tropically hued Modern Colonialism.

D

In her more recent work, Wearstler has tended to favor an eclectic blend of mixed metal details, graphic floor patterns, and late-20th-century European furnishings.

E

Since 2016, she has applied her unique style to Proper Hotels, where she is creative director. (Korzen co-owns the real estate and hospitality group behind the brand, which has outposts in Santa Monica, San Francisco, and Austin.)

S

At the group's latest hotel, the Downtown L.A. Proper, she took inspiration from the landmark California Renaissance Revival building's past iterations: It housed a private club in the 1920s—Cecil B. DeMille was a member—and became a YWCA in the 1960s. Wearstler layered the 148 guest rooms and public spaces with Spanish Colonial touches such as

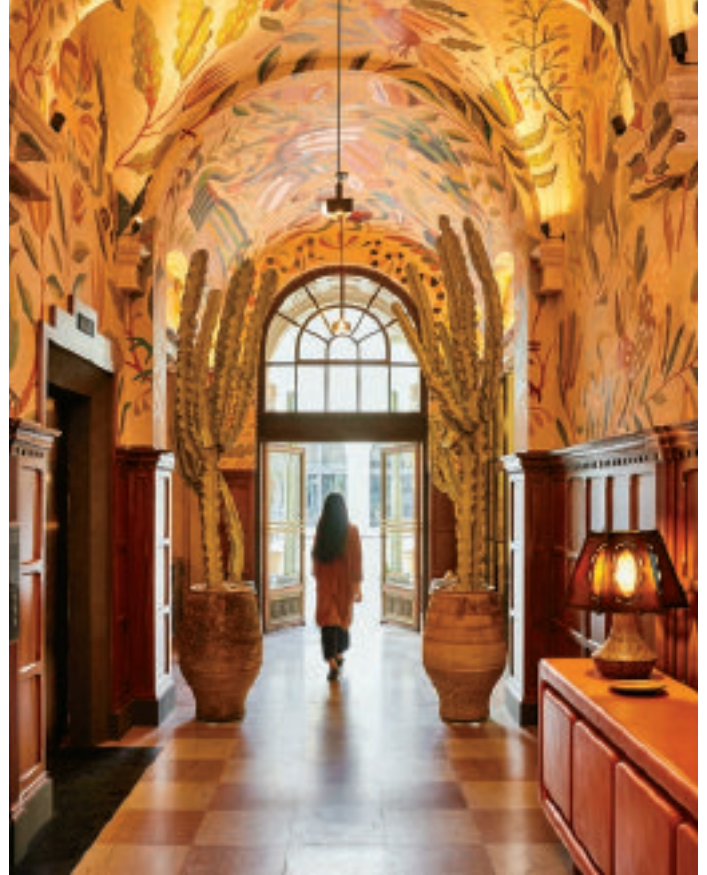
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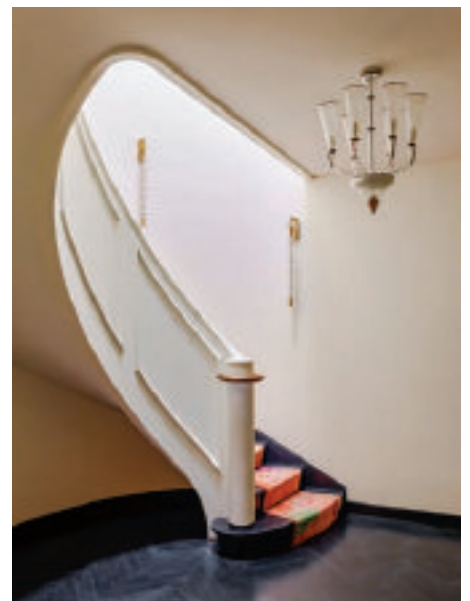
terra-cotta plasterwork, à la the 1914 *Los Angeles Examiner* building across the street, as well as Mexican Modernism, seen in charcoal-and-mauve vintage rugs and custom furniture. She also enlisted Los Angeles-based artist Ben Medansky to create a ceramic mural alongside the former Y's swimming pool, which is now incorporated into an expansive suite. (The basketball court was integrated into another suite.)

N

**Clockwise from right:** inside the Downtown L.A. Proper; a curving staircase in a New York City residence; the lobby at the Santa Monica Proper Hotel; objets d'art from Wearstler's collaboration with the art collective Rotganzen, shot at her Malibu home



Beyond her hotel and residential work, over the years Wearstler has been a judge on the Bravo show *Top Design*, created fashion and jewelry collections, written five books on design, and recorded a MasterClass that's one of the platform's top performers. Her team even recently



designed digital experiences for the new electric Hummer. "I'm absolutely loving it," she says about working in the metaverse. "It's challenging me and continuing to push the studio forward." She also oversees a retail line that includes lighting, fabrics, wallpaper, chinaware, furniture, and objets d'art such as trippy melting disco balls.

"[Seeing clients] happily living in their home, then going to a hotel and seeing people enjoying these spaces—there's nothing more fulfilling than that," she says. "Our job as designers is to create something that people feel is personal to them, that they feel good in. That's what it's all about: making people happy."

The Ingalls (L.A. and Santa Monica Proper hotels); Mark Durling (objets d'art); Eric Plasecki (staircase)