

Designer Profile

Shirley Wagner, ASID

Living Authentically is Living Well



By Kristina Anderson
Photography by Pablo McLoud

SHIRLEY WAGNER ASID LOVES TO SHOW visitors a tiny, hidden etching on the hand-blown window of the historic Spencer House, home to her Kamuela-based interior design company Fine Design Interiors, Inc. According to local lore, the graffiti, which reads “Boy Blue 1888,” was engraved by Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalanianaʻole, of the royal house of Kalakaua. Boy Blue had been his nickname.

The 1835-era structure, said to be the first frame house in Kamuela, seems an especially fitting spot for her business. That’s because in the world of Shirley Wagner, details, history and authenticity are highly valued.

“I love working from concept to concrete on all the details,” she says. “I do everything, select everything. I just love to work with the architects involved in a job from the ground up, including the landscape architects.”

Wagner’s clients trust her with the details, as her impressive portfolio proves. Specializing in residential interior design, Wagner demonstrates considerable versatility, whether it’s in furnishing the smallest of Hawai‘i beach cottages or creating interiors and design for large, custom-built residences in both Hawai‘i and the Mainland. Her projects have taken her as far away as Antigua, where she worked on the design and remodel of a classic Caribbean home and guest house called “The Blue Pelican” on the private island of Jumby Bay.

A more recent project, still in progress, involves the design of a historic Charles Dickey home on Diamond Head Drive in Honolulu, built as his personal residence in the 1930s by the renowned architect himself. “I’m so honored and jazzed to be part of such a meaningful project,” Wagner says. “I love the history and heritage of this house, and consider it a privilege to be on the team.”

Wagner, with her gracious personality, still projects the same love and enthusiasm for interior design that she must have had when she started out in the business more than 25 years ago. Her hands-on approach and personal warmth translate into interior design that’s a simple and pure reflection of the Aloha spirit. Clearly she chose the right career—and the right place to live.

“The beauty and mountains of Waimea were so inspiring. When I first saw these mountains, I felt like we had found heaven,” she recounts.

Wagner is self-taught. Before moving to Hawai‘i in the ‘80s, Wagner, a



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Kansas City, Missouri, native, worked in a small interior design studio, Alice Miller Interiors. Starting out as an office manager, she quickly realized she had a keen interest in design and set out to learn the ropes the old fashioned way, as an apprentice.

"Alice's studio was in an old Kansas City character home, and we sold lamps and had a fabric room," Wagner remembers. "I started out decorating my own apartment and I found I had a knack. It was an ideal way to learn the business."

Wagner accompanied Miller to the designers' markets in Chicago and Dallas, where she was shown such basics as the importance of how and where to purchase. Although Wagner attended the International Design Academy in Kansas City, she believes that mentoring is one of the best ways to study the trade.

"I was lucky: I had an inside track," says Wagner. "Alice was a family friend. With her guidance, I learned a lot."

Upon arriving in Hawai'i, Wagner and her husband, who creates etched art glass pieces, had no connections here. Wagner took a job at the Gallery of Great

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Things in Waimea, which showcases the work of local artists. Through the Gallery and the Waimea Design Center, she met artists and interior designers. She credits Karin Hazelhoff ASID and Maria Brick as influential in her Hawai'i success.

She's never forgotten the artists she met at the Gallery. "Today, I use all of their art in my interiors," she says. "Since moving to Hawai'i Island 20 years ago, I

have been so focused on meeting my clients' design needs that just recently I discovered that I may be my own best kept secret!"

Wagner also likes working with local retailers and says it's only been about the last five years that she could work with so many sources on-island. While she says upholstered furniture still needs to come from the Mainland, she uses all the Big

Island and Honolulu sources she can: "I feel it is important to support the local economy," says Wagner. "The sources work so well with us and give us great customer service."

As for her design philosophy, it's as fundamental as simply learning how to really listen to clients. To Wagner, that means getting to know the clients like personal friends. "I like to work with them one on one," she says. "Some of the best jobs were when I clicked with a client from the beginning. Regardless, to do the best job possible, I earn the client's trust and respect."

Wagner says she likes to create comfortable, livable spaces that support the concept of indoor/outdoor living, such an inherent part of the Hawai'i lifestyle. Over the years she has worked on many resort homes along the Kohala Coast, creating interiors for some of its highest profile residents.

In fact, her first Big Island job was to measure the private jet of a prominent local citizen for carpeting. "I used a nice commercial grade," she says with a laugh, recalling that she had to recruit her husband Gary to help her, as she had never measured a plane before. She then knew she was on her way as a sought-after Hawai'i interior designer, and she hasn't slowed down since.

But of all her work in Hawai'i, Wagner considers the 12 Puako Beach homes—both vintage cottages and large residences—to be the closest to her heart. Having lived for ten-years, as oceanfront residents of the sleepy, Big Island beach hamlet themselves at one time, Wagner and her husband feel personally bonded to the special little community that in recent years has been "discovered."

"I could live in any of those Puako homes," she says wistfully. "In each and every one I tried to respectfully incorporate the elements that are so a part of Hawai'i—its landscape, history and culture, yet remain true to the individual spirit of each client. To me, living authentically is living well." ❁



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