

Million Dollar Decorating Podcast with Host James Swan

September 12, 2016

James Swan: Hello everyone and welcome to Million Dollar Decorating, the only podcast devoted to the worlds of design decorating and beautiful living. I'm your host James Swan and I am thrilled to have you subscribing to the show today. Remember to head over to our website, milliondollardecorating.com where you can learn more about our family of design enthusiasts. Be sure to add your name to our e-mail list and then follow us on Facebook, Twitter and on Instagram, you'll be part of all the great things that we have going on, and the really great thing that's happening at this very minute is that I get to introduce you to our guest today. He is a third generation Californian drawing his energy and inspiration from his home state's progressive ideals and optimistic embrace of the new. He has been the visionary force behind KAA Design, and the firm he founded 25 years ago. His team enjoys elevating the human spirit through the benefits and authenticity of warm contemporary residential design.

Raised in Palos Verdes, he earned his Bachelor of Architecture Degree at USC and become a licensed architect at 24. His entrepreneurial spirit and passion for design lead him to found his architectural practice just a few years later in 1988. The firm now focuses exclusively on custom homes including residences where Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson, Kirk Kerkorian, Matt Damon, Julia Louis-Dreyfus and the Pritzker family and numerous other coastal retreats, city view estates, and vacation properties for a broad range of passionate clients. The firm's work has been extensively published over the years in over 30 design magazines and books including Architectural Digest, Most Beautiful, The New York Times, The LA Times, Coastal Living, Sunset Magazine and the Rob Report. He's developed a comprehensive line of outdoor furniture for Design Within Reach and a line of prefabbed homes. He designs, he creates, and he's always making the world more beautiful, Grant Kirkpatrick, welcome to Million Dollar Decorating.

Grant Kirkpatrick: Thank you, James. Pleased to be with you.

James Swan: Good to have you with us today, sir. Take us back. It sounds to me like you've always known what you wanted to do. Is that the case?

Grant Kirkpatrick: At least since I was 12 I had the fortunate circumstance of my parents remodeling our house around about 12 years old. It was a small ranch home and they decided to make it a little bit bigger and ended up almost tearing it down. I just thought it was an extraordinary thing to see these people showing up and the smell of that wood and oozing concrete pouring out of trucks and getting hard and foundations and slabs. I saw a guy walking around pointing his finger with this big roll of plans and he seemed like he knew what he was doing and I said, "I'd like to be that guy." I knew right then and there that architecture was my future.

James Swan: From there to USC for school.

Grant Kirkpatrick: That is correct. I was very fortunate to, and almost lucky really, to have a really a passion of education, architecture education, mostly in modernism right in my back yard. The USC in the 40's and the 50's was really in large part responsible for a lot of the modernism that was taking root in things such as the case study house movement and many other things in that arena and that modernism and that drive continues though the university today and I'm still apart of it there.

James Swan: Are you? Do you teach?

Grant Kirkpatrick: I occasionally teach but I serve on the board of directors and run various different programs. I've been president of the guild, which is our USC alumni association for the school of architecture that dates back to 1945 and I also work with the dean on various different programs.

James Swan: Wow. You really are involved. That's amazing. You find yourself in the middle of, sort of the epicenter for the modernist school of architecture, it continues still today. What for you was the allure? What for you was the drawl of modern architecture?

Grant Kirkpatrick: From the beginning the remodel I told you about, my folks had a very simple ranch bungalow in the Palos Verdes peninsula area of Southern California and they desired to make it into a more modern ranch style, largely inspired by Cliff May, arguably the father of the modern ranch style. We went from clapboard siding and framed doors and windows to walls of glass and butt jointed corner windows and soaring ceilings with ridge skylights. It was really a wonderful way to spend my teens and appreciate the Southern California aspect of indoor outdoor living and that just kept me moving and I did a lot of silly projects along the way ranging from greenhouses to decks and then I was off to USC where that

appreciation for modern lifestyle and modern architecture was really fostered and ingrained into me probably permanently.

James Swan: Sounds like you're a die-hard, yes?

Grant Kirkpatrick: Yes, I think that's ... In our profession, I think most any profession, being passionate is the key to success. Passion is really ... We can work as hard we want but being passionate about it is when that work turns into real gold, real magic, and I feel very blessed in that way because I'm passionate not just about the aesthetics of modern architecture but how it influences and betters our life and our lifestyle.

James Swan: Continue that thought and talk to us a little more about how it actually does that.

Grant Kirkpatrick: Our primary work is here in Southern California, and as I tell all my clients we're truly blessed to have the kind of conditions that we do here. It's not just climate conditions, which of course are wonderful, but it's also a bit of a freedom where design wise there's a lot of license and that permeates everything from automotive design to architecture to entertainment. We try to take maximum advantage of that and architecturally that includes of course the bleeding of the indoor and outdoor to a degree where it's focused on outdoor living and outdoor spaces as much as we are on the indoor ones. We focus our work because we do landscape architecture holistically with architecture. We're not just designing a home on a property, we're designing an entire property, and given what people pay for property around this area it's seems our clients are happy about that. They really do want to maximize their property, their investment and their lifestyle. It also includes the introduction of natural light and in conversely the emanation of artificial light, say in the evenings when our houses glow and welcome family, friends, entertainment.

Light, both artificial and natural light both play a very big role from the get go in our projects and what influences us, and then since our primary focus and my primary focus, or source of inspiration has always been nature itself you'll see the imprint of nature, both literally and physically in virtually everything we do, whether it's behind the main concept of a home or it's literally embedded into the concrete form work and exposed as wood grain. The use of nature and natural materials is truly the backbone of our inspiration and our work.

James Swan: Now with nature being such a source of inspiration for you how do you care for the environment through your designs?

Grant Kirkpatrick: One of the things that we're always paying attention to is how did these homes ... The homes are basically heirlooms. We're not building them for a period of time, we're actually building them for generations. A lot of our clients consider the types of homes that we do in terms of legacy. They're very interested in a couple things. They're very interested in setting an example of what it means to responsibly build, whether that's the systems we use, the environmental aspects we incorporate, the materials that we try to source locally, or at least in a certified and low carbon footprint manor, and goes all the way to low maintenance and longevity. The homes we design are always one of the core principals is how can they be objects that age gracefully in time and even age in patina over time to a better state, and we build with contractors that give ... I like to say good contractors give birth to these homes, they're their babies and they treat them as such, and the last thing a good contractor wants to do is get that phone call something is not working, this needs repair, this needs refinishing. We're very aligned with a good group of contractors that we typically build with that are producing homes for multiple generations.

These are not things that are going to be torn down or recycled or experience even some of the natural catastrophes that we have, they can survive those as well, and all of those aspects are such that if we look at the, again, the legacy aspect of these homes over time, they have a life cycle that's typically longer than I think this culture normally concerning themselves with. We may not see all the benefits of that in our lifetimes, but it's rewarding, comforting and also inspiring to know that, that's the case for generations to come.

James Swan: There is a certain comfort in that knowing that, that will work will endure maybe even beyond our lifetimes.

Grant Kirkpatrick: Absolutely, that's entirely the goal and if we're introduced to opportunities where that's not the case we take a pause and try to understand if there is enough alignment to make that a good fit. It also bodes to the notion that another core ingredient of our work is a factor of transcendent or an attempt to create an architecture that is timeless and in contemporary architecture that can be more challenging. You're not falling back on the longevity of traditions or rules or guidelines that have been created over centuries or even millenniums, but the same principles apply, principles of scale, proportion, what is pleasing to the

eye contract, texture, [inaudible 00:11:56] to position, these things that have a certain subjective quality to some but are actually objective to most are things that we're trying to employ in a way where these homes have a timeless character to them. It's a very important ingredient of what we to do.

James Swan: It seems to me and clearly an important part of this whole equation is the client that comes to you. You've been doing this for many, many years, what changes have you seen in the clients that come to you today say as opposed to 20, 25 years ago?

Grant Kirkpatrick: That's a great question, James. I think that, and we talk about this a lot, when you're lucky enough to have the type of career that as time goes on you get better and literally that's what happens. As an architect you fancy yourself with talent and bravado and you're going to go set the world on fire, and it's not too long into that journey that you realize that, that's not exactly how it works. Tenacity, hard work, and like I said, passion and mixed in there is talent and experience, but there's nothing like that experience. We're lucky to be involved in a profession that you literally get better and better and better and because clients are so sophisticated, and I've learned that just when you think you're on the top level of clientele, there's a whole other level after that and I'm sure that's an idiom that will continue.

You really ... There's a tremendous satisfaction out of seeing the kind of clients that get attracted to the good work and I've noticed through the years that what we have out there now, projects that we've been working on for years and that are built and photographed and furnished wonderfully and they're on our website or in our books or people hear about them in a magazine or something like that, those are beautiful things that we're very proud of, but what is actually under construction right now I like to think of as even better and what we have on the boards in even better than that, and as long as that continues to happen I get up every morning and I'm excited to get in here and do what we do.

James Swan: You've peaked our curiosity, can you give us some hints about what we get to see from you in the coming years?

Grant Kirkpatrick: Oh sure. The vast majority of our work, and as you stated, we focus on customer residential design, Eric and I, my partner, we decided about 5 years ago, after about 25 years of the business that really that's what we do best. Yes, the clients are high maintenance, and yes, there's a lot of passion and emotion involved, but for some reason we're very good

hand holders and when our clients like this shoot really big we seem to be able to make them happy and they're not always use to that. That's really quite satisfying. The types of things that we've been blessed with are mostly here in southern California. I think part of the reason for that is because both Eric and I are both and raised multiple generation here. My grandfather was actually born in Long Beach in the year 1900. We have a real connection, a real passion to southern California and we decided a long time ago to concentrate our business here because it's so prolific and there's so much opportunity.

We've had many invitations to travel far and do things overseas and we'll do that when a client takes us there, a current client, but 80%, 90% of our work, we're lucky enough is in between ... Most of it's in I would say Los Angeles County but as far as La Jolla and Rancho Santa Fe and Del Mar, far north as Santa Barbara and Monterey and out to Palm Springs, Palm Desert area, we do quite a bit of work. Things we're working on now range from exciting Hollywood Hills side modernist homes that are reaching over the city and have that iconic LA aspect to them. We're doing a terrific project out in the desert that's on a couple acres up in the hills that reaches over the Coachella Valley. We're doing a wonderful beach front estate in the South Bay area, Manhattan Beach, that's actually 3 lots combined and proven to be quite a compound, a couple of projects in Malibu, the water's lapping right on the edge. All in all we do about a dozen homes a year, and when I say that 3 or 4 of those are under design at any time, 3 or 4 are in the technical stages of approvals and documentation and bidding and then 3 or 4 are under construction.

James Swan: Wow, you're busy.

Grant Kirkpatrick: We do limit what we do because when you're in the custom home business every home is won off, every client is won off, every lifestyle story that we're telling is highly individualized so it's a matter of time and we found that, that allows us an appropriate amount of time to do really special things. We do have a staff of 40, which is fairly good size for a residential focused architecture and landscape architecture firm. We also do some very large estates and sometimes that entails a team of 7 to 10 people because although these are homes they have a sort of commercial back end to them to ensure they come to fruition in the way we envision them. I like to say people have built castles throughout human history, and they're still doing it, they just look a little bit different today.

James Swan: No moats, right?

Grant Kirkpatrick: You'd be surprised.

James Swan: I shouldn't say that.

Grant Kirkpatrick: I can show you a couple projects that you would say look like modern motes, they just may have one edge contained and the other is infinity.

James Swan: Yes, the infinity edge. Grant, from your position as an architect what do you see as the relationship between classic and modern design as it relates to our society today?

Grant Kirkpatrick: The relationship is extremely strong. It's a little bit of a myth to think about them as separate because all good design, architecture included, comes from tradition. Everything comes from tradition. Sometimes we're trying to break tradition and in modern or contemporary architecture, and I'm sorry to use those interchangeably but people do, we could have a whole separate discussion about that, but in contemporary architecture we are trying to break it sometimes, but I think what people would be surprised is if you took a project and you boiled it back, a modern project, you boiled it back to it's essentials you're going to find a lot of traditional aspects that man kind has been employing for millenniums. Today we of course have technology, we have materiality, we have a lot of modern amenities that allow us to both live and to build in a different way that we use to, and so what I like to think of is that we're coming always from tradition. Traditional aspects of family and community and communing with nature, shelter to shelter, but we're using a different language that employs some of today's technology and advances and what we're trying to do with that is we're trying to employ those things in an authentic way.

For instance, we often in domestic architecture you'll see that there's a lot of ... People like stone and you can drive down certain neighborhoods and understand, you can practically date the neighborhood from the stone work that is used on the homes, at least in Southern California, that's largely because we don't build with stone here, we're obviously earthquake country and stone isn't a reasonable material to surround yourself with. We do build with concrete and concrete is largely looked at as a very industrial and concrete material, but the reality of it, it's the most fascinating material and I told you when I was 12 I kind of realized that. The ability to form concrete, once you've care for it, if you build wall out of concrete and almost all homes have walls of concrete, some steel and mostly wood construction, but if you take that concrete and you just work with the form work in interesting,

organic ways the concrete can become beautiful. It becomes whatever you can dream it to be.

You'll see that in our work we use a lot of concrete in very interesting, provocative ways and my reasoning for that is concrete is what we build from and if we can express it beautifully then we don't need to cover it up. That kind of authenticity gives the home a strong ability to achieve that transcended or timeless quality that I was speaking to you earlier.

James Swan: My mind is racing. I'm now trying to think of all the different treatments that I've ever seen for concrete and it's actually a long list.

Grant Kirkpatrick: Isn't it?

James Swan: Yes.

Grant Kirkpatrick: It's the most fascinating material and it's not that old, and when it was really found to have worked for the purposes that we use it for was when steel was embedded in it. We all know rebar, those sticks of metal bars that come out of the concrete. The reason for that of course is concrete is a wonderful material if you try to push on it. In other words in compression it can't be beat, but if you pull on concrete it will pull apart or break. In tension it doesn't work well. Steel is the opposite and when you combine the two of those you get both tension and compression that can't be beat. It's also readily available, fully sustainable material that's easy to manufacture locally anywhere. I could go on. We could have our whole conversation about concrete.

James Swan: We'll have you back and we'll do that at another time. I actually think it'd be a fascinating subject to explore. Let's spin this around and think about our listeners at home right now. People tune into shows like this because they're wanting to create beauty in their own homes. You've seen a lot, the way people live, the decisions people make about their homes and the environments that they live in. What do you think are some mistakes that people make, Grant, that could be avoided if people would just, and then I'll let you fill in the blank there.

Grant Kirkpatrick: The first one that easily comes to mind would be the ability to keep it simple, and I'm a victim of this too. I'm so chocked full of ideas that my main job is to try to focus and we create a story for every project and that is really, it's a marriage of the lifestyle of the client and that particular property. That home becomes a manifestation of the story that we have basically unearthed up front, and I think what people tend to do is they

want to make things more complicated, more layered, just more, more, more. If you can look at creating a story of what your lifestyle is at that home, at that apartment, at your flat, whatever it is and allow that story to be truly how you want, how you desire to live there then what comes from that story will have that grounding and therefore be able to have that simplicity in it's answer, in it's manifestation. I think too often people tend to not either focus on that one thing or allow too many things to come into play. In today's lifestyle we don't need extra, we don't need more. We need calm, we need to be soothed and we need some serenity, and that doesn't negate the big stroke or what one of my clients coined the rock star moment.

I love that because our work does promote that serenity but it also excites and primarily we do that via one really fun or outrageous idea. It could be that flying cantilevered roof or that sinuous staircase in the middle of a very orthogonal right, left, right environment, but you put two of those together and they fight, you put three of those together it's a casserole. I think my answer to your question is simplicity and the power of that.

James Swan: It sounds to me like you may have just answered my next question and that is what's the best design advice you've never heard.

Grant Kirkpatrick: The best design advice, I will tell you there's a wonderful interior designer named Susan Tucker out of San Francisco, you probably know her, she's quite talented, and we've done some work together and she told me one time to do great design you need two things. You need to have your stuff together and you need a client who has their stuff together, and when that doesn't work is sometimes when you have a client who may have preconceived too much or may come to the table with an agenda or have a certain respect level that is not on par, and she said the key to understanding that is a list of a few red flags, but the one I love the most is she says when you first meet someone if you're at their house, or their office and they do not at minimum offer you a glass of water that red flag needs to go straight up and you can wait a bit and see if it comes but run.

It's really interesting because what she really meant by that is someone who really wants to collaborate and really values your talent and wants to get the most out of that and your relationship is going to have a certain level of respect on par with themselves with you and that glass of water is a symbol of that. If someone doesn't do that then they're not thinking

in that direction. I will tell you that was probably 10 years ago she told me that and that theory bats 1,000%, it has never failed.

James Swan: That's a bit of wisdom that we should all hold on to.

Grant Kirkpatrick: I think it applies in just about every category of life.

James Swan: I think you're right. What's one thing, Grant, that our listeners at home can do today to make their home more beautiful?

Grant Kirkpatrick: Again, I go back to the simplicity aspect. I would say remove something. Take something out, and maybe at the same time take a pause to understand what it is that is the marriage of you and your lifestyle and this place, and when I say tell that story I mean truly right it down. Right down what are the things about this place that you like and what are the things that you don't like, then what are the personality characteristics that you tend to want to manifest here. This still goes down into a couple of main core ideas or tenants and that's your story. Those 2, 3, 4 main tenants are going to end up being the basis for a 2 sentence story that says what your lifestyle is at this place. With that in hand you can then declutter, pull back, and then if you pull back far enough try to then add something that bodes well with that story, something that, that story suggests.

It could be an amazing color. It could be a way to bring more light in, whether it's natural or artificial, it could be ... Some people say to me, "A concrete floor? I can't live on a cold concrete floor." What's interesting about concrete floor is you never have to worry about it again. If I could tell you how many clients I have that worry about their floors. You don't want to worry about your floor and if you keep a concrete floor warm and have a few area rugs on it, it could be your best friend, but it comes back to that story and I think the simplicity and take something out.

James Swan: Take something out, some wise words from Grant today. Hope you're writing that down at home folks. Grant, let's think about books for a minute. Something tells me you are a lover of books, I may be wrong, but something just tells me that. If you were to recommend a book that you think should be on the shelves of every design lover in America what book would you recommend to our listeners?

Grant Kirkpatrick: James, that's so unfair. I actually keep a library of books here at the office. They're not design books. They are more life books and there's a lot of business and self help books but these are what I consider to be

seminal books in terms of how we engage and carry ourselves, and I often get into great conversations with clients and close collaborators and associates here at the office and we'll trade books so I keep an army of them at hand, but I will tell you my favorite, it's very difficult to narrow it down but I would go back to Stephen Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People". The reason I say that, I know we're talking design and I live design, but that book has probably had the greatest single influence of any book I've ever read on my design work because you can actually take those 7 habits and you can apply them in their entirety to design.

You literally just go right down them and whether it's principles centered, it applies to you, it applies to a great home, fairness, integrity, honesty, I've mentioned those things in certain ways. Just environmental responsibility is akin to that kind of almost stewardship I think we all have within us and want to manifest in certain ways, and you can do that. You can do that with your own home. I would tell you that's the book. A lot of people I know have read it, go back and do it again.

James Swan: I was just thinking I may have to dust it off and pull it off the shelf this weekend and review it, it's been a few years. Good selection, good recommendation, thank you for that. I know for our listeners that don't have the book we'll post a link to it in the show note sections so with one click they can add it to their library and I know that they will thank you for that recommendation. Grant, we've come down to the end, or almost the end of our time together. We've got one last question and we end every show with the same question so are you ready for this?

Grant Kirkpatrick: I'll be ready.

James Swan: I'm going to paint a picture for you here. Imagine that you woke up tomorrow morning in a brand new world. It's psychically identical to the earth that you know but you don't know a single soul. You still have all the experience and the knowledge you currently possess, your food and shelter are taken care of but your new home is empty. All you have is a laptop, a mobile phone and about \$1,000 in your pocket. What would you do over the next 7 days to begin to decorate your new home?

Grant Kirkpatrick: \$1,000? That's an easy one for me and it would only take one day. I would leave ... I'm assuming this home has great bones.

James Swan: Absolutely.

Grant Kirkpatrick: Okay, good. I would leave it alone. I might get a beautiful color of white paint that is soothing and calm but crisp and shellac the place and I'd spend all the rest of my money on just one thing and it would be a bonsai tree, and not a small one. I'm not talking about one that comes in the mail. I would fine a 35, 40 year old tree that has been trained in a way only a true bonsai master could and I'd put it right there in the middle and it would make me happy.

James Swan: With good reason it would make you happy. What a wonderful approach. That's art and nature combined.

Grant Kirkpatrick: That's nice. I should have realized that but you're absolutely right.

James Swan: I've not really thought about that before but it just struck me. Good recommendation. I like the beginnings of that house, Grant. I like that very much.

Grant Kirkpatrick: You're welcome. Anytime, James.

James Swan: Thank you. I'll take you up on that. I'll bring some wine, how's that?

Grant Kirkpatrick: That would be fabulous.

James Swan: Would that work? Okay, good. Grant Kirkpatrick, thank you so much for being a guest on today's show. This has been a delight.

Grant Kirkpatrick: Thank you for including me. It's been my pleasure, James.

James Swan: I want to thank our subscribers at home for listening in to today's podcast. All of this would mean nothing if it weren't for you. We appreciate your dedication to the show. Thank you for sharing it with friends and helping us to grow. Remember you can go to our website, milliondollardecorating.com where you can catch the notes from today's show. We'll post links to Grant's website so you can follow the projects that he and his team are producing. We'll post a link to that book that he recommended to us, Stephen Covey's, "7 Habits of Highly Successful People". We'll post a link to that so you can add that to your library at home. I know you'll thank Grant for that. While you're on our website be sure to click a few buttons, follow us on Facebook, Twitter and on Instagram, and finally, and maybe most importantly, remember that it's up to you to make your world more beautiful.