

# Destined for Design

## Jessica Risko Smith's Industrial Elegance



Jessica Risko Smith designed this earthy but modern enclave. Bedroom furniture from Crate and Barrel, chair by Room and Board, bedside Nelson Bubble Cigar Sconces from Design Within Reach in Santa Barbara. *Photo by Emily Hagopian Photography*

By Joshua Brayer

While sipping a latte on the patio of her favorite café, just around the corner from her downtown Santa Barbara office, Jessica Risko Smith points to the fading, moss-covered terracotta roof across the street, and explains how she is inspired simply by carefully observing both natural and manmade environments.

"I look at that and I see a really unique textured green and orange combination, and I might be able to use that in a project that I'm working on," she said.

As a child growing up in Los Angeles until the age of 8, then in Destin, a small town on the Gulf Coast of Florida, Risko Smith recalls many hours of standing on the beach with

the fine white sand in her toes and crawling on her hands and knees in the tide pools to get a super close look at all the amazing colors and textures of the marine life. Those experiences, along with the contrasting urban landscape of summers spent in Los Angeles, helped her realize that beauty can be found anywhere and everywhere, as long as she was on the lookout for it.

Although she confesses to almost obsessively rearranging her own bedroom furniture on a monthly basis as a child, when Risko Smith graduated high school, design was not what she originally set out to do. She enrolled in a small college in Florida as a premed student, a path she pursued for a few years before finally realizing it just wasn't what she wanted to do for the rest of her life.

## GO WEST

Trying to figure out what she did want, Risko Smith eventually transferred to Auburn University in Alabama, where she earned a degree in interior design with a minor in business. While in school, Risko Smith had done enough traveling to know that city life was calling to her. She narrowed her destinations to New York and Los Angeles; but the fact that she still had family in the L.A. area made the choice clear.

Once in Los Angeles, Risko Smith landed a position with Gensler in Santa Monica, a worldwide design firm, where she worked largely on commercial and office interior design, corporate campuses, and airports.

“Although I now focus primarily on residential interior design, working on commercial projects helped me to see how interior design can affect both employee production and a company’s bottom line,” said Risko Smith. “I became impassioned by the people-side of the business and that has helped me a lot with residential projects.”

In Los Angeles, Risko Smith met her husband, Kelly, a Santa Barbara native who was friends with a Gensler architect, and the couple moved to his hometown and soon started a family. Risko Smith still commuted to work for Gensler in L.A., but when her daughter, Leighton, was born, she realized that the long commute was not going to be sustainable any longer. >



This home-office retreat is rife with eco-friendly design principles with Risko Smith's trademark industrial touch. Sustainably manufactured linen tufted sofa by Viesso LA; custom reclaimed wood armoire by JRS ID and fabricated by BoMo Design of Santa Barbara; steel and walnut office furniture system by BDDW, Brooklyn, NY; pillows from Rooms and Gardens in Santa Barbara; rug, ottoman, and accessories sourced by designer. Contractor DD Ford. Photo by Lepere Studio



Risko Smith's industrial side shines through loud and clear in this modern, open-plan kitchen and dining area, complete with Viking appliances; tile from Buena Tile in Santa Barbara; custom cabinets by Wallace Woodworks; polished Calcutta Gold marble countertops by Armstrong Marble; furniture from Design Within Reach (DWR); kitchen island light fixtures by FLOS; and Nelson bubble lamps from DWR. *Photo by Emily Hagopian Photography*

While she consistently has a full slate of clients, Risko Smith realizes the value in not taking on too many projects all at once and in being able to spend as much time as possible in her clients' environments, which allow her to best understand how those spaces are truly being used.

"I find that I tend to do my best design work when I have time to allow things to percolate," she said. "I am certainly capable of turning around an emergency project, but it always helps to have some time to allow things to sink in — that's when the best solutions and ideas come."

#### URBAN-NATURE DUALITY

For as long as she can remember, Risko Smith has been fascinated with the way things are put together, which she attributes to time spent in the urban environment of Los Angeles as a child.

"Even though I mainly grew up in a small beach town," she said, "I really love finding hidden gems in the industrial-urban environment, where the elements take their toll on manmade objects and give them a whole new look. It's interesting what can happen to things when you just let them be."

Considering that, it's no surprise that Risko Smith says she almost always includes some kind of industrial element in her design projects — whether it's glass, metal, or stone.

"I don't force it," she said. "I like to work with what's there, but I can almost always find some way to incorporate a piece of the urban environment. >



Form meets function in this home library with guest accommodations. The landscape painting is by Arturo Tello; portrait drawing is the client's own; wall sconces by Circa Lighting; desk chair and sleeper sofa by Lee Industries; desk, fabrics, rug, and accessories sourced through designer. Contractor DD Ford. *Photo by Lepere Studio*

“Santa Barbara isn’t the easiest place to find it, but it’s out there.”

Additionally, Risko Smith has put a significant emphasis on the sustainable design element. That doesn’t just mean using sustainable building practices, it also means informing clients about environmentally friendly construction options and designing spaces that lend themselves to allowing clients to live a sustainable lifestyle.

#### SPACES

Now with two kids (daughter Leighton is 8, and son Emrys is 5), Risko Smith admits that she doesn’t always keep the nicest furniture in her own home, a quintessential 1920s bungalow in Santa Barbara.

“My house is a lesson in fluidity,” she said, “full of classic pieces that can take a beating. But I like to think of it as a bit of a design lab — I’m willing to try things in my own home, which helps me to know if they might work in someone else’s.”

Designing a variety of homes has helped Risko Smith to navigate design projects in small spaces, of which there are many locally.

“By nature of being in Santa Barbara, there are plenty of small-space projects,” said Risko Smith, “but I feel totally comfortable designing small spaces, large spaces, and anything in between.”

And with the loyal following she has, there is no question she will continue to do just that.

*Jessica Risko Smith Interior Design, 805-895-2081, jrsid.com.*