

Pirls of wisdom

Downsizing to apartment living requires a different mind-set, says interior designer Christa Pirl, who can bring a lifetime of apartment-dwelling experience to bear.

Words like 'shoehorn' are best avoided when discussing the transition from rambling family home to new townhouse or apartment.

It's more about a different way of thinking, says Kiwi-based New York designer Christa Pirl of CPInteriors, who has found an apartment niche market here since arriving in Auckland about three years ago.

Downsizing

Growing numbers of older New Zealand couples are choosing to sell up and scale down into apartment living some time after their families have grown up and flown the nest. They want to be where the action is, have the freedom to come and go, and not be tied to a suburban property.

"A big house is a lot to take care of," says Pirl. "People are travelling more than they used to and they want something that is low maintenance that they don't have to worry about." An apartment that you can lock up and leave affords a much more flexible lifestyle.

"Some of them can't be bothered; they've done the family (scene) and the dogs and the garden and all that and they just don't want to do it anymore."

By the time they've made that decision, clients have often also made the mind-set switch that will allow them to shed old belongings – except for a few precious pieces that help make

the new place home as they integrate with new.

"Artwork, (keeping) a few decorative pieces is really important to them. Besides that, people are often attached to a few key pieces like a dining table and like a sofa because of the memories that are attached... Often-times that's not a problem: just be very clear which things they are very attached to and work around that."

In fact, having a few large items is better in a small space than a clutter of small pieces: a common mistake. "One thing people tend to do when making that shift, is to think small-scale furniture and do everything you would do in a bigger space, rather than just accepting that you're not necessarily going to have a separate lounge and formal dining, separate living and a separate kitchen. You've got to look at the space as one space and see how you can make that work."

Manhattan

This is where Pirl's experience as a long-term apartment dweller comes into its own, in addition to her formal training at the Parsons School of Design in New York and Paris, including a semester of study abroad at the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London.

Born to a Norwegian mother and American father, this young designer was raised in Manhattan apartments – with some time spent in Scandinavian houses – by parents who owned an exporting business supplying



up-market wall coverings and fabrics to New Zealand interior designers, amongst others.

"Because I've had a lot of experience with apartments, that not everyone necessarily has had down here, it certainly helps. I think I have a different take on it than someone who's been designing large houses for years."

Pirl's professional experience began with Upper East Side apartments in Manhattan, followed by commercial and exclusive vacation properties in Hawaii before relocating to Auckland where she initially worked with major clients for Freestyle Design, before starting her own consultancy. CPInteriors works with residential properties and boutique commercial premises as well as specialising in apartments and townhouses.

In fact, Pirl says that – with the exception perhaps of a great house by the ocean – she personally prefers to live in apartments: "An odd thing for kiwis, I know. But I like being in the city and I like the convenience of apartment living where you don't need to drive anywhere; everything is right there."

"I think that apartment spaces can be dynamic and really interesting, and houses get a bit more traditional in terms of their layout and things. I think often-times, especially if you can get warehouse conversions and that kind of thing, you get a little bit more freedom with what you can do."



2

1. 'Apartment spaces can be dynamic and really interesting' – Christa Pirl.

2. The Pacific Rim flavour of design is evident in this Hawaiian residence.

3. A city apartment project by Christa Pirl on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

4. The IBM Building lobby was designed by Christa Pirl for Freestyle Design.



4



3

Functionality

She enjoys helping clients use small spaces to maximum effect in both functionality and style.

"One thing that is very important is to have a very good quality, very comfortable sofa – something you don't want to skimp on."

Then comes a multi-functional table that could perhaps double as a laptop desk and coffee table. "Try to keep things quite clean. Build in some storage instead of separate pieces of furniture, or have walled-off storage if you need that, so you don't have to look at it."

Where there are children, obviously more space is needed, she says, and not just in the shared area. While it's common to think small children only need small bedrooms, Pirl recommends maximising their own space – including places to keep playthings.

In open-plan living areas, screens and things like double-sided bookcases are great for adding some space definition where wanted, she says. Pirl's own simplified Upper Queen side-street apartment décor was built around a single inspirational item – a painted wooden Japanese screen collected while living and working in Hawaii.

Styling

"There are a lot of styles that I like, and a lot of styles that I would feel comfortable working with. But I think really the time that I spent in Hawaii influenced me a lot in style. "I do enjoy

that Pacific Rim work, slightly Asian influenced, modern but not overly modern; keeping it quite clean and slick but bringing in more of the textures, and natural materials."

Finding new design influences was one of the reasons for Pirl's antipodean sojourn that she expects to last a few years before eventually ending up, most probably, back in New York.

Here, a lot of the apartments are relatively new, with more of a clean, contemporary look to begin with. "Of course, you'd have that in Manhattan as well, but there a lot more people are looking for more traditional styles; it is kind of a bit closer to European styles."

Colder northern winters mean a greater desire for the cosy feel with darker, more substantial furniture – compared to the generally more open and lighter décor suited to the better Pacific weather.

Another difference is that New Yorkers are generally more used to the idea of using interior designers, whether it's for a little advice and help, or whether it's the complete fit-out.

"You've got that level of people that just want you to do the whole thing for them, and don't want to know about the details. They say: 'I want this general style, just do it. I'll walk back in when you're done.'" It's a lot of fun, she says, but it's also more stressful. In New Zealand, clients are likely to be far more involved in the project.

Kiwi clientele

Five to 10 years ago, employing an interior designer was seen as a very elite thing in this country, not for your average middle class, she says. But that is very much changing here: "I think people are just kind of realising that it's just some help. Like anything else, you don't want to necessarily fix your car or do your plumbing yourself. It's nice to have someone that has more experience and expertise to help out with the interior design side of things."

Although she has worked with younger people, much of Pirl's New Zealand client base is the 45-65 year age group. They have recently moved into a new property, often an apartment, and have a general idea of what they want – but are not really sure of how to make it work.

"They do have a little bit more security and a little bit more money to spend on things like interior design. They're at the point that they want their house to look a certain way and they want the package to look good."

Interior designers like Pirl can streamline the whole process, take over the hassle, come up with design solutions, source more exclusive items – at trade price – and help make the new home a place the clients will enjoy.

"At the end of the day, it's their home, their space. I like to think that I'm there to help them get what they want, not to push on them what I want."

Article by Vicki Poland.