

BY SARAH ZOBEL
PHOTOS BY JACK ROWELL

Design MATTERS

A SMALL-SCALE BOSTON DESIGN CENTER
IN SOUTH BURLINGTON

Annette Besaw was on the hunt for a monkey lamp. She had no other specifics, per se—as long as it included a monkey and a lightbulb.

That was in 2008, and Besaw, an interior designer, had recently opened Design Matters, a furniture and home-goods store in South Burlington. A woman who collected monkey paraphernalia had come in looking for a simian-themed light. Besaw spent a good 45 minutes going through catalogues with her, but they came up empty. Eventually, the potential customer left; Besaw, undaunted, continued on with the quest.

At last, success. “I opened one book and found six lamps!” Besaw says. Unfortunately, she’d neglected to get the woman’s contact information, so she had no way to make the sale. ▶



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“I like funky things, things that are different.
I don’t like cookie-cutter anything.”





Finding that Perfect Item

It's still that kind of personal attention that brings customers into Design Matters, which has grown to include two more staff designers and a bookkeeper. "Even when the client leaves, we're so determined to find that odd item, we can't stop," says Ali Jette, the other full-time interior designer on staff. "We search and search."

Adds Besaw, laughing, "We're maniacs!" The passion for finding just the right object even keeps Besaw at her computer late at night, going on what she calls "midnight clicking and shopping sprees." The rest of the staff can usually recognize the fruits of such undertakings. "I like funky things, things that are different," Besaw says. "I don't like cookie-cutter anything." A look around the store confirms that.

Jette explains that the space is meant to

evoke a small-scale Boston design center rather than a furniture store. It's divided into vignettes, so customers can envision a couch in the context of a living room, or how certain colors might work well together—even the difference just changing throw pillows can make.

Design Matters also offers window treatments, including shades and blinds, and custom bedding. A special rack holds 400 two-by-three-foot rug samples that customers are welcome to take home and try out before they commit to a full-size version.

The business's location, on Dorset Street, was formerly home to a Salvation Army store. When Besaw first moved in, she needed only 2,500 square feet. However, she later decided to expand to fill all 8,000 feet to allow greater accessibility to products. ▶



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Interior Designers
Annette Besaw and
Alison Jette.

“People like to touch and feel,” says Besaw, “especially with upholstery.” Customers are also welcome to look through the product books Besaw keeps on hand for some 150 to 200 vendors. Staff are happy to help guide visitors to the right catalogues, but there’s no obligation to make a purchase.


“I hate being pressured in a store,” says Besaw, “so I always tell people to go home and sleep on it first.” Her low-key sales philosophy extends to pricing as well; she’s committed to selling everything at a 30 percent discount.

Staging Sells Homes

The retail business is coupled with interior design and pre-market staging services. The latter involves a two-hour, room-by-room consultation with a homeowner who is preparing to put his or her house on the market and wants to maximize its appeal to potential buyers. Although furniture can be brought in, Besaw and Jette generally work with what’s already there, explaining the principles behind creating balance and harmony as they go. Sometimes



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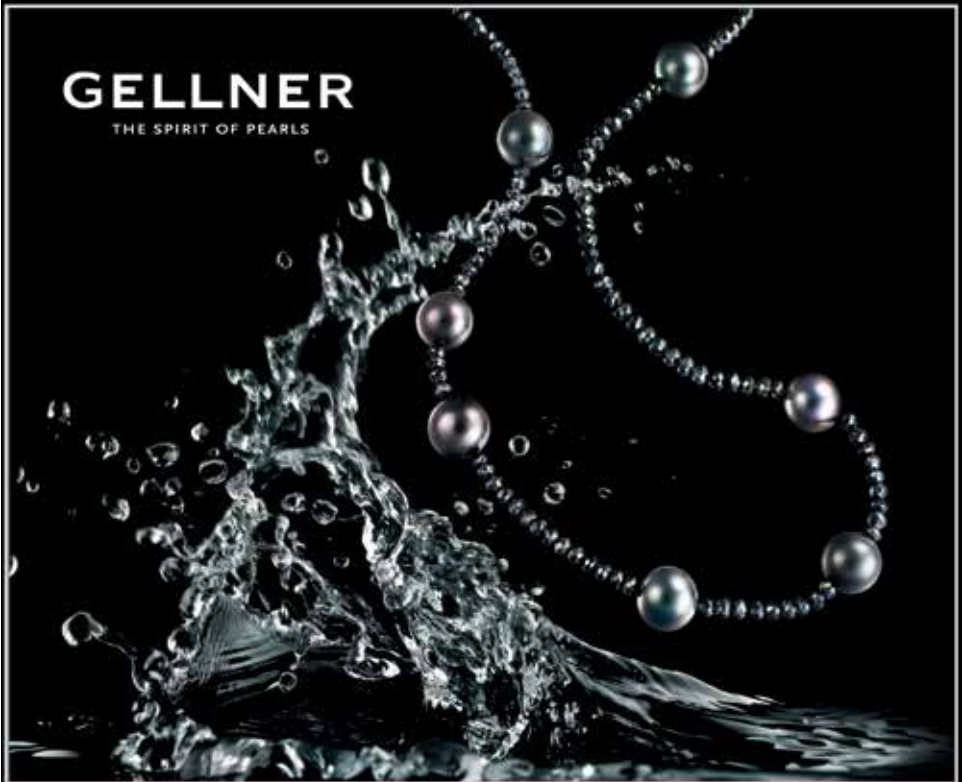


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that means moving a couch; other times fresh flowers may be called for, or perhaps pictures are hanging a little too high. Besaw will rearrange the first couple of rooms, and then she'll stand aside while the homeowners do the rest, offering suggestions when they ask for help.

Realtors have told Besaw that her staging work is selling their listings, and many clients have contacted her themselves to say thanks. They often tell her they'll never again live the way they had been. One couple went so far as to take their house off the market after a staging—"They saw the house in a different light and fell in love with it all over again," she says.

This isn't a new interest for Besaw, who has reportedly been engaged in interior design since she was three years old when, according to her mother, she'd sit on the floor in her room and slide the furniture around endlessly. She did it so often that she wore grooves in the tiles. Even after marrying and having three children, she continued to redecorate her home frequently. When her husband, Leo, was still an active command chief with the Air Guard, he would call if he was returning home late from deployments to say, "Just tell me which wall the bed's on."

For Besaw, there was no professional design in the picture then, however. When her children were young, she ran Annette's Playschool in Hinesburg so she could be with them. After they moved out—they've all stayed local, and

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Design Matters features many local artists, including paintings and prints by Lorraine Manley.

she's now a grandmother of four—she earned a certificate in interior design from Sheffield School in Manhattan, and then worked for a few years out of her home. She decided to open the retail location to help other designers who, like her, might not have had easy access to the resources they needed. Though designers are still welcome, most of Design Matters' business is members of the public, and Besaw is only too happy to have them.

"We just want people to know that we're designers," she says, "and we're trying to find the right thing for them. It's not just a lamp. It's the right lamp." Maybe even one with a monkey on it.



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