

EXTERIOR DESIGN

— LIVE OPENLY —



SO-CAL STYLE

COURTNEY THOMAS OUTFITS
THE OUTDOORS IN LA

BY JENNIFER BRINGLE



Growing up the daughter of a designer, Courtney Thomas spent much of her childhood in antique showrooms, fine art houses and perusing the paint and power tools at the local hardware store. Though she never intended to be a designer herself, she realized during college that the field was for her and enrolled at Parson's School of Design in New York City.

Today, Thomas runs her own design firm in the Los Angeles area, catering to high-end clientele who demand well-appointed outdoor spaces for soaking up every drop of the Southern California sun. We recently chatted with Thomas to learn her exterior design approach and what she sees on the horizon, trend-wise, for 2019.

Tell us about your favorite exterior project. What is it and why?

I came home one day to find a hot tub 'parked' in front of our garage. It seems my husband got tired of waiting for me to front-burner one of our own projects and threatened to "hook it up and use it" where it sat if I didn't find a more enticing spot for it. This precipitated a six-month backyard renovation that grew to include stone retaining walls, a built-in stone fireplace with floating concrete bench, an outdoor kitchen, dining area and, of course, a poured slab for a hot tub. To give us the task lighting we needed, we built eyelash pergolas over the kitchen area and fireplace, and we dropped barn lights. I also ran LED rope lighting in a channeled out groove under the countertop and fireplace bench overhang for accent lighting. I wanted 12-by-24 pavers with grass 'grout' for our patio floor, but we were covering a large square footage and the cost got high. So we devised a plan to build a grid of pretreated wood strips with a removable upper trench. We poured concrete into the grid, removed the upper portion and replaced it with false grass. Our outdoor patio and kitchen gets used as much as any of our indoor spaces do.

Is it important for the interior to always flow seamlessly into the exterior?

For me, yes. The hard surface and structural elements are especially important to keep consistent. An exterior space should be in keeping with the style and materials of the house. From an interior standpoint, breaking up the seamless flow can be



Thomas' style always entails a smooth transition from the interior to the exterior.

like breaking a house up with different flooring. Too many changes in material visually break up the space. So, just as maintaining a consistent flooring inside makes a space feel larger, so can maintaining the transition from interior into exterior. The more the exterior feels in keeping with the interior, the larger the space becomes visually.

What is your design mantra? Is your interior philosophy different from your exterior thinking?

What the sun won't disintegrate, the other outdoor elements will. Outdoor spaces take a beating faster than indoor ones. The lifespan of outdoor furniture is a fraction of what a well-made piece for the indoors would be, especially if you're in a coastal home. No matter how hard your Sunbrella fabric works, stains will show and fabrics exposed to the sun will shred. Adjust expectations or prepare to safeguard your furniture with ongoing maintenance, cleaning, furniture covers and dry spaces for cushions.

Are there specific items that you use in exterior spaces? Are there any exterior design details that you avoid?

We like the Essentials collection from Sunbrella. In particular, their textured fabrics, because they can transition an outdoor look into an indoor one. I have also loved some of the Elaine Smith pillows that add playful details like frog closures and braided knots. I also love that you can change out their pillow inserts to faux down for a more comfortable, malleable pillow. Details I tend to stay away from? Clear glass tables since they're a little more high maintenance, showing dirt and water marks so much faster.

We are starting a new year: Please share the trends you're seeing for the outdoor space in 2019.

In California, our use of outdoors is year-round. We demand much from our outside spaces and we've been growing our needs from them. We expect to see more outdoor spaces that look and function as indoor ones: full kitchens with larger refrigerator spaces and more storage, walls of bi-fold doors that eliminate visual barriers and expand access between indoor and outdoor spaces, as well as furniture that's more in keeping with interior demands, such as large, modular sectionals that provide greater seating and comfort. □