CARL ICAHN

"WHAT ELSE AM I GOING TO DO? SIT AT BORING DINNER PARTIES?"

ICAHN UNLEASHED

HE'S RICHER THAN ANYONE ON WALL STREET.
HE ANSWERS TO NO ONE. HE LOVES A FIGHT.
AND AT 77, HE SAYS HIS BIGGEST SCORES LIE AHEAD.
YOU'VE BEEN WARNED.
The Billionaires' Curator
Joan Behnke redesigns the homes of the rich and famous by first renovating their minds.

BY MORGAN BRENNAN

When interior designer Joan Behnke brought Bob and Audrey Byers to Paris, one of their first stops was the Grand Palais. The petite, silver-haired Californian charmed her new clients, self-made health care multimillionaires, through the great hall’s Monet exhibition, using the painter’s work to engage the couple in a larger discussion about fine art. “You have to bring clients along on a journey,” explains Behnke, a soft-spoken 59-year-old. “It’s about teaching people to appreciate what they are paying for.”

Behnke’s work adorns the homes of some of the planet’s wealthiest people. Her clients pay for six-figure furniture by haute designer Hervé Van der Straeten, weathered antiques pulled from the rickety tables of the Paris flea market, rare slabs of Carrara marble selected along the steep edges of a Tuscan stone quarry, black lacquered chairs created by artisans in a remote fishing village in Myanmar. More than anything, though, they pay for the stories that come along with these items.

Every fixture, every finish, every decoration positioned inside a Behnke-detached home comes with an adventure attached. The designer insists that her clients personify Joan Behnke, whose A-plus clients love the process. Every piece tells a story.
ally play a role in the narrative, whether as an integral part of the sourcing or as a Behrke-educated font of information on what is in their homes. And every step of the journey, from igniting an appreciation for fine art to enabling a client to choose her own bespoke light fixtures at a glassmaker’s studio, contributes to the Behrke brand. It’s an investigative process that may span years and cost anywhere from hundreds of thousands to tens of millions of dollars.

On a recent day we visited the Byers’ newly finished 23,000-square-foot Richard Landry-designed chateau overlooking Lake Sherwood in Tony Thousand Oaks, Calif.

“I don’t want my clients to just own a personalized piece for the home; I want them to experience it,” Behrke stresses, as we stroll through the mansion. Bob Byers eagerly joins the tour, pointing out a restored antique chandelier found at a Paris street market, reclaimed bricks from Boston’s Big Dig that march along the domed stairwell ceiling, a silky handwoven fabric from Laos that wallpapers the powder room and sliced bottle bottoms that form a gleaming glass collage on the wall of the wine room. The pièce de résistance: the lush black-and-gold home theater with a glass-paneled strip embedded in the floor to reveal an exotic-car collection in the showroom below.

Behrke’s network of high-net-worth clients—or, perhaps more aptly, collaborators—love her for putting them through their paces. “She always makes you feel like you are the contributor, that you are manifesting your own mission,” attests Thomas Barrack, the billionaire founder of Colony Capital and a decadent client.

Despite a college degree that included art history, Behrke first pursued a career in modern dance and put in time working on films.
Eventually, she scored a job with design maven Erika Brunson. Her first project: helping design the Saudi royal family’s estates in Riyadh and other locales. The gig exposed her to high-luxury vendors and specialized spaces across the world, stoking a passion for uncovering unusual items and, once she began her own firm in 1999, a desire to spread that passion to her clients.

“I don’t view her as a decorator; she is a cultural scientist,” says Barrack. “She will research little, narrow, unknown tunnels of history on a particular project and then start drilling down. She doesn’t just do research of the period; she has contacts all over the world who help her maneuver through identifying objects and materials.”

Behnke first worked on Barrack’s personal residence in Monte Carlo, Calif. When his private equity firm purchased a Sovereign wealth of Stadin’s Costa Smeralda, he enlisted her to help his wife, Laurel, transform the coasts hotels into bastions of high luxury. It meant identifying local artisans to create opulent textiles and furnishings. Today the private villas at the Pitrizza and Romazzino hotels (recently sold to Qatar) fetch more than $35,000 a night during the high season; living room moquettes, oil on glass and royal are from across the world.

With a client roster that reads like the society pages—or, really, a FORBES list—Joan Behnke & Associates keeps a low profile. Even the office lies below the radar, tucked behind unmarked frosted windows on a nondescript block of West Olympic Boulevard in Beverly Hills. Still, housing buffs are familiar with her work. It regularly graces the pages of Architectural Digest and Robb Report’s Ultimate Home of the Year issue (her work has snagged three of the past four covers).

Behnke’s lack of popular exposure is part of her allure. She caters to an echelon of wealth that values discretion. And she has earned these clients’ trust in part by charging fixed fees (rather than commissions attached to purchased items, like most designers). Maybe the rarest gift of all: as many clients attest, Behnke seems to be refreshingly free of ego.

“Many designers have a specific style, and that’s not Joan,” says Richard Martin, a luxury-home architect currently collaborating with Behnke on a $50,000-square-foot “beach house” in Abu Dhabi. “There is no formula. The common thread is that she will give her most personal interpretation of a client’s dreams for a house.” The Abu Dhabi compound, which will blend Eastern and Western aesthetics, is being constructed for a diplomat from an Arab country. Like so many of Behnke’s clients, the ambassador is a return customer, having hired her to renovate a Washington, D.C. abode after experiencing her decor at the ultraexclusive MGM Grand Mansions’ villas in Las Vegas.

“I have worked with a lot of people who tell you what they think you should have, and you must push back,” admits the diplomat. “She caters to what the client wants, which is why she has a lot of happy, satisfied clients with some very different stuff.”

Behnke typically juggles about 10 projects at a time—she is also currently at work on the 22,000-square-foot interior of quarterback Tom Brady and supermodel Giselle Bundchen’s Brentwood mansion, in L.A. Ground-up projects like this can take two to three years on average. And a client had better be ready to learn.

“Everybody travels with Joan, and it’s really wonderful because she has this network of people in various places to source exotic materials and furniture,” says Robert Veloz, an aerospace-equipment entrepreneur who enlisted Behnke to remodel his Monte Carlo home after he sold his nearby estate to Oprah Winfrey for $80 million. “You present concept boards,” says Behnke, “and sometimes people glance over. Then you go through the educational process, and they come to that concept themselves. It becomes so rewarding.”

When Behnke whisks me through the front door of Alec Gores’ 40,000-square-foot estate inside the gates of an exclusive Beverly Hills community, the private equity billionaire bounds out to hug her, singing her praises (her projects for the Gores family have included vacation retreats, office buildings, even a private jet). The home spans three floors, with rooms that range from a poker den to a series of masculine home offices to a vast gourmet kitchen made homey by plush couches and warm accents. Between the breadth of the property and the endless stories that accompany every decoration, the tour takes more than two hours—not at all an unusual time span for a Behnke-designed house. After all, she and her clients have already arrived at the end of a rich journey.

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