

Million Dollar Decorating Podcast with Host James Swan

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James Swan: Hello everyone and welcome to Million Dollar Decorating, the only podcast devoted to the worlds of design, decorating and beautiful living. I'm your host, James Swan, and I am thrilled to have you subscribing to our show today. Remember, you can bounce over to our website, MillionDollarDecorating.com, to learn more about our family of design enthusiasts. While you're there, be sure to add your name to our email list then follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and on Instagram. You'll be part of all the great things that we have going on.

Right now, the really great thing that I have going on is that I get to introduce you to our guest today. He's a lifelong resident of California, born and raised in Los Angeles, and educated at the Cal-Poly in San Luis Obispo, where he earned his degree in architecture. His appreciation of traditional architecture was nurtured during extensive travels throughout the United States and Europe. He joined KAA Design in 1998 and became a partner in the firm in 2005, overseeing a broad range of custom residential, commercial and institutional projects. In 2013, he established an independent design studio operating under the aegis of KAA and focused exclusively on traditional residential design.

His work has been published in a wide variety of publications, including Architectural Digest, House Beautiful and Western Interiors. He designs and creates, and is always making the world more beautiful. Erik Evens, welcome to Million Dollar Decorating.

Erik Evens: Thank you, Jim, so glad to be here with you.

James Swan: It's great to have you with us today, Erik. Now, I've known you for many, many years, Erik, but I've never actually heard the story of where your love for architecture began. Can you fill us in on that?

Erik Evens: Well, I started out as a child being just extremely interested in anything artistic and the arts. I've always been a drawer and a painter. I was always sketching as a child, and art was an important passion for me when I was young. Coming out of high school, I was absolutely certain I was going to art school and becoming a painter...that's what I wanted to do, and I imagined myself as a fine artist. Out of high school, I started art school at UCLA, back in the late '70s and was on my road to becoming a fine artist, when I took a really wonderful elective class, one of those classes that you have to take in order to fill in your degree, and I took a class in the history of modern architecture in Southern California. Thomas Hines was the wonderful professor.

I was absolutely mesmerized by it. It was a revelation to me to see the incredible work of these early modern masters in California, and see it so beautifully taught to me by Professor Hines. He probably doesn't realize that he caused a right turn in my professional trajectory. After that, I knew what I wanted to do and I took a left turn into architecture. I applied to architecture schools around the country, and got accepted to a wonderful school here in

California, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. At the time it was super well-regarded, and the rest is history. I've never looked back, and I love what I do every day.

James Swan: It shows in your work. It always has. I'm curious about the evolution from your early introduction to architecture being in a modern vocabulary to your work today which is so firmly grounded in the traditional classic work. Talk to us a little bit about that progression.

Erik Evens: It's certainly been an evolution, and I think my professional trajectory has meandered a bit. I've worked in a different modes and on a lot of different kinds of projects. When I came out of architecture school, you would really have called me a modernist true believer. I really believed in the power and the efficacy of modern architecture to affect people's lives. I really was on a path to become a modernist architect. Then I started to travel a bit. I went to Europe, spent time in great European cities and experienced that really nurturing, wonderful, human urbanism that you find in great cities around the world.

My point of view started to evolve... spending time walking down the streets of Paris can be a life-changing experience. I really was just enthralled with the wonderful human qualities of those streets, and the beauty of it, and began to have those thoughts about whether we could do work like that *now*, and what would be wrong with that. My point of view about architecture became much more eclectic. I spent time working for a variety of really eclectic interesting architects with varying points of view. Eventually, I found my way to working with Marc Appleton, who's a wonderful local architect and a real mentor to the traditional and classical architecture community, the design community here in Southern California.

That was really the crowning moment of my career when I spent a few years working closely with Marc. He really polished off my point of view on the power of traditional and classical work, I think, to bring beauty into people's lives. It's been a really interesting journey, and I wouldn't trade any moment of that journey for anything. It's definitely led me over the years to believing that traditional and classical architecture is a really steadfast path for making people happy. That's why I get up in the morning and do what I do.

James Swan: We're grateful for that. We very much are.

Erik Evens: Thank you.

James Swan: Tell us about the projects that you are working on right now. What's bringing you lots of smiles and happiness in your work today?

Erik Evens: Well, I would say literally everything I'm working in right now I'm really in love with, but there's a few that certainly stand out. We've just started construction on a really wonderful California ranch house project in Montecito, in the hills of Montecito. It's a really beautiful gently sloping property about an acre and a half, and it's covered with most magnificent oak trees. When we're done, we'll end up with a really comfortable ranch house there for our clients and several accessory buildings including a studio building and a pool house and even a chicken coop and a vegetable garden. It's a real California ranch in the old sense.

We've even planned a natural swimming pool which features natural under-gravel filtration and aquatic plants, so it's really like an old-fashioned swimming hole in a sense. I'm really

excited by this project. It's a perfect project for us, I think, because it seems so perfectly Californian, in both its location there in the hills of Montecito and in the character of the architecture. We're really excited about it.

James Swan: Sounds dreamy.

Erik Evens: It *is* pretty dreamy. I think projects like that, when you get a chance to work on something that is so perfectly suited for the locale and the romance of California, it's really a blessing. We've very grateful to get a chance to have such great clients.

James Swan: That sounds marvelous. When you say that, I imagined they're pretty jazzed about having you on board, too, so. It goes both ways, right?

Erik Evens: Yeah, I think so. I think our clients tend to be people that have invested in Southern California romance and lifestyle, and want to find a way to realize that in their architecture and in their homes. I think it's something that we're really good at and something that we really love to do.

James Swan: Talk to us a little bit more about that, Erik, this idea of the relationship between classical design and modern life. Help us see that picture a little more clearly, would you?

Erik Evens: Sure. I see the *modern* as addressing the current affairs in human life. I mean, we're surrounded by new technologies, new social structures, new fashions, the current zeitgeist. It really talks about how we're *different* than the generations that preceded us. On the other hand, the *classical*, I think, focuses on the eternal, on the constant human nature that we all share, on things that endure, how we are the *same* as our ancestors. I think in all human endeavor, and certainly when we're designing things for human beings, we need to carefully balance both modernity and the classical. I think we need to develop a point of view that says something thoughtful about that balance.

James Swan: That's so refreshing to hear you talk about a balance between the two as opposed to dividing the two in an inseparable way, as if they should never touch each other.

Erik Evens: I'm really a both/and rather than an either/or guy. I think that the tension between the modern and the classical is actually a really interesting place for a designer to dabble, because I think really good things come out of that. In our work, most of what we do are what I would consider modern houses. We're building them today. They have all the modern features, but they're rooted in the classical and in eternal design principles, and really fundamentally rooted in our human nature. I think we're most interested in working with clients to explore how we can use the language of traditional architecture, which I think really appeals to our need for those eternal values, those enduring values, and use it in a way that says something important and relevant about how we live now in the modern world.

James Swan: That resonates so nicely, as opposed to some other more strict and rigid conversations that I've overheard about modern design and classic design. Am I perceiving it correctly or is there an uptick in the appreciation for and the desire to experience classical architecture in our culture today? It seems like it had waned there for a period of time. Do you see it being in an uptick right now?

Erik Evens: I do. I feel like the winds of design are shifting a little bit in that regard. There's certainly been a lot of questioning in the media and among media people, and in magazines, in opinion pieces...people questioning the orthodoxy of modernism as a design philosophy, and our arguing for a much more eclectic approach. I truly believe that traditional architecture resonates with people because I think it's something, it's a language that has evolved over time along with us as a species. It's become fine-tuned to align itself with our human nature. I think there's an effortless parallel in traditional architecture and human nature and human sensibility that makes it a really powerful tool for making things that people find beautiful and things that make their lives better.

I think modernism can do that as well. I absolutely believe that. I regard it personally as a more difficult path to it, because I think it values the novel and the new over the time-tested and the enduring, so that alignment with our human nature maybe is less direct. Our firm does both modernist and traditional work, and I really believe in the power of both of those in the hands of a skilled designer to bring happiness to people.

James Swan: That's what it's all about, isn't it?

Erik Evens: It is. It's why I get up in the morning and do what I do.

James Swan: Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed.

Let's turn the conversation around for a moment, and talk about your home and where you lay your head to rest every night. Do you have a favorite room in your home, Erik?

Erik Evens: I'd have to say that the favorite room of mine in our house is our breakfast room, right adjacent to our kitchen. It's not a particularly fancy room. It's not particularly large, but it has this really wonderful broad windows that face southeast and it catches the first rays of sun in the morning. I just love to go in there in the morning quiet, everyone else is still asleep, and I open the drapery in the room and I have my first cup of coffee, and I look out on the street below. I just really love it there. It's a very wonderful thing to sit in the morning and watch the sun come up. That room is really energized by that.

James Swan: Lovely. You had me at drapery. Anytime you can open drapes in a room, it's a good place to start.

Erik Evens: I absolutely agree with that.

James Swan: Now, Erik, what would our listeners be surprised to find in your home?

Erik Evens: Well, let's see... We have quite an eclectic collection of furniture in our house that we've amassed over the years. It includes lots of traditional antiques and the normal things that people would expect would appeal to a traditional architect. We also have quite a few modernist pieces in our house that I really love: an elegant Saarinen tulip table in our office and a few Breuer chairs scattered around, a really wonderful lemon yellow transparent plastic chair by Philippe Starck that I just adore and I see it every morning when I get up, Emeco aluminum Navy stools in the kitchen, that sort of thing. Although I'm a classical architect,

many people seem surprised that we have such a mix of the modern and the traditional in our house.

James Swan: It seems consistent with some of the things you've said here today, so not a huge surprise, but interesting nonetheless. Let's talk about people that you admire and respect, maybe designer style heroes in your life. Living or dead, if you could be dropped into, I don't know, let's say the dressing room or the closet of a design hero, of course, to hang out for an hour while they are getting ready, who would you pick and tell us why?

Erik Evens: Well, that's a tough choice. There's so many heroes. I truly stand on the shoulders of giants. I think for current practitioners, I just mentioned Philippe Starck, and he would certainly be a terrific choice. Such an interesting fellow, and such a clever, nuanced designer. I'm a big fan and I'm sure that his dressing room would be a hoot. Also, maybe the great architect, HH Richardson, for example. He comes to mind. He used to come to the drafting studio in his office back around the turn of the century wearing a hooded monk's robe, and probably nothing else, so one can only imagine what his closet might have been like.

James Swan: Fascinating. Yes, I had never heard that story. That's interesting.

Erik Evens: Yeah, it's great.

James Swan: A colorful character.

Erik Evens: Indeed. Indeed.

James Swan: Now, Erik, so much good is happening professionally and has been over the years. It sounds like you're in a really, really good place with your work. What's out on the horizon? What's something that you have set as a goal that you're working towards or moving towards but maybe hasn't materialized yet?

Erik Evens: That's a good question. I think we look at the next project as being something where we constantly want to improve and get better with everything we do. We never seem quite satisfied with the last thing we did and certainly want to take the next project that we're doing to another level. Personally, lots of people are surprised to hear this, but I've never built a house for myself from scratch. It's definitely a goal of mine. We've renovated and remodeled three houses now and all of them have been really unique and personalized and interesting, but I'm hoping to get the chance to start with a clean slate. Perhaps next time around.

James Swan: Sounds exciting. Do you know what it'll be at this point or is that ...?

Erik Evens: You'll have to ask me *then*, because my personal tastes shift with the breeze. Right now would probably be some variation on the Mediterranean here in Southern California, but ask me in a couple of months and that may change.

James Swan: Okay, that's fair enough. That's fair enough. Let's think about design and decorating just in general in the broadest sense. What is some good design advice that you've been given over the years?

Erik Evens: Well, we've worked with so many wonderful interior designers and decorators over the years and I've learned so much from them. I think that the great interior designer just brings a completely new level of nuance to our architecture and they always bring an interesting point of view that maybe is different than what we had been thinking about the project, and it just gives us more reasons to want the building to be wonderful. I love working with good designers. I think the best decorators we worked with have all said similar thing in the sense that the magic is in the mix of elements. I think that we should layer our rooms with wonderful personal things that bring us joy and the interiors will come alive from there.

I think great interior say something really thoughtful about the people who live there. Great interiors, I think, are much, much more than the sum of the individual parts.

James Swan: Very true. Very, very true. With the thought of home interiors in mind just for a moment, give us one thing that are listeners at home could do today to make their home more beautiful.

Erik Evens: Well, for me, I just personally love beautiful, sensual drapery. I love lushly colored gauzy sheer drapery that moves in the wind when we open the door or window, and drapery that falls gently and casually on the floor. I think that almost any room is made better by beautiful drapery and it's a chance to bring softness and texture and color into a space. It's something that anyone can do, and it makes a big difference. It really brings the interiors alive.

James Swan: It's an amazing finishing touch to any room, isn't it?

Erik Evens: It is. I think it's something important, and it's often overlooked. It often ends up being the last thing people think about and something that is ignored at the end of the day and in the rush of trying to get things complete, but it really is a chance to bring a beautiful, sensual quality to a room that really can set it off.

James Swan: Preaching to the choir here, Erik. You are, you are.

Erik Evens: I'm a big fan.

James Swan: I can tell. Another reason I love you so much. Now, let's go with a hypothetical here for a moment. Hopefully, you'll never face this, but let's say there was a fire tonight at the house, family members, pets, all safe, all accounted for. What's the one object in your home that you would risk the flames to save?

Erik Evens: That's an easy one, James. We have a wall of multi-generational family photographs in our house, and there are just so many memories there on that wall, so many reminders for me of our humanity and our connections with the past and our families. Absolutely when I smelled that fire, first, I'm getting my wife and my daughter out, and then I'm going to go back in for those photos.

James Swan: That's a wise choice. Absolutely wise choice. Priceless, I think, would be how you would describe those, right?

Erik Evens: Everything else is stuff that we can replace, but things like that are really important. That's what I'm going to save.

James Swan: A good call, a good call. Now, Erik, something tells me that you are a lover of books. Would I be right in that?

Erik Evens: Absolutely. We have thousands of them around at all times.

James Swan: Music to my soul. Give us a recommendation, a book that you think should be on the bookshelf of every design lover in America.

Erik Evens: That's a big question...Recently, I've just been quite in awe of recently published book entitled *Americans in Paris* by Jean Paul Carlhian and Margot Ellis. It was published recently by Rizzoli. It's a lushly illustrated overview of the work of the American architects who attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris between mid-1800s and 1945. It's really incredibly inspiring to me to see the quality of the student work that was coming out of the Ecole at that time, and how influential was the professional outputs of the graduates of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. It's a really amazing book. It's beautifully illustrated and incredible reference, and just an awe-inspiring celebration of design in the great Beaux-Arts tradition. Wonderful book.

James Swan: Sounds fascinating. We will put a link to that book in the show notes section along with a link to your website so that people can quickly and easily add that to their design library. It sounds like one that should be a delight to dig in to. Thank you for that recommendation.

Erik Evens: Absolutely.

James Swan: Erik, we've come down to the very last question. Are you ready for this?

Erik Evens: Sure.

James Swan: We finish every show with the same question. Let me paint a picture for you and get your thoughts. Imagine that you woke up tomorrow morning in a brand new world. It's physically identical to the earth that you know, but you don't know a single soul. You still have all the experience and the knowledge you currently possess. Your food and shelter are taken care of, but your new home is empty. All you have is a laptop, a mobile phone, and about a thousand dollars in your pocket. What would you do over the next 7 days to decorate your new home?

Erik Evens: Okay. Wow. Well, I'd most likely spend it all on some really beautiful, gauzy lavender curtains with a subtle geometric...

James Swan: I'm sorry, I've got to interrupt you. Lavender?

Erik Evens: I love lavender.

James Swan: No judgment attached to it. It's a delicious color, but that one surprised me.

Erik Evens: Yeah. Well, I ...

James Swan: Okay, go for it. Lavender sheers it is.

Erik Evens: ...love that color, and maybe those curtains have a beautiful geometric pattern that you wouldn't really notice until you got up close and looked at them. Then if I had, say, a couple hundred dollars left, I'd probably buy as many roses as I could afford, and put them around, and maybe a nice pillow. Then I'd open the windows and let the ocean breeze below the drapery around a bit, and I'd sit back on the pillow against the wall and enjoy the view.

James Swan: Something tells me you'd have a big smile on your face.

Erik Evens: I think I would. I think everything else will work itself out, but we have to have the basics.

James Swan: I like the sounds of that, a good place to start. Erik Evens, thank you so much for joining us today.

Erik Evens: My great pleasure, James. Wonderful to talk to you.

James Swan: It's lovely to chat with you also. I want to thank our listeners, our subscribers at home for tuning in today. All of these would be for nothing without you, so we're deeply appreciative of your dedication and commitment to the show. Thank you for sharing the news about the show with your friends. Help us build the show as best we can. Remember to go to our website, MillionDollarDecorating.com, where you can catch the notes from today's show. We will have links to Erik's website where you can look more closely at the work that he does. We'll also post a link to that wonderful book, *Americans in Paris* by Rizzoli that he recommended to us. I know you'll want to pick up a copy as I am going to. While you're there on our website, be sure we have your email address. Click a few buttons. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and on Instagram. Finally, and maybe most importantly, remember that it's up to you to make your world more beautiful.