



Build me up, Buttercup

ANDREA UTTER HONED FLAIR FOR DECORATING IN MAGAZINE WORLD

By Deborah Birkett

Photography • Jonathan Bielaski

AS ONE OF THE YOUNGER, fresher faces in the Waterloo Region design scene, stylist Andrea Utter brings to her work a meticulous eye for detail, one that's been sharpened on scores of high-end photo shoots for top décor magazines and retailers.

She confesses to being very painstaking and picky: "My trades oftentimes hate me for it, but my clients love me for it. I've worked with trades that can't handle it — so I don't work with them anymore. I'm nice about it, but it's definitely hard to [enforce] such high standards."

As so many designers and decorators seem to do, Utter found her way into the business indirectly. Many come from related backgrounds such as fine art, fashion, visual merchandising, graphic design or marketing.

Utter's story is a little different: she comes from the world of design journalism. Largely self-taught, she'll soon finish a diploma in interior decorating at Conestoga College. But she's been working in the field for years already and has a roster of residential and commercial clients.

Utter grew up in Burlington but by high school had moved to Cambridge. A love of literature and a passion for magazines in particular led her to obtain a bachelor of arts in English from McGill University and a diploma in journalism from Humber College. (A love of her Kitchener-based fiancé brought her to this area.)



Andrea Utter owns Buttercup Design in Kitchener.

During her second year at Humber, Utter managed to get a full-time internship at *Style at Home*, one of Canada's leading décor magazines. While the college usually encourages part-time internships so that students can complete their programs, they appreciated the value of a full-time internship at a top magazine and gave her their blessing.

"The whole point of me getting into journalism from the beginning was because I

loved magazines," says Utter. "And I love decorating magazines. That was my big thing, since I was young."

And, indeed, her considerable magazine collection — along with plenty of fabric, wallpaper, and carpet sample books — crowds her charming home office. She's in the market for a studio space to accommodate her burgeoning business, Buttercup Design, which she launched more than three years ago.





Above: Andrea Utter's living room has a neutral palette to which she can add hits of colour through flowers, pillows or other accessories with the seasons. At right: A rustic antique farm chest is paired with a vintage lamp, contemporary mirror and modern accessories in the front foyer.

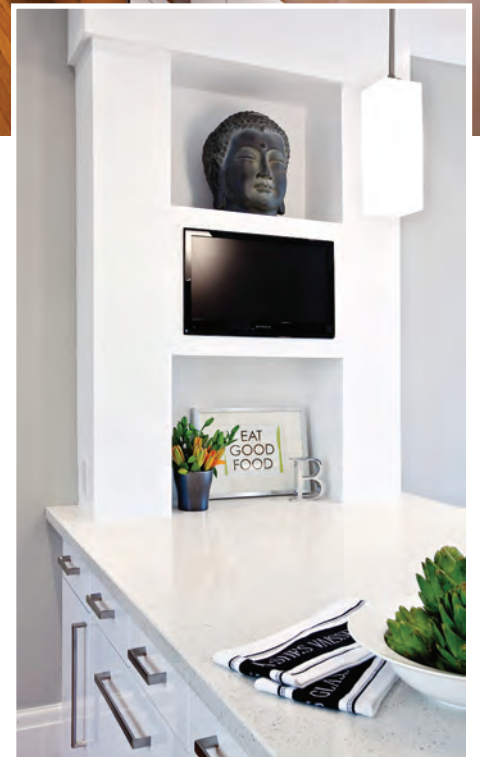
Recalls Utter, "I had such a great experience at *Style at Home*, working with [editor] Samantha Pynn," (who now hosts her own HGTV show, *Pure Design*). She was there full-time for three months, which turned into a twice-weekly gig after the internship was over.

"During the internship, I went over and above the editorial, offering to do design

styling assistance on sets. They were more than happy to have me. That's what I really loved once I got into doing that," Utter says.

Helping with styling gave Utter the priceless opportunity to become familiar with the best sources and suppliers. "Even though you might be at the bottom of the barrel, you really need to look at things ▶





▶ as a stepping stone. When I was at *Style at Home*, that was the main thing that got me into doing this, because I was a sponge. I just soaked up everything that I could from all of them,” Utter says.

Realizing that she had a talent for décor that went beyond loving design journalism, she secured a position as an assistant with Toronto designer and former *Style at Home* editor David Overholt.

“It was probably the best experience ever,” says Utter. “It really prepared me for the job that I’m in now, and he was such a great person to learn from. He knows what he’s doing. He’s got a great business, he’s got great clients.”

But after six months, the daily commute from Kitchener to Toronto — where she spent most days driving around even more from client to client — proved too gruelling. She gave it up for freelance writing, for magazines from *Grand* to *Canadian House and Home*. It was an assignment for the latter magazine that helped her finally decide to be a stylist instead of a writer.

Canadian House and Home asked her to

Above: The kitchen in Andrea Utter’s home mixes old architecture with modern materials. Glossy white cabinetry, quartz countertops and a grey glass backsplash contrast the home’s original oak floors. At right: The custom built-in shelving with flat-screen TV was originally designed to hide mechanicals that could not be moved, but has now become a focal point in the space.

report on the top 100 designers in Canada, which involved interviewing at least 80 designers. “It was a huge amount of work. It took me months. It was great: I got to pick the brains of the top designers in Canada — Sarah Richardson, Brian Gluckstein, all the big names. It was my first big piece in that magazine. It was such a great opportunity.”

It made Utter realize that she wanted to be in the design business. In 2005, she and a friend opened a short-lived business called Suite Home Design. “It just didn’t work out. Partnerships are difficult,” observes Utter. There was no big falling out, she says, and they’re still good friends.

Utter went back to the drawing board, and spent some time figuring out what the focus of her business would be, and coming up with the business name, the

branding, a marketing plan, and so on. She found it particularly challenging to pick a name: “With my background in English, I was going through the dictionary. Every word that I liked, I was writing down. I came up with lots of cool words. None of that turned into anything.”

Utter says many people suggested punning on her last name because “it’s so quirky.” “I was like ‘That’s so cheesy, I’m



Above: A wall was removed to open up the space between the kitchen and dining room in Andrea Utter's century home.

At right: A modern luxury in the kitchen is the pot filler installed above the gas range, making filling stock or pasta pots a breeze.



not doing something with my name, that's so silly," she recalls. She couldn't help but think of the Stoney Creek fruit stand, formerly owned by some family members, called "Utterly Delicious." "I thought that was so perfect for what they had going on, but it just didn't speak to what I was trying to do."

One day, "Buttercup" popped into her head. "And then I start singing that song *Build Me Up Buttercup*. I really like the word. I like buttercup flowers. I think it's kind of quirky. I started imagining what the business card could look like. When I was a kid I always drew flowers, and when I'm doodling, I still draw flowers. I thought, this is cool. I don't want to yell out that it says 'Utter.'"

She knew she could subtly emphasize her name within the word with graphic design elements like colour.

"It's worked really well for me, the name.

The name is playful. People just call me Buttercup now; they don't even call me Andrea. My suppliers just say 'What's up, Buttercup?' It's fun, and it's my design principle — it's fun. Yes, design is serious; it's a lot of money people are spending, but the whole thing is to have fun while you're doing it. I hope that's what I do with my clients. I think most of them feel that way."

Robin Thomas would agree. Thomas, a Cambridge homeowner who bought a new house for herself and her children last summer as her marriage was ending, needed her home ready by Christmas. As a housewarming gift, a mutual friend gave Thomas a complimentary consultation with Utter. Thomas says she "completely clicked" with Utter and that they "worked really well together and agreed on almost everything." What did they not agree about? "My floors! She wanted me to change my floors," Thomas laughs.

Thomas had already ordered very striking, top-quality black and gold striped cork flooring and insisted on proceeding with it. "Andrea wasn't sure at first if she could work with them. So I gave her a challenge and said, 'Work with my floors, Andrea, because I'm not changing them!'"

She was set on the floors, she says, because "they were very new, very trendy, cork is a very good soft surface to live with, they clean up well, and I love them. They're very different and they make a statement. My home is small and I wanted my floors to really make a statement."

Utter found the exuberant cork flooring to be a great challenge: "Andrea said she had so much fun. And everything she did worked with my floors and it looked amazing," Thomas says. Utter understood that Thomas was leaving a large, traditional home where she'd had little say in the decorating and never felt comfortable in the very masculine interiors her husband had chosen.

"I was really wanting a girly feel this time around and she really went out of her way to make sure I had bright hot pink accents throughout my house," says Thomas. Utter redecorated the kitchen, living room, dining room, family room, and powder room, all within Thomas' budget and tight schedule.

Because Thomas particularly loves accessories, and likes to change her interiors around frequently, she really appreciates Utter's ability to source almost anything: "Andrea's always in touch with what's new and trendy, and if you mention something she knows exactly where to find it."

Another client, Cara Strohack, owns a century-old two-storey near Belmont Village in Kitchener. She engaged Utter to decorate her living room and basement. The living room had some design issues, including a hideous fireplace and a complete lack of storage. Utter designed a built-in unit that attractively accommodates the books, toys, decorative items, stereo equipment and even the radiator.

The fireplace, which formerly featured a pink-paving-stone surround, brass screen, ▶



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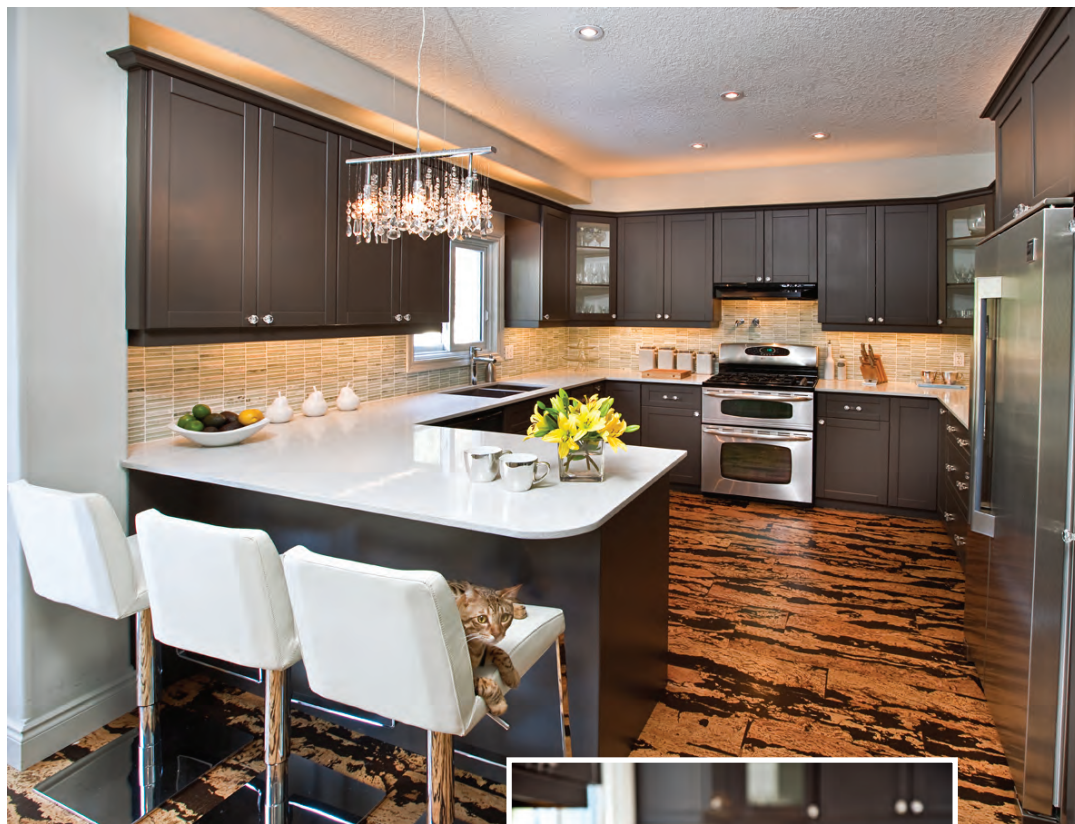


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In the kitchen of Robin Thomas' home in Cambridge, tired-looking natural maple cabinets were painted a rich chocolate grey/brown to complement the dramatic cork flooring and to unify the space.



▶ and oak mantel, has been completely transformed with white woodwork and a surround surfaced in beautiful narrow glass tiles in watery colours. The brass firescreen was inexpensively rehabbed by painting it with black high-heat spray paint.

Strohack observes, "Andrea is very resourceful. I think she has a great eye, and she has a great network of tradespeople who need to meet her standards, which are very high for her work."

She adds, "She exuded professionalism and confidence and at the same time, she listened to what we were trying to do and what we liked."

A first-time homeowner, Strohack feels Utter helped her find her style: "She could pick out themes that we maybe didn't we even know we had, or were leaning towards." Strohack is looking forward to working with Utter again on other projects: "I wouldn't bother even finding anyone else."

Rachel Bender, marketing specialist for Hanson Hardscapes, one of Utter's

commercial clients, says that the photos Utter styled for the company's 2009 catalogue "are definitely an improvement on what we had in the past." Previously, "we kind of muddled through on our own and did the best we could," she explains. Bender says that "Andrea was really good to work with; she usually had several different options so if we didn't like something, we didn't have to use it. All the little details we never would have come up with, she had those covered."

Utter has recently turned that great eye for detail to her own properties. She and her fiancé, Jason Naumann, live in a well-proportioned century home on a quiet street in Kitchener's east ward. The place needs her professional touch, and the couple has been working diligently at getting the place into shape, while at the same time venturing into the real estate flipping game. The two did a stylish



Above: A modern horizontal fireplace and custom built-ins are the focal point around which the cozy family-friendly seating area is arranged in Robin Thomas' home in Cambridge.



Left: In the home's small powder room, natural bluestone subway tiles run floor to ceiling on one wall, creating drama and warmth.


makeover on a Shanley Street property that sold in August for over asking price to one of multiple bidders.

In their own home, they've focused on the first floor. Utter ordered custom furniture for their living room, including a striking sofa in dark grey distressed leather. She's indulged her love of fabrics with some lavish pillow fabrics in greens, creams, and charcoals, and a cream-and-charcoal ikat-influenced fabric for the drapes. She comes by her love of textiles honestly: her grandparents owned a fabric store. "Fabrics are huge for me — I love fabrics," she says.

Removing a wall between the kitchen and

dining room has opened up the space wonderfully, and improved the flow and light on the first floor. The kitchen feels vast, and the clean white-and-grey scheme adds to a fresh, modern feeling. It's the sort of house that facilitates entertaining on both smaller and larger scales, which the couple enjoys.

Her interiors — both for clients and herself — reflect a modern approach to different styles. "I like tension between materials and styles. I think the word 'eclectic' is a little bit overused, but it's easy to use that word to describe so many things because it's such a huge umbrella. So I don't really like to say eclectic, but I really like to have tension between curves and straight lines, smooth and textured, modern and traditional, or modern and rustic. That speaks to my style a lot," Utter says.

"Definitely functional, clean, and simple. Those are my biggest catchall phrases," she adds. "Fresh, fresh, fresh...that's what I'm about." 

For Andrea's style tips, see page 134.

Contact: By phone: 519-496-2804; on the web: www.buttercupdesign.ca.



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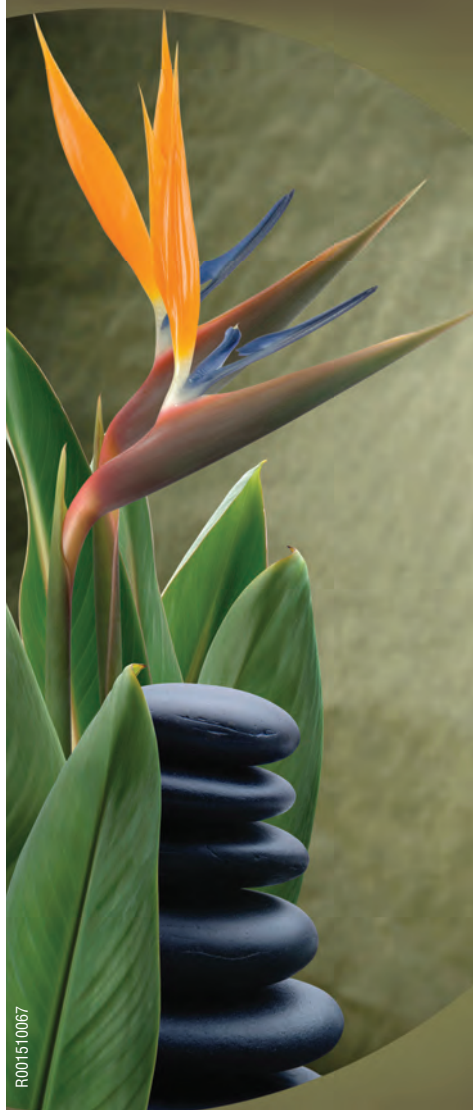
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The rich brown palette in the dining room of Robin Thomas' Cambridge home is kept light and reflective with a large, oversized mirror and mirrored drum shade chandelier.



TIPS FOR A MORE STYLISH SPACE

The following ideas for sprucing up your home are from **Andrea Utter, owner of Buttercup Designs:**

- **Use Fabric.** Draperies and pillows are a great way to bring pattern and colour into a space. If you have a window, frame it with great side panels and your room will look complete. Don't be afraid to mix different patterns and colour together. It takes a good eye and a knack to do this successfully, but when done well, it will transform a space.
- **Play with scale and proportion.** Avoid lots of little bric-a-brac and opt for one large striking piece . . . like a large wood or chrome vase on a coffee table or a bookshelf. One oversized piece has much more impact than several small pieces.
- **Bring books into the picture.** Scour used bookstores or a local shop for large hard covers with pretty spines. Always take the sleeve off to see if what's underneath is more appealing. Often tacky sleeves are hiding beautiful linen or silk covers that should be on display. Stack them on a coffee table or end table for impact. Or group them by colour on a bookshelf for a high-impact, unified look.
- **Soften underfoot.** When choosing an area rug, be sure to measure your seating area (most importantly the space around sofas and chairs). The rug should extend slightly beyond the main upholstered pieces or at least under the front legs of each piece. Anything smaller will look too small and disconnected from the furniture. It should frame the space, uniting the pieces together.
- **Choose upholstery wisely.** When selecting upholstery fabric, consider the abrasion rating of the fabric, referred to as "double rubs." The fabric is tested to rate its ability to withstand surface wear from rubbing. For pieces that will get regular everyday use (family rooms, dens), a minimum of 15,000 double rubs is recommended. Anything higher is considered heavy duty for residential applications. Occasional chairs that may only get light use can be less, but to ensure your fabric will last, stick to 15,000 double rubs or more. If the rating isn't listed on the fabric label, you can call the manufacturer to find it out.