



# Incubators for Joy

By Camilla McLaughlin



**“Joy: An intense momentary experience, a positive emotion that makes us smile and laugh and feel like we want to jump up and down.” — Ingrid Fetell Lee**

**W**hen Austin architect James LaRue was tasked to create a home for a young family with three small children, the desire was a design that would maximize a setting framed by heritage trees overlooking Lake Austin. It’s a rare visitor who doesn’t break into a smile soon after stepping inside. “In this particular home, the fusing of the colorful and playful interior elements nods to this being a joyful family home. Views of the lake and the heritage oak trees bring a strong connection to nature and lake life, which was really important to this family’s outdoorsy, playful lifestyle. We carried the home’s exterior Lueders limestone (a Texas limestone) in through the interior. By using regionally sourced materials, we are anchoring the home to its beautiful natural surroundings,” shares LaRue of the property, dubbed Cliffside House.

From an aqua kitchen to furnishings made from found items and personal mementos, even a request for a log cabin bedroom in a traditional center hall colonial, the quest for joyful interiors is apt to follow any number of paths. Color, connections with nature, harmony, textures,

lighting, and the occasional note of whimsy are all elements that enhance an undercurrent of joy and wellbeing that can pulse through a home.

Joy is not always voiced as a desired characteristic, yet the best residences are often incubators for joy. Brittany Farinas, creative director at House of One in Miami, finds consumers often use keywords such as bright, airy and energetic to indicate joyfulness, but, she says, “clients are definitely portraying they want a space that sparks joy.”

Joy and happiness are frequently used interchangeably, but they don’t necessarily refer to the same quality. “Happiness is a broad evaluation of how we feel over time. Sometimes it’s hard to know if we’re happy at any given moment, which is why happiness can feel elusive,” shares Ingrid Fetell Lee, a designer and author whose mission is to empower individuals to find more joy in life through design.

Compared to happiness, joy is simpler and more immediate. “Joy is how good we feel right now in the moment. What’s powerful about this concept is that instead of focusing

so much on this big, vague idea of happiness, we can concentrate on smaller, very achievable moments of joy in everyday life,” Lee elaborates.

The idea that you can be going through tough times and still find moments of delight seems ideally suited for a time when growing uncertainty and turmoil threaten the emerging post-COVID *joie de vivre* that ushered in 2022. “In the past, many people assumed joy was something that happened passively and not necessarily something that could be created or fostered. Now, I believe people are more intentionally looking for opportunities to create joy in their daily lives,” says Sarah Barnard, a leading designer of personalized, sustainable spaces that support mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.

Like Lee, Barnard advocates small touches that elicit delight and gratification. “While joy is often associated with big, exuberant emotions, it can also manifest in small moments. Savoring a cup of tea while enjoying bird songs

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Heritage oaks overlooking Lake Austin make this deck a joyful setting.



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in the morning can be a profound source of happiness. Preparing a meal with loved ones can improve mood too," she says.

"More clients want to highlight and expand on these daily experiences through design. By building more opportunities to create joy and find joy in daily routines, the lived experience can become more peaceful and pleasurable," Barnard explains.

"When you start to think about your homes as a series of moments, it's so freeing," observes Lee. "Consumerism has really taught us to see decorating homes as making a shopping list and filling rooms with stuff. "When joy is added to the equation, that 'stuff' begins to serve a higher purpose," explains Lee, who highlights 10 aesthetics of joy in her recent book **"Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness,"** and on her site, [aestheticsofjoy.com](http://aestheticsofjoy.com).

**"Color has a profound effect on our mood, as I have learned through a lot of successes and a few failures,"** shares Chris Goddard of Goddard Design Group

A deep blue creates a signature look in this kitchen.

### Gut Reaction

"Consumers are becoming increasingly more design savvy and conscious in living in spaces that spark happiness and joy apart from the stark and sanitized trending interiors one sees on television shows. There are an infinite number of beautiful things out there — and there is no math equation to solve what your eye is attracted to. This is your gut speaking," observes Lance Thomas with Thomas Guy Interiors in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Mention joy to designers, and conversations are apt to turn to color. "Using color is such an important part of what we do, and the way we combine different colors is not only to create a harmonious and aesthetically pleasing space, but also to spark different emotions for the people inhabiting them," says Farinas.

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A collection of starburst mirrors turns this corner into a meaningful moment.

Design Group, reflecting on a regrettable choice of a bright yellow hue for a baby's room. "The perfect color can make or break any day," he says. "Whether you are drawn to either light and bright or dark and luxurious, color has the power to spark emotion and turns any space into an escape from the outside world."

### Color Me Happy

Bright colors seem to evoke positive feelings, but darker hues can be equally powerful. Barnard recalls a project in which a client requested a deep jewel-toned bedroom that "felt like a hug for a cocoon-like, cozy experience when preparing for sleep."

"Surround yourself with colors and textures that you enjoy," suggests designer Glenna Stone. "Some people prefer bright and energizing colors like yellow, while others prefer more calming colors such as blues and neutrals."

Light also plays into the feelings a space creates. "Light quality and light levels are super important," shares Kim Coombs of KBCO

TOP LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF GODDARD DESIGN GROUP  
TOP RIGHT PHOTO BY MICHAEL PARENINO, COURTESY OF K.A. MURPHY INTERIORS



The juxtaposition of a quirky fixture, oak table, modern chairs and dramatic art in this dining room guarantees smiles.

Design in Orlando.

"Since COVID, we have definitely seen a shift in our clients' willingness to incorporate color into their homes. While spending so much time at home, everyone has grown tired of navy and gray and pivoted to shades of green, yellow and orange. We have always encouraged color, and this is a very welcome change," shares designer Kevie Murphy of K.A. Murphy Interiors.

### Unexpected Whimsy

Throughout Cliffside House, unexpected playful elements, artwork and splashes of color lend a sense of fun without detracting from the home's elegance. To illustrate, designer Fern Santini with Abode points to details such as a red Lee Broom hanging chair in the living room. A vintage art piece by iconic Austin artist, Evan Voyles, "The Neon Jungle," hangs in the breakfast nook. A dark green bar in the game room pays homage to actor Steve McQueen's famed Jaguar, a favorite of the homeowner. Also unexpected is the juxtaposition of the

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Framed with gold, a hanging red chair in the living room of the Cliffside House injects a lighthearted note.

Ingo Maurer utterly quirky chandelier with an antique Belgian oak dining table, mixed with the very contemporary dining chairs in the dining room. "It all keeps people guessing, but always with a smile on their face," observes Santini.

"I love client requests grounded in a memory or place of joy and happiness. Clients are often drawn to palettes that remind them of being somewhere they love, whether it's the ocean by their home or a favorite trip to a forest. Using these spaces as a basis for a project can help inspire a sense of happiness that permeates the home," adds Barnard.

### Functional Bliss

Often not considered as a catalyst for ease, functionality has a substantial impact on joyful living. Barnard says, "Functional design is one of the best ways to increase ease throughout the day and remove small moments of friction. Most of us have experienced the significant impact of a small change, like improved sleep after buying a more supportive

pillow. Designing a home to fit your personal needs and comforts, from soft-close doors and cabinets to reduce noise and enhance the use of the kitchen space to custom height counters that support improved postures, can all make daily experiences more joyful."

There is no recipe for joyful interiors and what sparks joy is very much centered on each client. Ensuring this inspiration and references to meaningful moments are woven into a design, designers such as Stone say it's important for clients to define how they want to use a space based on things that bring them joy.

"What inspires joy may cause stress for another, so working closely with clients to understand their needs and personal preferences is crucial to designing a space that speaks to their unique happiness," advises Barnard.

In the end, creating interiors that gratify, add delight, even moments of bliss is not always an easy task. Designers advise to look to clients for inspiration and wait for the moment when their eyes light up. **U+H**