



Things are going just swimmingly for Anna Campbell-Jones. The presenter and interior designer talks authenticity, inspiring people to live vibrantly, and a love of the deep blue

BY **CHERYL CAIRA**

**E**very home has a heartbeat, an imprint left by the humans who brought its walls to life. In the case of interiors visionary Anna Campbell-Jones, this includes the scratches scored into the chairs by a beloved cat and the clock that punctuates our conversation as time flies past.

I'm pleased to have been invited to Anna's Glasgow abode for our interview. Being a curious cat myself – don't we all want a peek behind the curtain? – I'm keen for the lowdown on everything my eyes land on. The 'Home Sweet Home' artwork made of gummy bears next to reams of fabrics; the slightly austere family portraits, and the Day of the Dead-esque nesting dolls perched on a bookshelf.

Storytelling is a topic we keep coming back to. After all, it underpins what Scotland's Home of the Year is all about – the BBC TV programme Anna has presented since its inception in 2019. Spanning every iteration of bricks and mortar possible across the country, previous winners have included a renovated Edinburgh train house, a property with views over Kirkcudbright Bay and an early 20th-century croft house on the Isle of Lewis. The tales of the owners' careful restorations and the memories and personality expressed through their interiors is as affecting as it is fascinating.

The presenters/judges aren't party to a property's backstory ("There's no smoke and mirrors. What you see is what you get," says Anna) and each home is scored on its "architectural merit, distinctive design and personal style". When Anna and I chat on the eve of the season six winner announcement, she's feeling nervous amidst the buzz surrounding the final.

"It's the biggest day of the year for the show, so it's exciting, but really nerve-wracking. We're all scoring blind in the shows leading up to the final, but we're jointly accountable for the house we choose as the winner [It ended up being an eclectic 1960s bungalow in East Dunbartonshire].

Obviously you get an edited version on the show, but we spend hours talking about it. The conversation can get quite emotional, because we care a lot – it's like choosing a favourite child or something."

Classed as a reality TV series, Scotland's Home of the Year is one of the most watched BBC Scotland shows on both TV and iPlayer, with ratings that have increased exponentially by season. Home exploring alongside interior designer Banjo Beale and architect Danny Campbell, it's a feelgood watch, with the question at the heart of it all: what makes a house a home?

"Occasionally you'll get somebody saying: 'I think the judges should be more nasty' or that there needs to be a Simon Cowell. I'm like: why? I think part of the show's success is that people find it comforting to watch. They know everything's going to be alright, and there's no jeopardy – as opposed to watching Love Island or something like that."

Anna was initially sceptical about being involved in the programme. Presenting had never been in her gameplan, despite being approached about doing TV a number of times over the years.

"I'd always said no, because of that TV interior designer trope – that sort of posh-sounding person who swans

into people's homes and tells them everything they've done wrong and how to change it. I'm not interested in that. I said to the producer: if we're going to do anything, I would want it to be about what homes mean to people, and understanding their own identity through the space they inhabit."

The biggest thrill Anna gets from working on the show is being approached by viewers who have been emboldened to go all-out with their decor.

"I love it when people say they've painted their house in loads of different colours, or have been inspired to do things they wouldn't have felt brave enough to do before. They feel like they've been given permission by hearing us chatting on the show, to do things that are a bit more

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adventurous and personal to them.

“Your home is like your autobiography. All those objects coexisting in one space tell a really complex and beautiful story.”

The clock flips (I learn it's a much sought-after 'font clock' designed by Sebastian Wrong, with an ever-changing face). We're in Anna's kitchen, sipping tea with oat milk she rustled up herself. She takes a sustainable approach to every decision she makes, and she's not long home from a Glasgow Climate Week event, where her keynote speech has already received thousands of views online.

“When it comes to sustainability, I come from a place of, do what you can and feel comfortable with that. There's a danger of feeling so helpless in the face of a climate emergency, that you think: 'Well if I can't achieve perfection, I won't bother.' It's overwhelming.”

The table my cuppa is resting on is an heirloom – a 20th-century antique Anna snaffled from her father's office when he retired. He was an architect, and this was his meeting table. “It has gouges and Airfix paint on it. I pinched these chairs too. He found them in a skip in the '70s and got them rechromed. I could probably get them reupholstered again because the cat's attacked them, but I like the trace of what was once there, as it tells a story. We have to not be so precious with the things we love.”

Anna grew up in the Hammersmith area of London, with both her parents working in the art and design world. Her father adored modernist German-American architect Mies van der Rohe, to the extent that almost everything in the family home was white. An assumption could be made that the muted shades of Anna's childhood home may have led to the penchant for colour she's synonymous with.

“My dad was very particular. He chose everything in our home – from crockery to fabrics. It looked like a traditional terraced house from the outside, but it was really contemporary inside. It was most definitely my father expressing his personality with the interior, to the point where when I wanted to paint my room a different colour, I wasn't allowed to. So the idea of having a space that I could do stuff to was really exciting.”

“I was always quite a creative kid, crafting and sewing and making things in my dad's workshop, so not being able to make my space look like how I felt really annoyed me! Knowing that I wanted to do interior design from a young age felt like an act of rebellion.”

The future was bright, and appeared in the form of



Glasgow School of Art, where Anna studied in the late '80s (and also later lectured) and fell for the city's charms. So much so, that she returned in 2000, this time with a baby on her hip and to the flat she still lives in – at that point, the definition of a doer-upper.

“It was a literal shell with dead pigeons and broken windows. When we first bought the flat, we really didn't have the money to do anything apart from putting in central heating, paint the walls and sand floorboards. The living room only had a sofa, TV and one picture on the wall for a very long time.”

Over two decades of the ingredient Anna covets so much on the show – love – has gone into adorning these tenement rooms in the West End, now a far cry from a blank canvas. But is there still more to do – and can a house ever be finished?

“I don't believe it can. It's an evolution. We change, and our needs change. When we bought this flat, I was married. I'm not married any more. The baby I arrived with is now married himself. Relationships have come and gone. My parents have died. Time has moved on, and my tastes have changed.”

“I always say to leave some things. Think of your home as a mistress that you need to buy treats. You need to give her little tweakments every now and then to help her feel fresh, you know?”

When Anna was named 'Scottish Influencer of the Year' in Interiors & Design in 2022, it propelled her into launching her own microbrand a year later, with homeware pieces



Anna has lived at her stunning West End home for over 20 years



From left to right: an artwork made of gummy bears; the much-loved kitchen and 'font clock'; with her fellow BBC presenters on Scotland's Home of the Year



Credit: Kirsty Anderson



made in Scotland in small quantities.

"I was absolutely flabbergasted to win. I hadn't nominated myself or anything, it just came out of the blue. A lot of brands started contacting me, and there was this penny drop moment where I thought: why don't I just market my own stuff?"

Alongside running her interior design practice, *Habitus*, Anna began curating small collections tapping into her love of the sea, with signature designs monikered with shipping forecast areas. A recent candle design marking the Paris Olympics also commemorates the RMS Olympic liner, with a swallow inside the china pot – a sailor's tattoo which they believed carried their soul to heaven if they drowned.

"My father loved sailing and we used to live on a boat all summer. The number of people going back through generations of the Campbell-Jones family that were sailors or shipwrights and lost at sea... there's definitely some kind of salty seawater in my blood, I think"

It's fitting then, that the eco-conscious designer's next collaboration is with Ocean Plastic Pots, who make all of their recyclables from rope and fishing nets collected round Scotland. In the same vein, she's also teamed up with wildflower brand Seedbom to encourage colourful guerilla

gardening, and with No Rules – a Glasgow wallpaper company designed to have no repeats, so there's significantly less wastage. She also recently started creating art "for art's sake" again, something she hadn't done since she was an art student, with her prints now proving to be her most popular designs.

"I get a total buzz when someone orders something that I spent ages designing and worrying about. It's not about making a sale, it's about the idea that someone will love looking at it in their home every day. That's a really nice feeling."

There's a realness and easiness about Anna, which has seen her build up an online community who are 'absolutely lovely'. "People are always quite surprised that I'm exactly the same as I am on TV or on my socials. I just don't have the guile really to have a persona or make stuff up."

"I'm definitely in my era of just not giving a f\*\*k. I'm shouting from the rooftops about how middle-age femininity is ace. I wish I'd been more relaxed and confident 20 years ago."

"Imposter syndrome is such a real thing, particularly for women. And then suddenly, I found I had a wake up call in my late forties. I was like: wait a minute, everybody's winging it. If you're honest and authentic, what's the worst that can happen?"

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