

How 6 top designers would make Barbie's house even dreamier

We asked Jonathan Adler, Sheila Bridges, Bobby Berk and other big-name designers to create a new space for an iconic client

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The first Barbie Dreamhouse was made of cardboard. (Illustration by José L. Soto/The Washington Post; Mattel Inc.)

Barbie, a plastic doll with a trippy pink home, is the original design influencer.

As generations of children have played with more than 20 versions of her Dreamhouse, they've learned how to arrange furniture and accessorize a pink room, and to aspire to have their own cool place, like Barbie. Mattel's first Dreamhouse in 1962 was a mid-century cardboard ranch with wood paneling. The [2023 version](#) — which somewhat resembles the one in Greta Gerwig's [Barbie movie](#), opening July 21 — is glammed up with a kidney-shaped pool, three-story spiral pool slide, potted succulents and a mod swinging chair.

[*Sign up for Unboxed, a pop-up newsletter on the best memes, coverage and buzz around the "Barbie" movie.*](#)

The movie's production designer Sarah Greenwood says she and set decorator Katie Spencer aimed for a kind of "utopian Americana" when conceptualizing the world that Margot Robbie's Barbie inhabits on screen. The details of her Dreamhouse include a flamingo mailbox that doubles as a charger for Barbie's electric-pink Corvette and a Pepto-hued Smeg toaster. The set is ageless, because Barbie is ageless. "This is our own version of Barbieland. There is no period specificity," says Greenwood. "We were cherry-picking elements and refining things."

All the excitement around the movie got us thinking: How would today's top interior designers remake the Dreamhouse if they had the chance?

(Apparently, we weren't the only ones with this question — on July 16, HGTV premieres "[Barbie Dreamhouse Challenge](#)," wherein design teams will transform a real Southern California home.) As [Kim Culmone](#), Mattel's global head of design for Barbie and fashion dolls, puts it: "It's a Barbie summer."

We asked six designers to reimagine a space for a modern-day Barbie. Certainly, some drew from [the Barbiecore craze](#) that started last year. Others

made more unexpected choices. See if you can spot the one item that showed up on two mood boards.

Barbie's living room, by Jonathan Adler



(Jonathan Adler)

[Jonathan Adler](#) knows his way around Barbie's place — in 2009, Mattel commissioned him to decorate a Malibu mansion for the doll's 50th anniversary, a project that included giant hot-pink poodle statues and a chandelier made of blonde hair. (Adler will also lead the judging on the HGTV Dreamhouse show.)

For this assignment, Adler says he was looking “for a more grown-up way to interpret Barbiecore” that skewed more real life, less fantasy.

“What is so interesting about Barbie is how her life has evolved. She changes

with the times but somehow, she always manages to remain current,” Adler says. He gave the living room a polished style. “I wanted it to look sparkling and new,” he says, “with jewel tones and gold tones.” His choices include a brass and lavender chandelier, a harlequin credenza with an Italian modern vibe and a curved sofa upholstered in light pink velvet.

And yes, Adler designed the needlepoint pillow that says “Boss Lady” and everything else except the [Benjamin Moore Bed of Roses](#) paint. The space still involves plenty of plastic including a giant hand sculpture. “Plastic is an important part of Barbieness,” Adler says. “There are not a lot of natural materials in this space. I didn’t want to introduce nature, God forbid.”

Barbie’s beach house, by Ken Fulk



(Ken Fulk)

Interior designer [Ken Fulk](#) has long had a personal relationship with Barbie.

“As a Ken, I’ve always felt a fondness for Barbie and her idealized world,” says Fulk, who splits his time between San Francisco and a 19th-century cottage in Provincetown, Mass.

Fulk transported Barbie and her dogs to her own weathered historical house at the tip of Cape Cod, Mass., for the season and sets up her living room to

blend high style with a cozy, lived-in look.

“We decided to leave the vintage 1890s wallpaper in place,” Fulk says in an email. “To punch things up and add a bit of drama, we took some of Barbie’s old gowns that she no longer wore and turned them into draperies.” Keeping with the upcycled vibe, Fulk filled the salon with vintage chairs and quirky tables he discovered while combing local shops and country antique shows. Old and new paintings by local artists, in gilded frames full of patina, provide a touch of glamour. A romantic bouquet of garden flowers adds the final touch.

Now Fulk is hoping that Barbie might show up at one of his summer parties. “Barbie and Ken forever,” he says.

Barbie’s mid-century sanctuary, by Sheila Bridges



(Sheila Bridges)



(Sheila Bridges)

[Sheila Bridges](#) was surprised that one of Barbie's 250 careers was interior designer. "She has too much pink in her house to be credible," Bridges says. "Maybe she was self taught."

That's why Bridges chose to create a living room for a more design-savvy Barbie who loves Eames chairs and collects contemporary art. This Barbie decorates in primary colors rather than the predictable pink. "It tells the story of an independent and modern woman who is living her very best life," Bridges says.

As a child, Bridges says she enjoyed the doll and her accessories although she

didn't physically resemble her. She was given more Barbies as an adult, after she went public about her alopecia. "Google 'bald Barbie'," says Bridges. (The [bald doll](#) was introduced in 2020, along with several other diverse Barbies).

Bridges, who recently designed the [vice president's official residence in Washington](#), says her version of Barbie's home was inspired by the architect Philip Johnson's Glass House and is filled with a mix of warm mid-century furnishings. Barbie's art choices include paintings by Amy Sherald and photographs by Lorna Simpson, and even, says Bridges, "an artist commissioned Frankenstein-ish bust of dear Ken, which she keeps outdoors on her property as a memento of their on-again-off-again, obligatory, long-distance relationship."

Barbie's living room, by Bobby Berk



(Bobby Berk)

“When I think of Barbie, I think of playfulness, female empowerment, and having fun,” says designer [Bobby Berk](#) via email. He was inspired to seek out pieces from female designers for the living room he imagined. He was not inspired, however, to go bubble-gum pink.

“I wanted to push this room beyond the typical Barbie pink we all know well. Modern Barbie is very multifaceted. I wanted to bring in a few different pink tones including salmon, coral, blush and raspberry to contrast against darker shades of brown and crisp white,” Berk says. The result is a more layered, textured design. The amber and pink rug is from [Nordic Knots](#).

Berk, Emmy-nominated host of Netflix’s [Queer Eye](#), included the [Lilypad Chandelier](#) in textured glass by Parisian designer Laura Gonzalez, [Chromeo armchair and Ottoman](#) by Sarah Ellison, and a pair of watercolor-like framed [Tappan fabric prints](#) by AOTH.

There is a mix of soft and hard, curvy and linear, that hark back to Barbie’s ’60s and ’70s past, such as a [Pink marble coffee table](#) and a walnut [Polynet](#) cabinet. The [Lilou modular sofa](#) has sensuous lines. “It can be moved around and repositioned,” Berk says, “say if Barbie is having her girlfriends over.”

Barbie’s bedroom, by Dabito



(Dabito)

“I imagined a more mature Barbie who still loves pink but a richer, sultrier, muted shade of pink,” says Dabito, founder of design studio [Old Brand New](#), via email. He imagined a 2023 Barbie bedroom in a playful, monochromatic style with sculptural pieces.

“I wanted to introduce other shades of pink, not just fuchsia or fluorescent pink,” he says. “I think today’s Barbie is also well traveled. She likes to collect art. She’s a bit of a maximalist.”

Dabito’s color palette includes black, brown and terracotta accents “to make it feel warm and elevated.” The walls are a dusty pink: [Rangwali by Farrow & Ball](#). He created a sophisticated, sexy look by mixing the pinks with wood tones, patterns and soft materials such as [Soho Home’s Lawrence bed](#) in

antique-rose velvet, an ottoman in plum boucle, trimmed in pink feathers — and, yes, the same rug that Berk used in his design.

Dabito found the [postmodern, waterfall nightstand](#) on 1st Dibs, explaining that it is similar to a 1980s piece from one of Barbie's former homes. "Barbie still wanted to keep some of her favorite pieces," he says.

Barbie's bathroom, by Michelle Gerson



(Michelle Gerson)

"Is Barbie rich?" asks New York interior designer [Michelle Gerson](#), weighing whether Barbie could afford a tub made of rare, pink onyx. "It would definitely be custom and would cost a small fortune," she says. "Everyone looks good and feels good in a room with lots of pink in it."

Gerson says when a client gives her free rein, she tends to pick bold

statement pieces. For Barbie's bathroom, Gerson chose a 1970s-inspired geometric pink and white wallpaper [“Nod to Mod,” which she designed for Phillip Jeffries](#). It makes a dramatic backdrop for the [Stephen Antonson plaster “Shell” mirror](#) hanging over the fluted vanity table, flanked by a pair of [Welles double sconces](#) that resemble hanging flowers. Barbie's towels would be monogrammed with single Bs because “like Madonna and Cher, she is just Barbie,” says Gerson.

The stunner is a chandelier by [Larose Guyon](#) that resembles a giant string of pearls, in tribute to Coco Chanel. “It's like a big piece of modern jewelry,” Gerson says. “It's just the perfect finish to the room and brings in lots of good energy.”

Jura Koncius covers interiors and lifestyle for the Washington Post. Her White House coverage has chronicled historical renovations and State Dinner style. She covers the decluttering movement from Marie Kondo to Swedish death cleaning. For 20 years, she has hosted a weekly home and design Q&A. She won the 2022 Washington Post Eugene Meyer Award. [Twitter](#)