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## Features

### SPECIAL FEATURE

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#### The Inquisitor

*Keitha Brathwaite Interior Designer*

**WHY WE LOVE HER:** Despite her parents' misgivings about a career in design, Keitha Brathwaite persevered. "Others made Barbi's clothes or dressed her; I designed her house," she says. Today, she fits the new breed of designer whose goal is to satisfy a client's aesthetic and functional needs without promoting her own style. "We don't have a look," she says. She and partner Erik Koalacz dig deep to develop each vision, starting with a multipage questionnaire. They prod clients to expand horizons. "I'll say, 'from our experience, we'd approach it this way.'" The firm's success is due to its merchandise background, functional interior architecture approach, use of manufacturers at all price points, attention to a client's budget and ability to listen.

**WHAT SHE'S DONE:** Opening her own business has given Brathwaite, the ultimate chance to pursue her vision. Projects range from a small chain of barber shops, State Street Barbers of Chicago—a hair-cutting version of Starbucks for men&mdash;to a 20,000-square-foot Georgian-style house with Tuscan touches in New Jersey. "It's gorgeous, not glitzy," says Brathwaite.

*Contrast Design Group, 400 N. Wells St., Chicago 60610, 312.222.0772, [www.contrastdesigngroup.com](http://www.contrastdesigngroup.com)*

**Q.** How important is function?

**A.** It's where we start. If a project is aesthetically pleasing and not functional, that's not good. We're huge on space planning. Success goes back to asking people the right questions. We're great at listening and observing. We make rooms usable and gorgeous.

**Q.** Whom would you like to design for?

**A.** Oprah! I think a person's home should reflect their style. When I look at her, I don't think her home in Santa Barbara fits. I'd put Oprah in a home with a more streamlined, transitional style.