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Episode Title: Carmeon Hamilton: Follow The Principles of Design, But Break The Rules

Episode Description:

Regardless if you rent or own, loving your home starts with making it your own. Whether it's a simple coat of paint or a full room renovation, interior designer, and Reno My Rental star Carmeon Hamilton believes each space should be a reflection of those that live there. In this episode of The Better Buy, Carmeon shares her curb appeal deal-breaker, the power of being patient when tackling DIY projects, and why you should break the rules when it comes to interior design.

Episode Type: Full

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**Episode Transcript:**

*Music begins.*

**Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):**

Welcome to The Better Buy, a podcast from Better Homes & Gardens. I'm your host, Mélanie Berliet. Each week, we talk to experts about the highs and lows of home ownership, and share stories, advice, and practical tips you can actually put to work in your own space.

In this episode, I'm speaking with reality TV star Carmeon Hamilton, who won Design Star: Next Gen and has her own show, Reno My Rental. Carmeon is the founder of the Memphis-based design firm, Nubi Interiors, and prides herself on being able to see beauty where it has yet to exist.

*Music fades out while Carmeon's voice fades in.*

**Melanie Berliet:**

Thank you so much for joining us, Carmeon. We're very, very excited to have you on the show. We would love to start off by having you tell us about your very first home buying experience.

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Well thank you for having me. And my very first home buying experience has been my only home buying experience. I currently live in our very first purchase and it was actually, I think in reality, about a year long process. My husband and I went through the preapproval process and the particular mortgage company that we went through linked us with a real estate agent and so, from that process, it was completely straightforward, which made it really convenient. We had one point of contact with the mortgage company

who was the same point of contact that communicated with our real estate agent. And our real estate agent sent us several listings that mostly aligned with the home requirements that we had. My husband and I knew what we wanted in a home years before we started looking. We rented an apartment, a three bedroom apartment, before we started looking for a home and we knew our apartment had to be the basis for what we wanted in a home. Our apartment worked well; we just knew we wanted a yard. So the three bed-

**Melanie Berliet:**

Hm.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

...two bath was kind of the basis. We didn't think we were having anymore kids so the one extra bedroom was gonna be a guest room or an office for me. But we knew we wanted a lot of yard – well my husband did, (laughs) I didn't care. But I wanted to make sure we found a house that was older. I'm a fan of mid-century style homes and I also didn't want to purchase anything brand new because I didn't trust it. Me personally I don't trust new construction at all (laughs).

**Melanie Berliet:**

Interesting. I love that philosophy because I feel like it's counterintuitive in a way.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

It is. It is indeed for most people, but I want something that's been standing for longer than 50, 60 years because if it stood the test of time for that long it can stand another 50, 60, 70, 80 years if you take care of it. But if you're the first person to kick the tires on something you're the first person that gets to experience everything that goes wrong with it, so I did not want that whatsoever. And I also grew up in a home with a garage on the back and ever since then I've noticed everyone's garages being on the front of their homes and how much visual real estate it took up looking at the front of a house and I was like, "I don't want that at all." So, I wanted my garage either on the side or the back. And especially me being a very, as an interior designer but also just a creative in general I, I notice it for every house I drive by or visit. It's like your garage is, most of the time, at least a third of the full size (laughs) of the front elevation of your house and that's a lot of real estate for just a blank door. Or even if it's decorative, it's just a lot of visual real estate and I didn't want that. I wanted more house on the front.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Yeah, I think it's fair to say it takes center stage with most facades in the typical home. Is it true that you knew within five minutes of finding your current home that it was the home?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Yes, that is absolutely true. Yes. And our real estate agent didn't find it. My husband found it online. I actually sent the listing to our agent and said, "Please get us into this house as soon as possible."

**Melanie Berliet:**

So it was love at first floor, one might say. (laughs)

**Carneon Hamilton:**

(laughs) Um, I guess you could say that. It was that day that we got to see it, it was that afternoon. We scheduled the viewing immediately after work right before having to pick up our son and my husband got here about five minutes before I did and as I was turning the corner he texted me, "This is it." Like, he was already inside. And I was like, "Oh my god, I can't believe it." So as soon as I pulled up to the front of the house and

saw that the garage wasn't on the front I was like, "I think it's it too." (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs) That's amazing. I love that. What would you say is your favorite room in your current home and why?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Favorite room in this house is definitely our living room-slash-my office space. It is the main and core area of the house and it has vaulted ceilings with two story windows and it has the most amazing natural light. We almost never turn lights on in that room unless I'm using my office in the dark or at night. But it's incredible. Our house faces north so we don't get direct light into that room. It is always just a beautiful glow all day long. And that's where we spend most of our time as well.

**Melanie Berliet:**

That sounds beautiful. Can you tell me the origin of your tagline, "Elevate the Everyday?" I'm curious what that means to you exactly and how that tagline came to be.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

I've been a part of the social media and internet blogging space for over 10 years and the type of information that I shared was always just small things that I did to make things prettier or better or easier for me in the way I lived or cooked or designed or whatever it was. Just an example: "I hate chopping vegetables." But frozen vegetables, especially onions, which I hate chopping in general, saves me time, they taste just as great as fresh and they cost a dollar. So elevating the everyday is making things better for yourself or simplifying things to give you your time back, or taking something that is typically mundane like a cup of coffee and adding something like cardamom to it just for a little added flavor. That takes no more time in making your regular cup of coffee but it's elevated to the point that makes it that much more special, something that you can slow down in that particular moment and enjoy the life that you've curated.

**Melanie Berliet:**

I love that. You've also said that a well-designed space can change your total outlook on life. I'm wondering if you can elaborate a little bit on the relationship between our environments and our sense of wellbeing.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Yes. I started my career in the healthcare industry, designing hospitals and nursing homes and physical therapy clinics, and I realized then, the decisions that I was making for these environments impacted the patients and the people that took care of the patients in those facilities. So, certain colors evoke certain emotions and adding plants to a space can induce dopamine levels in the brain. And the prettier things are the happier we are in those spaces. Just thinking about walking into a beautifully designed restaurant for dinner or an amazing hotel for vacation, you immediately feel the difference when you're walking into these environments. And so I wanted people to understand how important that was for your home. Like as soon as you walk into your home everyday you should get that same feeling that you get walking into a boutique hotel or an amazing restaurant because those feelings should come from the places where we spend the most time. The better you feel in a particular place, the better you behave in a particular place as well, and the better you treat people in beautiful spaces.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Can you tell me where you look to for inspiration?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Oh, I am a hospitality girl. I love hotels and restaurants, especially hotel lobbies and bathrooms. You know, that's where, one the designers of those spaces have to be really creative developing these very comfortable pods that people want to sit down in and feel comfortable in and relax in, and so you get the most innovative furniture layouts or seating solutions that have to do dual duty. Or, you know, they go all out for these bathrooms because most people are only in them for, you know, five minutes or so, so you really have to wow people. And that's where some of the most creative design is found because those spaces have to appeal to so many different people and that is where I draw my inspiration from because they completely cause you to think outside the box.

**Melanie Berliet:**

So true. I was actually in a bathroom recently at a venue and they had put their restaurant or venue's watermark on the mirror in the bathroom which I thought was so smart because everyone is taking bathroom selfies these days.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Absolutely. (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

And I noticed it because I of course was taking a bathroom selfie in this beautiful space. And I was like, "Oh wow, these people are very clever." (laughs)

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Very clever. Yes, branding at its finest. (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

Yeah, for real. We spoke a little bit earlier about how you were a renter previously. Can you talk to me about the benefits and drawbacks of renting versus buying a home?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Sure. So when we were renting, we were based in Memphis, Tennessee where cost of living is pretty great compared to lots of other major cities. For the four and a half years we rented our three bed two bath apartment that was around I think 1400 square feet our rent was 800 dollars for three bedrooms and two bathrooms. (laughs) And so being able to live in a decent amount of space very affordably is what kind of led our home buying process. We knew we could afford way more than we were paying for rent but we also knew that we could find a house that was bigger than our apartment, but still comparable to the rent that we were paying. So for us the perks of renting, you know, you don't bear the responsibility of maintaining the grounds. And you have the benefit of, if something breaks you have one person to call and someone else takes care of it and you are not out of pocket for any of it. Your air conditioning goes down, your plumbing sucks, whatever it is, someone is on their way to take care of it as soon as possible. You don't have to deal with contracting out, or finding your own plumber to get something fixed, or anything like that which is a hassle. As a homeowner you're having to vet several different companies and finding the best price and is this covered under my warranty and all of these things that go into home ownership that you totally don't have to deal with as a renter. But in my home I get to make whatever decision I want for my space without clearing it with anyone involved. I can change light fixtures, I can knock down walls, I can paint, I can do whatever my heart desires without worrying about putting it back or losing a deposit or anything like that. And also I reap the benefits of the equity that grows in my home as I make these changes or as property values around me arise. Thankfully we have a fixed mortgage so I don't have to worry about the rent going up because everything else around

here... We have a new Ikea, or we have a new Costco or we just got a new highway or whatever it is that causes property values to go up. I don't have to worry about those inflated costs, that you would typically get after a year or however renewing your lease. So there's a lot of give and take.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Mm-hmm.

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

It's just according to what your values are. (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

Right. I don't think I've ever shared this story but you mentioned swapping out fixtures, and when I was in my 20s I was renting a tiny little shoebox studio apartment in Lower Manhattan for probably way too much money, but I made the mistake of deciding to upgrade the fixtures, you know, thinking, "Who would be mad at that?" So I swapped out the faucet and the door handles and maybe even the medicine cabinet and I ended up evicted. So...

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Oh, no.

**Melanie Berliet:**

So (laughs) it's not... Yeah, it was a horrible learning experience because I really improved the apartment and I spent what was a lot of money for me at the time to do those things-

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Wow.

**Melanie Berliet:**

... and then I got the notice under the door. I can't even remember how they came to learn of this. Maybe the super saw it or something. In any case, definitely not something you want to do in a rented apartment. Yeah. Being a renter can be tricky. I'm curious, Carmeon, if you have any favorite renter friendly design tips given all of the limitations?

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Yes. My favorite renter friendly design tip is watching Reno my Rental, my show for Discovery+ and HGTV. (laughs) You can get all of the design tips there.

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs)

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

But I was one of those renters that knew we weren't leaving in a year, so I actually made lots of decisions in our apartment that could have, I guess in your case gotten me evicted-

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs)

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

... or lost my deposit. But I convinced my husband, like, we paid this deposit, we're gonna be here for who knows how long. The deposit is to pay for all of the stuff that we're changing anyway so we gave it away, why are we looking to get it back, like that money's gone. It's spent. So I hung floating shelves, I painted the island of our kitchen, I put holes in the wall to hang our amazing art collection, I painted an accent wall in our walk-in closet because it just made me feel better to walk into a blue closet than a beige one. And all of those things were things that were easily repairable or I could've put them back. I did swap out light fixtures but I made sure I kept the old ones.

**Melanie Berliet:**

You were smart. (laughs)

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

I was, I was very conscious to consider (laughs) putting things back where I got them from. But changing a light fixture is absolutely my favorite way to elevate a space and change up from builder basic to something with some personality, because the vast array of lighting options out there, I mean you could swim in lighting for 20 years and still not hit the bottom of your options. So there's something that's perfect out there for everyone. So swapping out a ceiling fan or upgrading a ceiling fan to a better looking one, a more modern one, or whatever your style is— swapping out those fixtures to something that fits your personality while also holding onto the old ones so you can put it back before you go (laughs). And of course paint or even a peel and stick wallpaper. The walls in our spaces are the largest canvases we have and are the biggest way to make an impact and a change in space that you're renting. So adding a new color or a new pattern with a wallpaper, you will get that dramatic and personalized effect that you're looking for.

**Melanie Berliet:**

I walked into a space recently that had a beautiful floral wallpaper on the ceiling. And I like to remind people that ceilings are also walls.

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

They are the fifth wall, absolutely.

*Music fades in.*

**Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):**

We'll be back with more from Carmeon Hamilton after the break.

*Music fades out.*

*[Mid-Roll Break]*

*Music fades in.*

**Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):**

Welcome back to The Better Buy, a podcast from Better Homes & Gardens.

*Music fades out.*

**Melanie Berliet:**

What would you say is the best home decor project for a beginner to tackle? You are very skilled so you can do all of these things quite easily. Are there projects that beginners can really embrace?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Beginners can absolutely get their hands dirty with painting. It's very funny, I was with my husband almost 10 years exactly, like two weeks shy of 10 years, but he had never painted a room until last year and it was his room where he hosted his podcast and all these things so he wanted a new paint color and I just let him do it. But to see him struggle painting a room, I was like, "Okay, this is clearly something that needs to be the baseline for the DIY community. Let's start with painting. And this is a roller, and this is how you cut in, and this is how much paint you need to get on your roller when you start." But once you get the hang of it, the world is your oyster because painting is the number one way to transform any space whether you're renting or owning. Start with painting. And as intimidating as electrical may seem, swapping a light fixture is actually the easiest thing to do. It's easier than swapping out faucets on your sinks or anything like that. Swapping a light fixture, if you can turn the power off, you're good to go.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Very good tips. Is it true that you sort of stumbled upon interior design when you were making over your college dorm room?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Yeah. I went to college to be a physical therapist. I chose the school that I went to for their physical therapy program and actually, two years in, hated the program I had taken so many science classes, anatomy, chemistry, biology, and really overloaded my schedule with these classes and ended up losing my academic scholarship to that school. So to help pay for college I became a resident assistant and once you're an RA you get your own dorm room and it was the first time I'd had my own space and so I took decorating it very seriously. My mom helped me. I knew I wanted hot pink and zebra to be my theme because back then you went with a theme. (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs) That's so perfect.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Hot pink and zebra was my theme. And I mean, once you nail down your thing, like, you're like a hound on a hunt. Everything hot pink and zebra I bought. I went to the fabric store and bought things and my mom had custom curtains made for me. We customized my comforter set that we found at probably Target or K-Mart or somewhere. Who knows? We added zebra borders to my hot pink comforter, and my mom made signs for me. And all of these small touches, but I also arranged the room in a way that felt like a small little studio apartment in New York. I'm like, "Okay, this has to be my bedroom, my living room, my office, my dining room, everything. How do I make this room work?" And once I was done, a few of the other RAs walked in and they were like, "How did you even think of this? And where did you get this stuff from?" And one of my friends at the time walked in, she was like, "Oh my god. You really need to figure out what you're doing with your life because you should check out the interior design department." And I was like, "What is that?" And she said, "We have an interior design department and you really need to go talk to the dean about it." And I made an appointment with the dean of the department the next day and instantly changed my major, like within ten minutes. I was like, "Oh, okay." So yes that is what happened. I changed my major from physical therapy to interior design, thanks to my hot pink and zebra dorm room. (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

I love that. And that seems like the perfect segue to speak about something you spoke to in the finale of Design Start: Next Gen, the competition show you won. You spoke a lot about the importance of creating spaces that really reflect your personality. So I'm wondering if you can speak a bit more about your approach towards authenticity and why it matters so much.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Yes, there's nothing more important than the environments that we dwell in and one of the main ways that I move as a designer, especially working with clients, I want to get to know the people that will be in those spaces. I can design a pretty space with my eyes closed with absolutely no other help but a pretty space does not connect with the people that have to be in them if there's nothing that reflects those people in that space. So I want to know where are your favorite places to travel, what do you like to do in your downtime, are you a reader or a movie watcher, are you an outdoorsy person. Like what are the things that make you you? And then finding ways to translate that into tangible items in a space, or colors in a space, or the way a room is arranged. Those things, as soon as those people walk into that room they instantly feel connected even if it's a brand new space. They instantly feel connected because they see themselves in that space and that is one of the main ways where you should be able to download and decompress at the end of the day. And a space that reflects you should be your sanctuary and that's why it's incredibly important to make sure those things that are personally important to you or that reflect who you are as a person or the things that really get you going as a human existing in the world— having those things in display instantly connects you to that space and it feels like home.

**Melanie Berliet:**

That's very beautifully said. You were also praised throughout the show for breaking design rules, so I'm wondering, Carneon, if you can tell us some of your favorite design rules to break.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

I wish I could 'cause I'd break all of them.

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs)

**Carneon Hamilton:**

I don't know what the rules are anymore. (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs)

**Carneon Hamilton:**

The only air quote rules I follow are the principles of design because I don't believe in rules. If you can nail function and scale in a space, everything else is carte blanche. You do whatever you want. You want vertical shiplap versus horizontal? Go for it. If you don't want shiplap, kudos to you because I can't stand it.

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs)

**Carneon Hamilton:**

I believe in doing what makes you feel good. You want yellow to go with green, there are yellows and greens



that can coordinate. There's nothing anywhere that says that any particular thing has to go with any other particular thing. If you can nail the principles of design you can complete any beautiful space.

**Melanie Berliet:**

I love that. I remember realizing that I could wear navy blue with black sometimes.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Yes. I actually designed a bar with navy blue walls and black trim.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Amazing.

**Carneon Hamilton:**

And it looks impeccable. Yes, it is gorgeous.

**Melanie Berliet:**

And it was just for me-

**Carneon Hamilton:**

(laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

... and you didn't even know it. (laughs)

**Carneon Hamilton:**

It absolutely was. I had to convince my client of it and apparently lots of other people, but yes blue and black make a great pairing.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Right? I bet it's a stunning space. I'd love to see it. Can you tell me what some of your favorite money saving home decor tips are?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Well my first one is, one, going to YouTube university and trying things and making things yourself. If there's a planter that you're needing, maybe you find a very inexpensive one at a big box store or you find a vintage one in the shape that you like, but you then figure out or research how to change the finish on it. You can spray paint it. You can now plaster things, or rub things with spray, or spray them with the cement texture. There's a way to get those expensive looks for less; you just have to be willing to DIY it! Number two in inexpensive decor: buying vintage or pre-loved. And now you can go outside (laughs) and shop vintage places in your local areas but thank goodness someone somewhere decided we can sell vintage online. Thankfully there's tons of websites out there, reputable websites where you can find vintage items or pre-loved items at great prices before you go and pay for them brand new. Also vintage items just add that much more personality to a space in my opinion. I absolutely incorporate something vintage in every space I design because all of us need a little nod to the past every now and then to help us move forward. That's just me and my philosophies. And lastly, you know, finding inspo in the things in the places we love to be and incorporating those elements into the spaces that we live in. Incorporating those things that you love outside in the world into your home, is a great way to, to elevate your space and typically inexpensively.

**Melanie Berliet:**

And on the other side of the spectrum, is there anything that's always worth splurging on?

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Lighting is always worth the splurge and rugs are always worth the splurge. Great quality rugs are. And your main staple pieces in each room. So for a bedroom your bed, for your living room your sofa or sectional, for your dining room your dining chairs— not always the table, it's the chairs. The chairs get touched the most often, splurge on the chair. Splurge on the things that you touch all the time because if you touch them more than once a day, if it's not great quality you're gonna be replacing it in about a year so splurge on the high touch items.

**Melanie Berliet:**

That makes sense. What is your favorite room to decorate in a house and why?

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

I love bathrooms. That is where you can typically take the most risk. It's a bunch of hard surfaces and most people spend no more than 30 minutes in a bathroom, that's for your shower, doing your hair, whatever it is, but it's one of the rooms we visit the most often but for the least amount of time. So that's where you go for that high punch of inspiration, or just something outside of the box. Also hallways have this same effect, too. You're never in them longer than a few seconds but they are where you can have the most fun, and mixing materials and incorporating color. So bathrooms are usually my favorite.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Interesting. I like that answer. If you could give one piece of advice to new homeowners what would it be?

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Hm. This may be a little taboo but I 100 percent believe in living in your space before making major changes to it. I've been in our home six years now and we just went through our first major renovation a year ago and it was our primary bathroom. But I knew after living in it for five years that I didn't need it to be bigger— I just needed it to function better and be prettier. So I knew we didn't have to knock down any walls after living in it, but when we first saw the house I was like, "Oh, we can knock this wall down, we don't need this closet, blah, blah, blah." And everything has changed, now I do need that closet that's behind it. And just having a more beautiful bathroom and not a bigger bathroom has been amazing for my psyche and just getting ready everyday. But living in your home for a while before making those major decisions is key. You may be saving a lot of money by waiting a little bit. Give it some time. Truly figure out how you function in your space before you start spending major bucks on renovations.

**Melanie Berliet:**

A little patience can go a long way. I think that's very true.

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Absolutely.

**Melanie Berliet:**

I would love to wrap things up with a few quick fire questions, Carmeon.

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Fun.

**Melanie Berliet:**

What does home mean to you in a single word?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Security.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Spacious lawn or large basement?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Ooh. Large basement.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Super high ceilings or lots of natural light?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Natural light all the way (laughs).

**Melanie Berliet:**

Top sheet or just the duvet?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Top sheet.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Neighbors or privacy?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Neighbors.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Bowls or plates?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Oh my god, bowls. (laughs)

**Melanie Berliet:**

(laughs) Fully renovated or fixer-upper?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Fixer-upper.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Pom-poms or tassels?

**Carneon Hamilton:**

Tassels.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Great. Well thank you so much for joining us. It's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you today, Carmeon.

**Carmeon Hamilton:**

Thank you so much for having me. This was so much fun.

**Melanie Berliet:**

Oh, good. I'm glad you enjoyed it too.

*Music fades in.*

**Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):**

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