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DESIGN DIARY

INTERNATIONAL

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STILL WILD

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DESIGN DIARY
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FOUNDER'S NOTE

What does the world of design have to say right now that deserves your attention? That is the question every issue of "Design Diary International" starts with.

Issue 5 tackles this question more specifically than any issue we've put together before. Richard Hutten is one of the leading figures in contemporary design, and he talks openly about thirty years of Dutch design, the importance of play, and why the most interesting word he has come across recently is "brainrot." Tom Fereday, Australia's most thoughtful product designer, discusses what it means to create objects not just for the moment of first interaction but for the decade that follows. Great design is not just for the eyes but for the nervous system. Every line, material, and color in a space is an emotional instruction, often read before conscious thought, says Alena Bulataya, whose studio is on five continents.

In this issue's Blueprint section, five projects on four continents: a woodsy peninsula above a lake in Ontario; a wooded bluff overlooking Puget Sound; the salt flats of Goa and the vivid interiors of São Paulo; and a meadow in Denmark where a creative studio nestled among coastal pines runs its fountains without a single electric motor. Each project is an attempt to respond to the question, "What does it mean to build something that belongs to its site?"

In our Material Intelligence essay, we look at the stone that has defined Milan for 2,000 years, Ceppo di Grè, and what we lose when it is replaced by porcelain tiles. Our Grammar of Architecture examines the floor, the one surface that the body always engages but is usually the last thing architects consider. Our Heritage and Craft essay travels to Room 70 of the British Museum, home to the Portland Vase since 1810, to ask what it means that a piece of glass created between the first century BC and the first century AD remains the benchmark for glassmakers worldwide.

We speak to what the industry has been thinking for years.

This is the spirit of "Design Diary International". We don't want to chase fads or fawn over the familiar but rather to thoughtfully explore work that deserves to be better known.

This is our most ruminative issue yet. We hope you can feel this on every page.

(Founder—Design Diary International)

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The Object That Glass Has Never Surpassed

DESIGN DIARY

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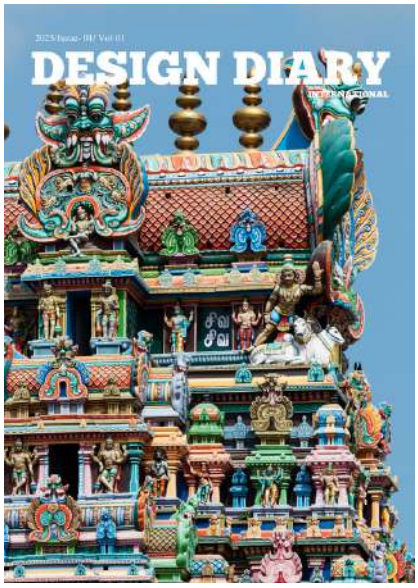
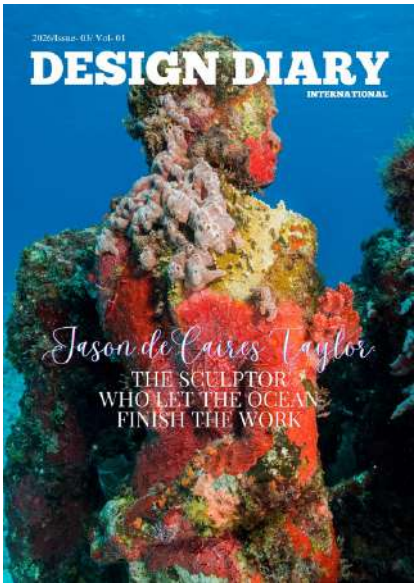




Cattelan Italia's new Murphy sofa, designed by Maurizio Manzoni, arrives as a study in deliberate formlessness. Its soft, irregular volumes reference the organic logic of wind-shaped dunes rather than the geometric certainty of conventional upholstery, and the result is a piece that occupies a room without asserting itself over it. The defining feature is a fully repositionable memory foam backrest that shifts the sofa between individual and convivial configurations without any fixed structure dictating the arrangement. Double-sided and vis-à-vis settings are both possible, making Murphy as relevant to contract and hospitality spaces as to residential ones. A feather-blend scatter cushion completes the composition.

cattelanitalia.com

INTERIOR DESIGNER

Alena Bulataya

SPACE IS NEVER NEUTRAL

On designing for the nervous system, the psychology of the room, and why great design speaks where words cannot reach

When Alena Bulataya walks into a space for the first time, she does not look at the style. She observes how the space behaves. Circulation, balance, light distribution, and moments of tension reveal themselves immediately, before the brief has been read or the client has spoken. Most people cannot explain why they feel good in a particular space, she says, but their body knows. Good design speaks to the eyes. Great design speaks to the nervous system. This is the principle she pursues, and one she actively passes on to every member of her team at AB Design Buro.

Bulataya is the founder and creative director of an international studio whose work spans private villas, restaurants, beauty clinics, spas, offices, and apartments across Belarus, the UAE, Qatar, the United States, and Europe. The range is not accidental. Working across typologies removes hierarchy, she says. A private villa, a restaurant, and a clinic are not fundamentally different—they are all environments that influence behaviour, perception, and emotional state. What changes is the intensity and rhythm of that interaction. The discipline she has built her practice around is the same across all of them: understanding what a space needs to do to the person inside it, and then making that happen without the person ever knowing it is being done to them.


Good design speaks to the eyes.
Great design speaks to the nervous system.

She studied at the National Academy of Fine Arts and then continued in Milan, and she is clear about what each gave her that the other could not. The academy trained discipline, a precise understanding of proportion, balance, and composition, and developed a way of seeing where you instinctively recognize when something is resolved and when it is not. Milan introduced context and, with it, an understanding that design is inseparable from culture, industry, and lifestyle and that form without relevance to the world it inhabits is simply form. One gave her a rigorous visual language. The other taught her that design is always part of a larger system, economic, cultural, and human, and that a designer who does not understand that system is only ever working on the surface of it.

Creation, for Bulataya, was never inherited. She did not grow up surrounded by artists or designers, and there was no moment in her childhood that pointed inevitably toward the career she built. What she had instead was awareness, an early understanding of how strongly the environments and contexts you place yourself in shape the way you think and see. She made conscious decisions about which cities, cultures, and creative communities to move through, treating contrast itself as a form of education. No one is tied to a single place, she says. The world is too diverse to remain within one perspective. For her, inspiration comes from contrast, from moving between cultures, rhythms, and ways of living. It is within these differences that depth is formed.

The studio she opened more than fifteen years ago did not begin as a fixed structure. There is a moment, she says, when working within someone else's framework begins to limit the way you think. For her it was not about independence but about authorship. As the demand for her work grew, it became clear that a different level of control was needed over concept, process, and execution. The team evolved organically through shared vision and increasing project scale, with flexible teams emerging across different cities as the work expanded. Today the studio operates simultaneously across multiple cities, countries, and continents while maintaining a consistent approach.

When the structure is precise, the visual outcome is no longer a matter of choice — it becomes inevitable.

Consistency at that scale, she says, is not achieved through control at the end. It is embedded at the level of thinking. Spatial logic, hierarchy, and proportion are established early and guide every subsequent decision. In her practice, elegance and functionality are rarely in tension because they are rarely treated as separate concerns. Elegance is clarity, the absence of excess. Functionality is logic, the absence of friction. When the structure is precise, the visual outcome is no longer a matter of choice. It becomes inevitable.

One of her hospitality projects was built around a challenge that had nothing to do with visual identity. The primary question was time: how the same space transitions from a calm morning atmosphere into a dense, high-energy evening environment without physical transformation. This required designing not objects but scenarios. A successful restaurant, she says, is not defined by a single atmosphere. It is built through layers of light, rhythm, density, and reflection. The task is not only to accommodate different moods but also to actively shape them, to guide emotional experience almost like a conductor directing an orchestra. A client later described the completed space as feeling like an exhale. Moments like these confirm that design operates beyond the visual. It affects how people feel before they can articulate it.

The difference between a spa and a restaurant, in her formulation, is not stylistic. It is perceptual. A spa slows time. A restaurant accelerates it. In a spa, stimuli are reduced. In a restaurant, they are orchestrated. In recent projects she has begun integrating what she calls soft zones, areas without visual noise, direct light, or pressure. In one wellness project, combining matte travertine, diffused light, water sound, and tactile materials led a client to say this space feels like an exhale. Good design, she says, is almost invisible. Bad design constantly interferes.

A spa slows time. A restaurant accelerates it.

Dubai and Qatar want to be the most in architecture, technology, innovation, and scale. She has worked extensively across both markets and understands exactly what this ambition requires from a designer: not just solutions, but a strong and confident perspective. Clients there want to see the outcome before it exists. Decisions are fast, expectations are high, and the demand for immediate clarity is constant. New York asks something entirely different: spatial constraints that demand precision where every square foot is critical and complexity embedded within limitation rather than expressed through scale. The core process across all of these markets remains unchanged, she says. What changes are the parameters: climate, cultural patterns, materials, and light. Design is not adapted emotionally. It is calibrated.

Luxury is not cost. It is alignment with one's own perception.

The material that has surprised her most in her practice is stone. It carries a sense of permanence and weight, yet in the right composition it can feel almost fluid, particularly through light and scale. Its perception shifts dramatically through texture, finish, and surface treatment, from raw and monolithic to refined and tactile. Its potential becomes especially evident through unconventional geometry, where it moves beyond its expected rigidity and becomes part of a more expressive, sculptural language, no longer simply applied but fully controlled and integrated into the formation of each piece.

Clients, she says, almost always begin with images rather than with how they want to feel and live in a space. It is understandable, because visuals are easier to communicate than feelings. But design begins with a projected sense of self, with how a person envisions their future experience. Only then does the visual language become precise. The space that truly works is the one that reflects who the client is, not what they saw on a screen.

On luxury, she is direct. Luxury is not a cost; it is an alignment with one's own perception. A well-designed space does not require explanation. It simply works on a sensory and emotional level. The underlying principle of her work across fifteen years has been three words she does not treat as a slogan but as a way of thinking: see more, do more, and be more. Seeing deeper, creating with intention, living in a space that truly reflects who you are. Luxury today, she says, is not about meeting expectations. It is about being authentic and shaping your environment accordingly.

The typology she thinks about most and has never been given is large-scale public or cultural spaces, particularly in cities like New York and Miami. Not because of scale. Because of impact, the ability to shape collective experience. Every environment she designs, from a private apartment to a restaurant accommodating changing light and crowds, reflects the conviction that space guides behavior, often unconsciously. A public cultural space is simply that conviction operating at its largest possible scale. It is, she says, where design becomes something closer to responsibility.

www.bulataya.com

UNDERFOOT

Consider what people do when they want to change a room. They repaint the walls or reupholster the furniture. They replace the light fittings, rehang the curtains, bring in new objects, and move things around. They do almost everything except change the floor, and they do not change the floor not because it is unimportant but because changing it is an act of such consequence and such commitment that most people will live with a floor they do not love for decades rather than face the disruption of replacing it. The floor is the most permanent decision in any interior, which means it is also the most revealing one. It is the surface that stays when everything else has moved on, that outlasts the fashions and the repainting and the furniture changes that accumulate above it across the life of a building. In old houses, the floor carries the memory of every life that has been lived in the rooms above it, in the paths worn smooth between door and fireplace, in the threshold stone polished by generations of hands and feet, and in the slight hollows that form over centuries at the places where people have stood and turned and stood again. No other surface in a building accumulates time this way. The floor is where the building keeps its history, and it is the surface through which that history is most directly communicated to the body of the person standing in the room, whether they are aware of it or not.

The floor is the only surface in architecture that the body cannot ignore. Everything else can be looked away from. The floor is always there, underfoot, and what it is made of, how it is laid, and what it carries in its pattern and its material and its age shape the experience of a space in ways that most people feel without ever being able to name.

This is not a minor observation about interior decoration. It is a description of one of the most consequential and least examined relationships in the history of architecture, the relationship between the surface beneath a person's feet and the meaning of the space they are standing in. Every great architectural tradition in human history has understood this relationship and worked with it deliberately, treating the floor not as a finishing material applied after the real design decisions have been made but as one of the primary surfaces through which a building communicates its intentions about order, hierarchy, beauty, and the nature of the world. The contemporary design industry's treatment of flooring as a specification decision made late in the process, chosen from a catalogue after the plan has been resolved and the budget has been reduced, represents a narrowing of architectural intelligence that would have been entirely incomprehensible to the people who laid the floors of the Alhambra, the Pantheon, the great Ottoman mosques, or the brick floors of the farmhouses of Tuscany and the Netherlands that are still, centuries after they were laid, among the most beautiful surfaces that domestic architecture has ever produced.

The ancient world left behind floors that make the contemporary design conversation about materiality look timid by comparison. In the House of the Faun in Pompeii, a mosaic floor assembled from nearly one and a half million individual tesserae of glass and stone depicts the Battle of Issus, in which Alexander the Great defeats Darius III of Persia, with a level of pictorial ambition and technical refinement that would be remarkable as a panel painting and is extraordinary as a floor. The foreshortening of the dying horse on the left side of the composition alone represents a degree of pictorial sophistication that European painting would not recover for the better part of a thousand years. But what matters here is not the quality of the image, which is genuinely exceptional, so much as the decision to put it on the floor, to make a surface that people walked across, that servants swept, and guests stood on at dinner parties, the occasion for one of the most ambitious works of pictorial art in the Roman world. The Romans who commissioned and inhabited that floor understood something that the contemporary industry has largely lost, which is that the floor is not the background to the room. It is the room's first statement, and everything that happens above it either confirms or contradicts what it has already said.

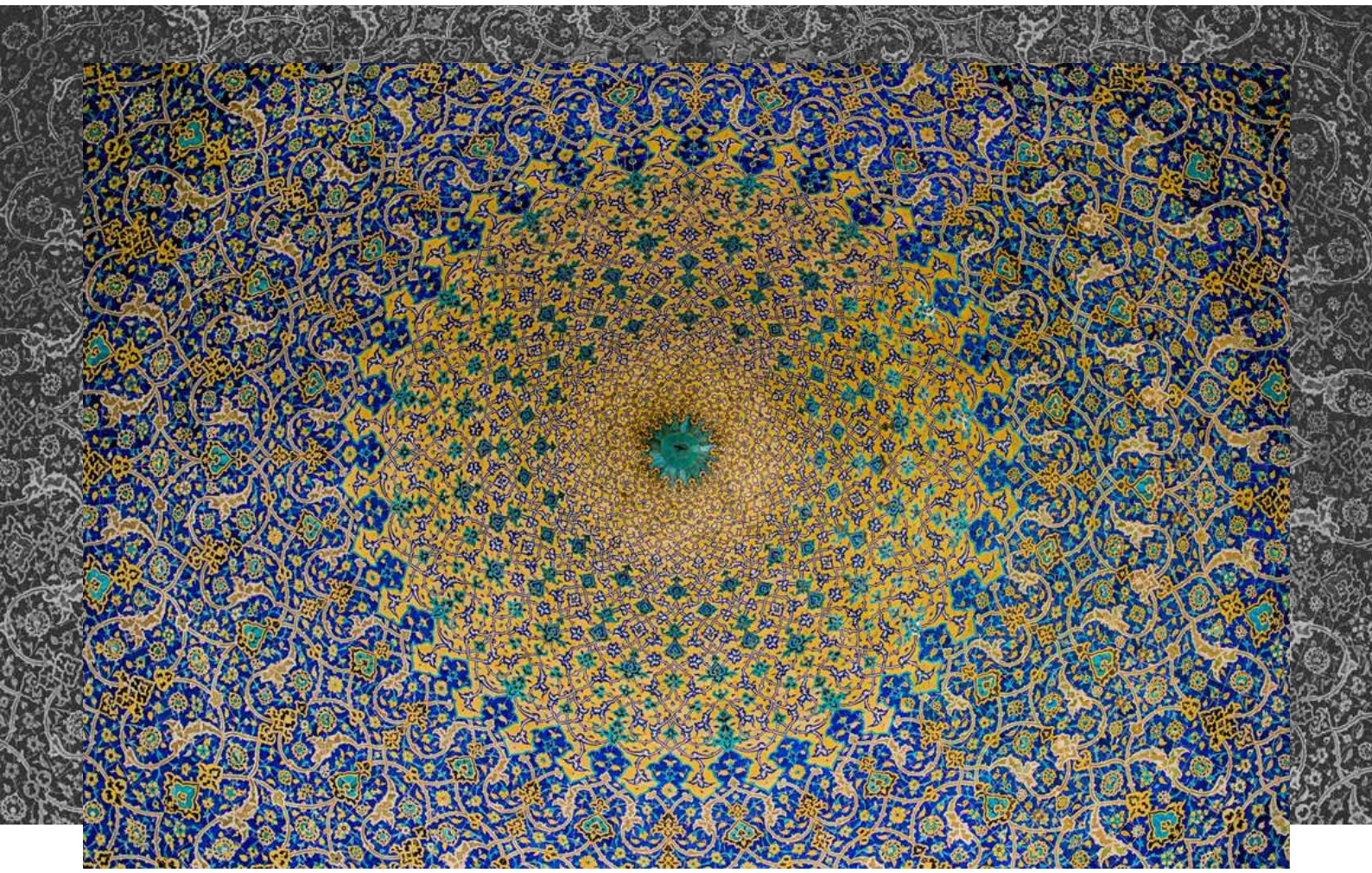
The geometric mosaic floors found throughout Pompeii and across the Roman world more broadly were not decorative in the contemporary sense of the word, which implies something added to a surface for visual interest after its functional purposes have been satisfied. They were communicative in a precise and deliberate way, conveying information about the values, the social position, the cultural references, and the cosmological understanding of the people who commissioned them. A floor decorated with marine creatures in a Roman dining room was a statement about the abundance of the sea and the wealth of the household that could command it. A geometric pattern at the threshold of a room was a boundary marker, a signal that the person crossing it was entering a space governed by a different set of social rules. The Romans used their floors the way contemporary architects use their facades, as the surface most immediately legible to anyone approaching or entering a space, and they devoted to them a corresponding level of design intelligence and material investment. The Pantheon, whose floor of alternating circles and squares in giallo antico, porphyry, and granite has been in place since the second century, is a building that most visitors look up at the moment they enter, drawn by the oculus and the famous coffered dome above them. The floor is equally considered, equally specific in its geometry, and equally essential to the experience of the space, its pattern of warm yellows and deep purples and the grey-green of the granite creating a surface that holds the enormous room together from below with the same authority that the dome holds it from above.

The Islamic architectural tradition carried the design intelligence of the floor to a level of geometric complexity and philosophical ambition that has never been surpassed in the history of any building culture. The tile work floors of the Alhambra in Granada, of the great mosques of Isfahan, and of the Ottoman imperial mosques of Istanbul are not patterns in any decorative sense. They are arguments about the nature of the infinite, encoded in the mathematical logic of geometric repetition and worked out in ceramic and stone with a precision that required a level of mathematical understanding that European architecture would not fully develop for several more centuries. Islamic art's prohibition on figurative representation directed the creative energy of its architectural tradition toward geometry, and the floor became one of the primary surfaces on which that geometry was pursued in its most complex and rigorous forms. A craftsman in fourteenth-century Granada working on the tile work of the Alhambra was not a decorator in any diminished sense of the word. He was working within a tradition that understood geometry as a form of theology that saw in the infinite extension of a repeating pattern an image of divine order that human reason could approach but never fully comprehend. The floors of the Alhambra encode this understanding in every tile and every joint, and walking across them, which visitors still do today, produces a different quality of spatial experience than looking at any other surface in the building, because the geometry is beneath the feet rather than before the eyes, and the body's relationship to it is physical and continuous rather than visual and intermittent.

In Japan, the relationship between the floor and the life lived above it is more explicit and more socially codified than in any other architectural tradition, and it has produced one of the most distinctive and most consequential floor materials in the history of building. The tatami mat, made from a core of rice straw covered with woven rush grass, has been the defining floor surface of Japanese domestic and ceremonial architecture for over a thousand years, and its influence on the spatial character of Japanese interiors extends far beyond the material itself. Tatami rooms are measured in mats, making the floor not just a surface but the room's measuring unit and the organizing principle of the building's spatial system. The floor determines the plan, and the plan determines everything. The removal of shoes before entering a tatami room is not a practical measure for keeping the surface clean, though it serves that purpose as well. It is a ritual acknowledgement of the boundary between the outside world and the interior space, a gesture of respect for the floor and for the life that takes place above it, an understanding that the surface underfoot is not neutral but charged with meaning and deserving of deliberate attention.

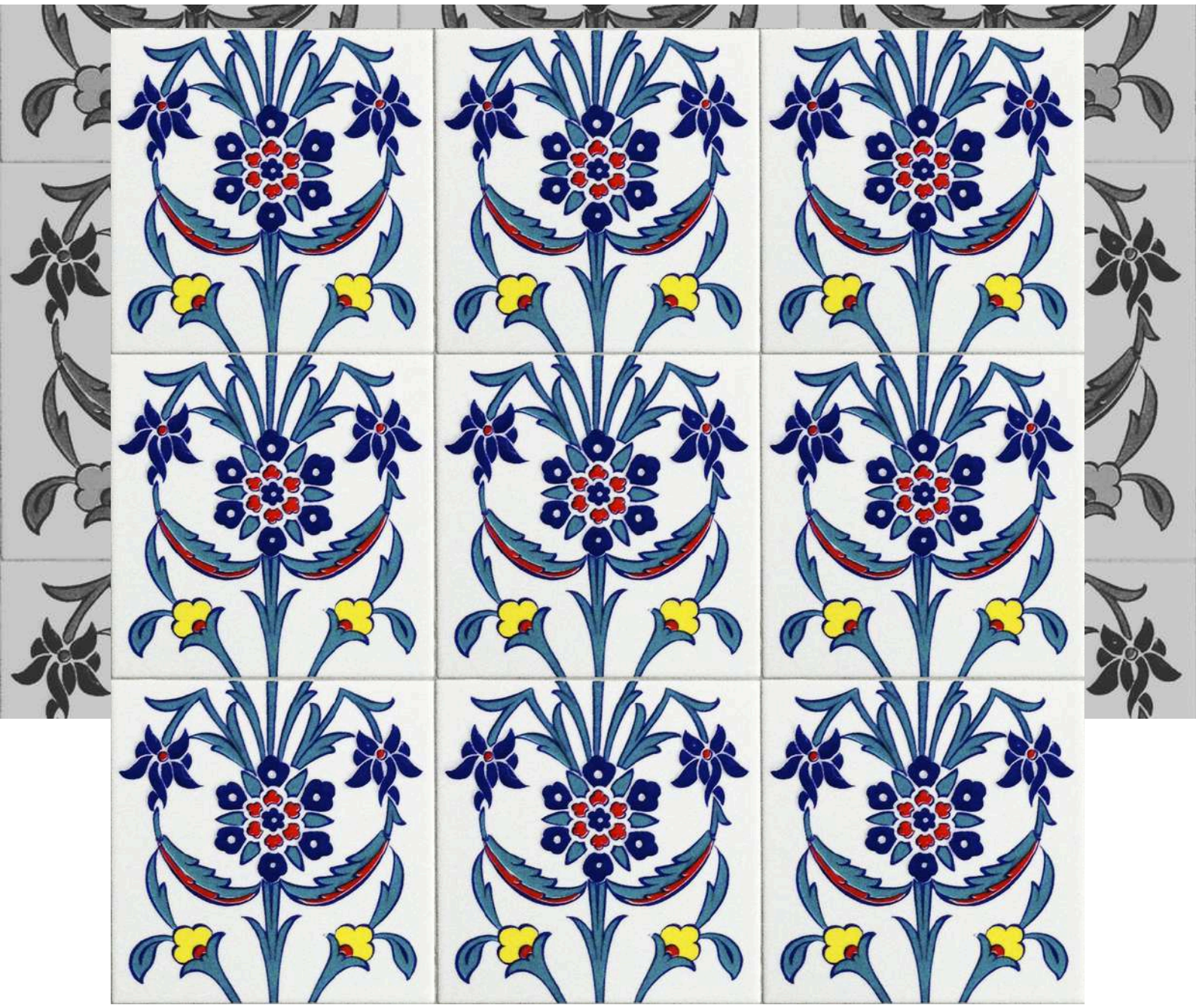
The floor traditions of Europe's vernacular architecture are less philosophically codified than those of the great formal traditions but no less intelligent in their use of material and pattern, and they have produced surfaces of extraordinary quality and enduring influence. The brick floors of Tuscany and the Netherlands, laid in herringbone patterns across farmhouses and civic buildings that have been in continuous use for four and five centuries, are among the most beautiful surfaces that domestic architecture has produced anywhere in the world. They are beautiful not because of any particular design ambition but because of the qualities of the material itself, the warm terracotta tones of handmade brick, the irregularities of surface and color that give each floor its individual character, and the way the herringbone pattern creates a directional energy that moves with you through a room rather than stopping the eye in any one place. These floors age magnificently. The high points of the pattern wear down slightly under centuries of foot traffic, producing a surface that records the history of the life lived above it in the most direct possible way, in the paths worn smooth between door and fireplace, between table and threshold, and between the places where people have stood and moved and lived for generations. No manufactured floor covering can do this. It is a quality available only to materials that are genuinely what they appear to be and that have been given the time to become fully themselves.

Carlo Scarpa's use of brick flooring in several of his most important projects, most notably in the ground floor rooms of the Querini Stampalia Foundation in Venice, which he renovated in the early 1960s, represents perhaps the most instructive modern example of what a floor can do when it is treated as a primary design element rather than a finishing material. Scarpa raised the floor of the Querini Stampalia slightly above the level of the surrounding canal, using a system of stepped brick platforms that acknowledge the presence of the water outside while protecting the interior from flooding, and the floor he designed for that space is a composition of extraordinary refinement, a pattern of brick and Istrian stone that creates a dialogue between the local vernacular material and the classical building tradition of Venice, between the practical need to manage the relationship between the building and its watery site and the spatial and aesthetic ambitions that any serious architect brings to the design of a room. The floor resolves all of these considerations simultaneously, and it does so in a way that is immediately and continuously present to anyone who moves through the space, not as an object of conscious attention but as the ground condition of the entire experience.



The most overlooked floor tradition in the contemporary design conversation, and perhaps the one with the most to offer a profession currently searching for ways to connect the built environment to the natural and cultural world, is the tradition of the intarsia floor, the use of contrasting stone inlays to create patterns and images that carry specific iconographic meaning. The intarsia floors of the great Italian cathedrals, most spectacularly the Cathedral of Siena, whose floor of fifty-six marble panels depicting scenes from the Old Testament, the Sibyls, and the history of the church was laid over a period of nearly two centuries, from 1369 to 1547, with Pinturicchio and Beccafumi among the artists who contributed to it, are among the most ambitious works of decorative art produced by any civilization, and they are floors. They are covered with wooden boards for most of the year to protect them from the foot traffic of the tourists who visit the cathedral daily, which means that one of the most extraordinary floors in the world is, for practical reasons, a surface that almost nobody walks across, and the irony of this situation captures something important about the relationship between the contemporary world and the tradition it has inherited. We protect the floor by preventing people from experiencing it as a floor, which is to say by removing from it the one quality that makes it specifically and irreplaceably what it is.

The contemporary luxury design market's current interest in natural stone floors, in the travertine and limestone and marble and the handmade brick and the terrazzo that have been appearing with increasing frequency in high-end residential and hospitality projects across Europe and North America and increasingly in India and the Middle East, reflects an intuition about the relationship between material and experience that the tradition from the Roman mosaic to the Querini Stampalia brick floor has always understood. Natural stone floors carry the weight of the geological world beneath a space, and the body registers that weight even when the mind does not consciously notice it. Walking across a floor of genuine travertine is a different physical experience from walking across a porcelain tile printed to resemble it, not because the eye can necessarily tell the difference but because the body can in the thermal mass of the surface, in the acoustic quality of the footfall, and in the slight variations of texture and color that remind the body continuously that it is in contact with something formed by natural processes rather than manufactured to simulate them. The floor is the surface through which the building speaks most directly to the body, and it speaks most clearly when it is made of materials that have their own genuine character rather than borrowed character.



The floor will always be there, underfoot, whether the architect has thought about it seriously or not. The difference between a floor that has been considered and one that has merely been specified is the difference between a space that works on the body from below as well as from every other direction, that holds the experience of a room together from its foundation, and a space that leaves the body in contact with a surface that has nothing to say. Every tradition that has built seriously has understood this. The Pompeian mosaic maker, the Islamic geometric tile worker, the Japanese tatami craftsman, the Tuscan bricklayer, and Scarpa working out his brick and stone patterns for the Querini Stampalia: all of them were designing from the ground up, in the most literal sense. The floor is the most permanent decision in any interior. It is worth treating it as such.

Tom Fereday

PIECES THAT GROW ON YOU

Tom Fereday on slowness, honesty, and designing for the life of an object rather than the moment of its making

Before Tom Fereday knew what design was, he knew what a well-made thing felt like. He grew up between Sydney and London in a house shaped by his father's trade in antique rugs and textiles and his mother's work as a ceramicist, with both grandparents being artists. As a result of that particular upbringing, he spent his childhood among objects that had already proven themselves across time. Not new or fashionable things, but things that had earned their place by surviving long enough to matter. That understanding settled into him early and has not left.

Sculpture at the Wimbledon School of Art came first, then a return to Australia for an honors degree in industrial design at the University of Technology Sydney, a shift that suited him precisely because it traded the contemplated object for the lived-with one. The studio followed in 2012, and what has accumulated since is a body of work in furniture, lighting, and objects that is functional in its purpose, serious in its material intelligence, and quiet enough in its presence to still feel right a decade after arriving in a room.

Commissions for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Powerhouse Museum, Louis Vuitton, Herman Miller, Alessi, and Stellarworks sit alongside a new studio and gallery opened earlier this year in Camperdown, Sydney, part working space and part archive, holding ten years of the practice's output under one roof. Opening it, Fereday says, was about digging his toes in, a commitment to retaining a physical presence in a city where rising costs are pushing creative studios out.

When Design Diary International's Alisha M spoke with him over email, the conversation turned quickly to the thing that defines his practice more than any single commission: the way he thinks before he makes.

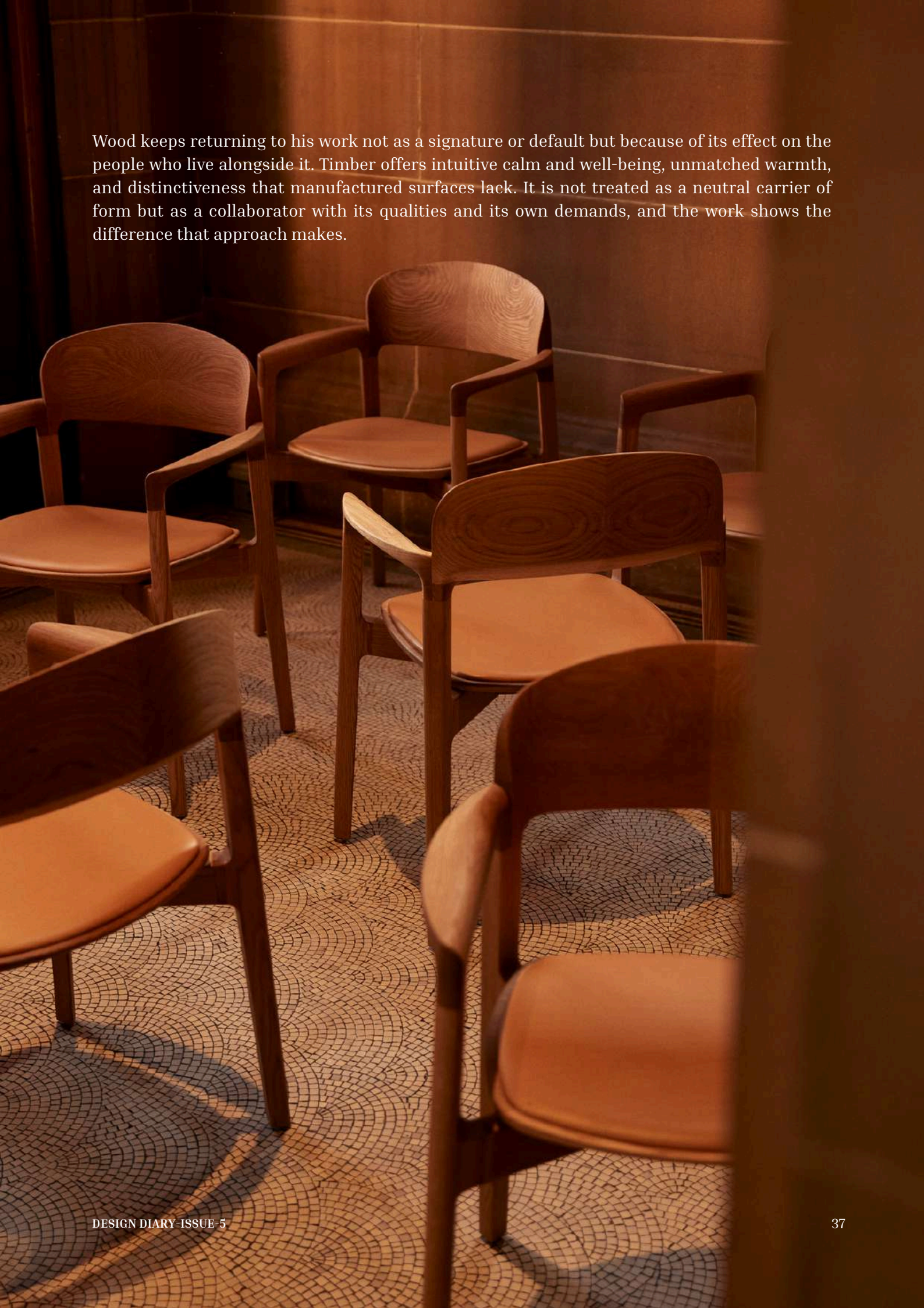
Just allowing time to think about the problem and dreaming of the most elegant solutions.

He used to move quickly. Sketches arrived early, models soon after, and ideas tested in physical form as they came. Over time, something shifted. Sitting with a problem, letting it cycle through the mind without reaching for a pencil, produced better work than the faster process had. Not because slowness is inherently better but because the discipline of waiting produces a different quality of resolution, one where the answer that eventually arrives has already been tested against everything the design brain knows and found to be the most honest response to the problem. He calls it dreaming of the most elegant solutions, and the results of that dreaming are pieces that feel complete in a way that designed objects often do not, as though the decision that produced each one could not have gone any other way.

The goal, as he describes it, is to make pieces that grow on you over time. He aims to create pieces that gradually reveal their qualities over time, quietly inhabiting a room instead of simply performing well at first encounter. Longevity is not a material specification or a marketing promise in his practice. It is the organizing principle of the entire enterprise, the question to which every other design process question is subordinate. The person who will still own this thing in twenty years and understand by then why it was made the way it was—that is who Fereday is designing for.

The tension and pushback between design and production are critical for creating unique, high-quality work.

Wood keeps returning to his work not as a signature or default but because of its effect on the people who live alongside it. Timber offers intuitive calm and well-being, unmatched warmth, and distinctiveness that manufactured surfaces lack. It is not treated as a neutral carrier of form but as a collaborator with its qualities and its own demands, and the work shows the difference that approach makes.



The construction of his objects is never hidden. A discipline developed early in the practice of designing from every angle, from the inside out, means every detail, including the ones that will never be looked at directly, is as resolved as the details that present themselves immediately. This is neither minimalism nor puritanism. This position emphasizes that a manufactured object must honestly reflect its construction for a fulfilling ownership experience, regardless of its immediate appearance.

The Powerhouse Museum's Sibling Chair, made in collaboration with his brother, also a designer, carries this quality in full. The seating for the Art Gallery of New South Wales members' lounge must serve two purposes: it should both disappear in one sense and remain present in another. It must be comfortable enough for a schoolchild who races up and sits down on the first morning they are installed, yet also be considered appropriate for the institution that commissioned them.

Collaboration with manufacturers and craftspeople is spoken about with the kind of specificity that comes from having built a practice around it rather than having arrived at it as a late conclusion. The artisans who have spent decades inside one specialized field carry knowledge that cannot be transferred through a brief or approximated from outside, and the encounter between that knowledge and the designer's intentions produces something that neither party would have reached alone. The tension between design and production is not a problem to be managed but the condition that makes quality possible.

Owning and enjoying objects for life, paying respect to the incredible natural materials that embody them.

I am currently obsessed with cast glass. The nuance and beauty of this material are so elegant.

His relationship with Canberra Glassworks, ongoing since 2018, has recently deepened into what he describes as an obsession with cast glass. The nuance and beauty of cast glass, particularly how it interacts with Australian natural light, has sparked an early exploration of its possibilities. The same level of attention once given to timber is now applied to cast glass, emphasizing its behavior over time, in light, and through use.

Perspective and opinions, Fereday says, continue to change year on year as experience accumulates. Seeing pieces over longer periods of time gives a different interpretation. The commitment to constant improvement and refinement, he hopes, will never change. For a designer whose work is built entirely around the idea that the best things reveal themselves slowly, such ongoing restlessness is not uncertainty. It is the only honest way to keep making work that deserves the patience it asks of the people who live with it.

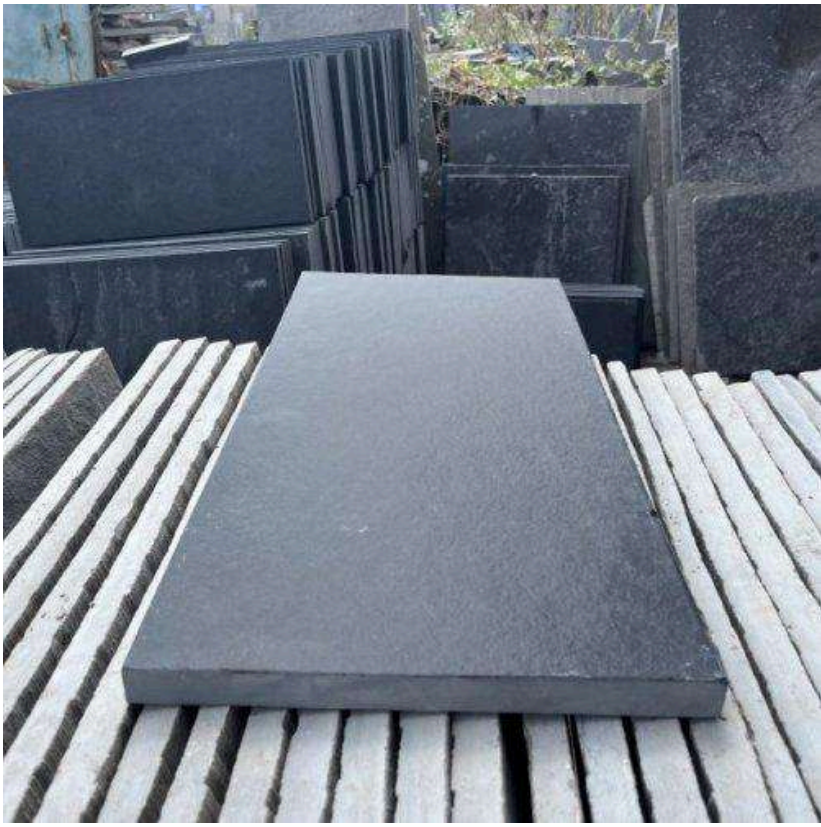
CEPPO DI GRÈ

and the

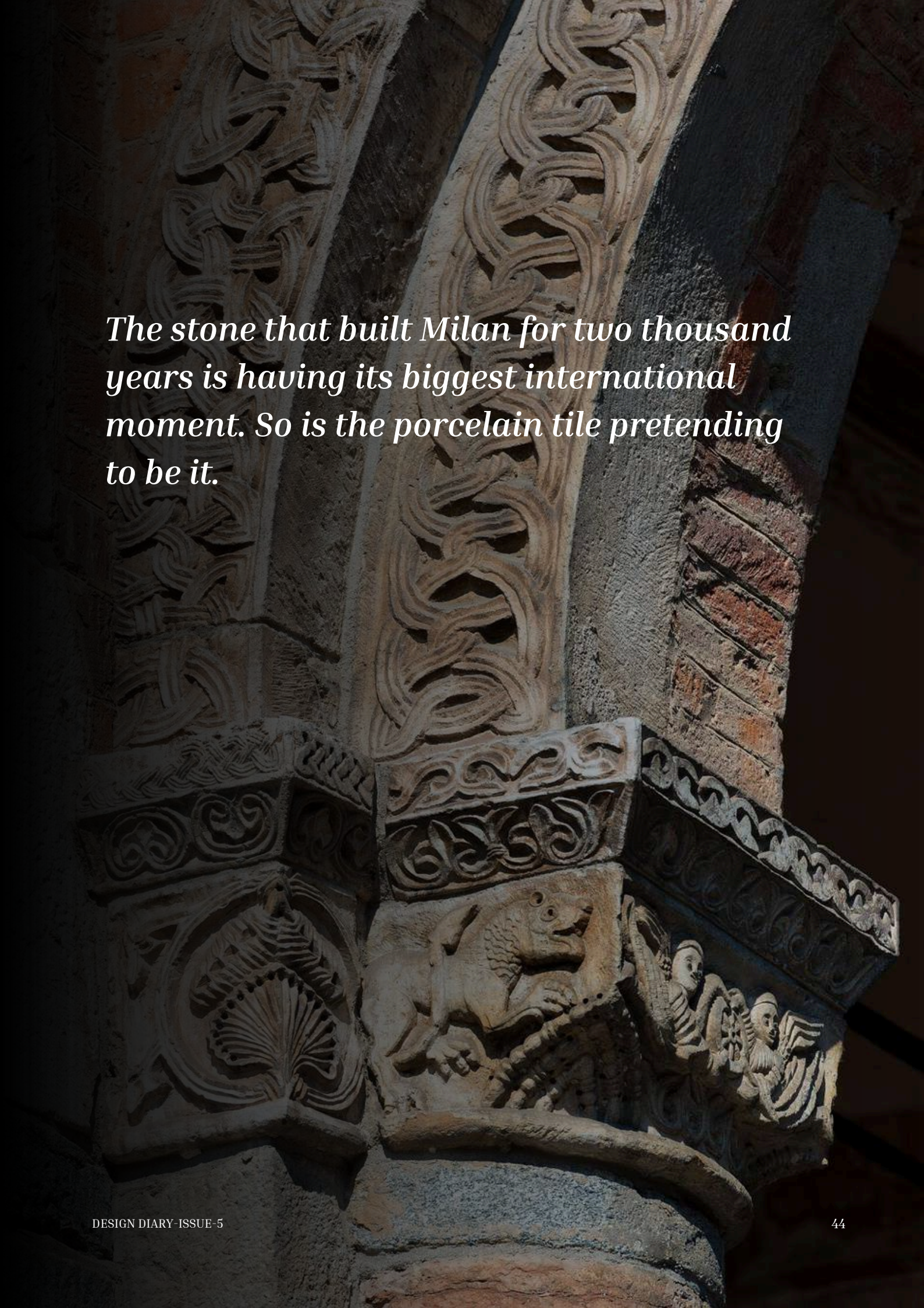
QUESTION OF WHAT IS

real?

At Milan Design Week in April 2026, the Convey design showcase occupied an entire Modernist apartment building from 1958 in central Milan, a quintessentially Milanese block with terrazzo floors, a monumental entranceway, and a facade at street level clad in Ceppo di Grè. The building was chosen because it embodied the character of the city at its most authentic, and that character was expressed, as it has been expressed in Milanese architecture across every century of the city's history, partly through the particular grey-blue stone on its facade, with its visible pebbles and mineral fragments locked into the matrix of the material like evidence of an ancient geological argument still being made in the present. In Milan, this detail passes without special comment. Ceppo di Grè is simply the given condition of the urban fabric. It has existed longer than any living memory, and the city's relationship with it reflects the relationship of a place with the material it was fundamentally made of, a relationship that produces buildings that feel not designed but inevitable, not placed but grown.



What is new, and what makes this particular moment in the stone's long history worth examining carefully, is that the rest of the world has begun to understand what Milan has always known. Ceppo di Grè is now among the most specified luxury grey stones in international architecture and interior design, being used for the flooring and facades of luxury hotels, private estates, and residential developments across the United States and Europe in quantities that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. It is being specified for interior and exterior flooring, wall cladding, and facade applications in projects where the client wants a material that communicates permanence, provenance, and authenticity rather than merely the appearance of them. The global luxury interiors market has been shifting, across the last several years, away from surfaces that perform well in a render and toward materials that perform well in a room over decades of actual use, and Ceppo di Grè, with its combination of visual complexity, geological depth, and an unbroken history of use across two millennia of northern Italian building, is one of the materials that the shift is moving most decisively toward.



The stone that built Milan for two thousand years is having its biggest international moment. So is the porcelain tile pretending to be it.

To understand why, you have to understand what the stone actually is, because it is something considerably more interesting than the description of a grey building material from northern Italy suggests. Ceppo di Grè is a dolomitic breccia, a geological term for a rock formed by the gradual cementation of slope debris that accumulated at the foot of Monte Clemo in Lombardy over millions of years, bound together by water filtering through the mountain until what had been loose rubble became a compact material of extraordinary and unrepeatable visual character. The result is a stone whose grey-blue ground is embedded with pebbles, clasts, and mineral fragments of varying sizes, pale limestone and darker dolomite distributed with the irregular logic of natural accumulation rather than any human arrangement, so that every slab cut from the deposit is unique in its internal composition and no two surfaces, even from the same block, look precisely alike. This variation is not a flaw to be managed or a quality to be apologized for. It is the visible record of a geological event that began sixty million years ago and produced, through processes of extraordinary complexity and duration, a material that no technology can manufacture and no imitation can replicate in the sense that actually matters, which is the sense of being genuinely what it appears to be.

The quarry at Gré, in the municipality of Solto Collina in the province of Bergamo, has been supplying this stone since the Romans were building what would become Milan, making it one of the oldest continuously active stone quarries in Europe and giving the deposit a cultural and historical significance that extends well beyond the practical question of what the material can do in a building. Marini Marmi, the family company that has been extracting and processing Ceppo di Grè since 1897, is now in its fourth generation under Giulio and Giancarlo Marini, the great-grandchildren of Giuseppe Marini who first began quarrying the stone along the shore of Lake Iseo. Since 1993, in a decision taken in collaboration with the University of Turin's Department of Mining Engineering, the company has mined the deposit entirely underground, a choice that reduces environmental impact, preserves the landscape above the quarry, and produces stone of superior technical quality to that extracted in open pits. The underground quarry is now the sole source of authentic Ceppo di Grè in the world, and the family that runs it has been cutting and supplying this specific stone, from this specific mountain, for one hundred and twenty-eight years.

The stone's two-thousand-year presence in Milan is the clearest possible evidence of what a genuinely right material choice looks like when it is sustained across generations and centuries of changing political and aesthetic conditions. The walls and pillars of Sant'Ambrogio, Milan's oldest church and one of the most significant early Christian buildings in northern Europe, are built in Ceppo di Grè and have been standing since the fourth century. So are those of Sant'Eustorgio and San Simpliciano, both of which date from the same early period of Milanese Christian architecture. When Roman and early medieval builders needed a material that could carry the weight of a basilica and weather the damp of the Po Valley across an indefinite future, they reached for the stone from the mountain above Lake Iseo, and the buildings they made with it have been in continuous use, some of them, for the better part of two millennia.

The stone's presence in Milan did not diminish as the city changed around it. The Renaissance facades of the Palazzo Marino, which has housed the city council since the sixteenth century, are clad in Ceppo di Grè. So is the Palazzo Giureconsulti, built around the same period for the guild of lawyers that was among the most powerful institutions in Renaissance Milan; the portal of the Seminary; and the facades of the Palazzo degli Omenoni, the sixteenth-century palace famous for the caryatid figures on its ground floor. Walking through the older quarters of Milan today, you encounter Ceppo di Grè not as an occasional accent or a deliberate historical reference but as the basic material from which the city was built and rebuilt across six centuries of continuous occupation, the stone of choice not because it was exotic or expensive but because it was nearby and it was right, because its particular combination of durability and visual character suited the Milanese preference for architecture that communicates substance without ostentation.

The period between the two world wars was the period of greatest use, when the civic ambitions of Italian Fascism found their architectural expression in a style that combined the monumental authority of ancient Rome with the stripped rationalism of the modern movement, and when Ceppo di Grè became the material of choice for the banks, theaters, government buildings, and institutions being built or rebuilt across Milan and Bergamo. The Bank of Italy in Bergamo is Ceppo di Grè. The Donizzetti Theatre is Ceppo di Grè. The Chamber of Commerce is Ceppo di Grè. The monumental cemetery of Milan, one of the largest and most architecturally serious burial grounds in Europe, is clad extensively in the stone. These buildings were produced in a political context that demands critical engagement, but the stone itself participated in them with the same geological honesty it brought to the Roman churches, carrying no ideology in its composition and offering to each new architecture the same qualities of material depth and civic weight it had been offering to builders for fifteen centuries before.

What these buildings share, across the enormous distance in political intent and aesthetic ambition that separates them, is the quality of having been built with a material that understood where it was. Ceppo di Grè in Milan does not ask to be noticed. It does not perform. It simply belongs to the fabric of the city in the way that only a material with a genuine history of use in a specific place can belong to it, and this quality of belonging is precisely what the current international interest in the stone is reaching for, even when the projects specifying it are thousands of miles from the mountain that produced it.

Contemporary use has been building quietly for a decade and is now reaching a genuinely international scale, driven by the luxury design market's renewed interest in materials with genuine provenance and visual depth. Giampiero Tagliaferri, the Milan-born architect who now has studios in both Milan and Los Angeles, chose Ceppo di Grè for the facade of the Oliver Peoples boutique on Corso Venezia in Milan, the city's most architecturally serious retail street. The boutique is housed in a classic prewar Rationalist building, and the stone on its facade connects the contemporary commercial use to the fabric of Milanese architecture with an authority that no modern cladding material could have achieved. He subsequently used the stone again in his Minotti showroom concept, conceived as a typical Milanese apartment in green marble and Ceppo di Grè, a pairing that is as Milanese in its material intelligence as anything in the city's interior design tradition. Tagliaferri has described the stone as looking particularly relevant, modern, and right, and the precision of that observation captures what makes the material so suited to this particular design moment: it is a stone that manages to feel both ancient and completely current, both rooted in a specific place and applicable across contexts that have nothing geographically to do with Lombardy.

The question of the imitations is the most pressing issue currently surrounding Ceppo di Grè in the design and architecture industries, and it deserves more direct engagement than the professional conversation typically gives it. Several of Italy's major ceramic manufacturers, including Marazzi and Ergon, have produced porcelain stoneware collections that reproduce the visual character of the stone with considerable technical skill, and these collections have found a substantial market in projects where the budget for natural stone is unavailable or where the practical limitations of the natural material, its porosity, its weight, and its variability from slab to slab make it inconvenient to specify. The porcelain versions are waterproof where the natural stone is porous. They are perfectly consistent where the natural stone varies. They are less expensive, easier to source in large quantities, and available in color variants that the actual geological deposit at Solto Collina cannot provide. One American supplier of the porcelain version has even positioned it as LEED-friendly on the grounds of its Environmental Product Declaration and recycled content, a marketing argument that requires you to accept that the ecological credentials of a manufactured ceramic tile are a meaningful substitute for the geological and cultural specificity of a natural stone quarried from a single mountain in Lombardy and transported to the project site.

What none of these arguments account for, and what the design culture has been too willing to overlook in the interest of convenience and budget management, is the full extent of what the porcelain tile cannot replicate regardless of how accurately it reproduces the visual surface of the stone. The weight of Ceppo di Grè is not merely a physical fact but something the body registers when it walks across a floor or places a hand against a wall, and what the body registers is the weight of a geological formation, of millions of years of accumulation and cementation and the slow transformation of mountain debris into something of unexpected beauty and permanence. The thermal mass of the natural stone, its capacity to absorb and moderate temperature in ways that synthetic materials cannot match, is part of what the stone contributes to the environmental quality of the spaces it inhabits across seasons of actual occupation. The acoustic character of the real stone, the way it ages and acquires the patina of genuine use over decades rather than simply wearing away at an even rate; the knowledge that every slab is unique and that the particular distribution of pebbles and minerals on any given surface will never be precisely reproduced in any other slab from the same quarry, let alone in any manufactured tile—all of these qualities are not available in the porcelain version, and all of them are part of what Ceppo di Grè is and what it does to the spaces that are given the real material.

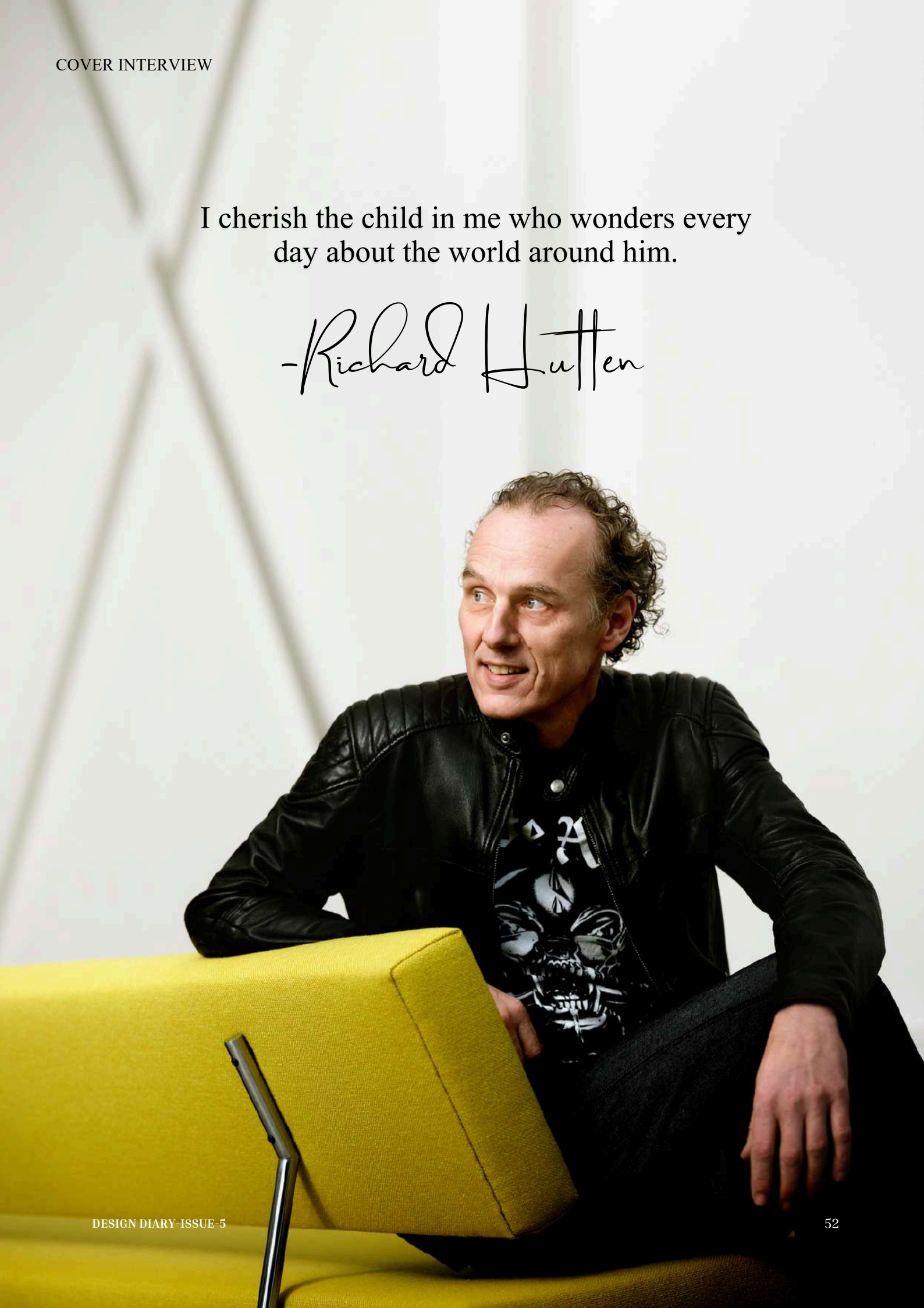
There is a deeper issue here than the practical differences between natural stone and its synthetic imitation, important as those differences are. It has to do with what a material means, with the relationship between the material of a building and the place and history that produced it, and with what is actually involved when a designer chooses between a genuine material and a copy that resembles it closely enough to satisfy a client who has not been told the difference. Ceppo di Grè is not a visual texture that happens to come in a grey-blue palette with an interesting internal pattern. It is a specific deposit from a specific mountain above a specific lake in a specific province of northern Italy, and its entire history of use, from the Roman churches of early Milan through the Renaissance palaces and the civic buildings of the interwar period to the contemporary luxury interiors specifying it in cities that had never heard of it a decade ago, is part of what the material is and what it brings to the buildings where it appears. A porcelain tile can reproduce the surface of that history. It cannot participate in it. The distinction matters because the buildings that have meant the most in the history of any city have always been, among other things, acts of material commitment, declarations about the relationship between the built environment and the physical world that produced the materials from which it is made.

For architects and interior designers working in India, who have access to a native stone tradition of extraordinary richness, from Makrana marble to Kota limestone, from Jaisalmer yellow sandstone to the black Kadappa of Andhra Pradesh, the story of Ceppo di Grè is less a discovery than a reminder about the relationship between a material and the place that made it. India has stones that Milan has never heard of, stones with histories as long and as deeply embedded in regional architecture and cultural identity as Ceppo di Grè is embedded in the fabric of northern Italy. The Indian design profession's increasing engagement with international materials is entirely legitimate and produces interesting work, but it is worth pursuing alongside a parallel engagement with the native stone traditions that have been supplying Indian architecture for millennia and that carry the same qualities of geological specificity and cultural depth that make this Lombard stone worth examining in the first place. A material is most fully understood when you understand what it is, where it comes from, and what it has meant to the people who built with it before you. That understanding is available in the stone from the mountain above Lake Iseo. It is equally available, for those who choose to look for it, in the quarries of Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh.

The broader shift in the luxury market that is driving Ceppo di Grè's international moment is, at its core, a shift toward exactly this kind of understanding of what material means and what it is for. The market has become more selective, more tactile, and more genuinely interested in provenance than at any recent point in its history. Surfaces that look right in a render but feel hollow in a room are being replaced by materials that ask more of the people who specify them but deliver, across the life of the spaces they inhabit, something that no render can promise and no imitation can provide. Ceppo di Grè serves this shift exceptionally well because it has the visual authority and material depth to communicate permanence and authenticity to every person who moves through the space it defines, and because the provenance it communicates is entirely real, rooted in a specific mountain above a specific lake in Lombardy and in a history of use that connects a contemporary luxury interior in Los Angeles or Mumbai to the builders of Sant'Ambrogio, who reached for the same stone from the same deposit in the fourth century and trusted it to last.

I cherish the child in me who wonders every day about the world around him.

-Richard Hutten



On thirty years of Dutch design, the seriousness of play, and why the most interesting word he has learned recently is brainrot

The most interesting word Richard Hutten has learned recently is "brainrot." He mentions it with the particular combination of amusement and precision that runs through everything he says, and it is worth sitting with for a moment, because coming from a man whose work has been in production for over thirty-five years, whose objects sit in the permanent collections of more than forty museums worldwide, and who helped found what many consider the last genuinely consequential movement in contemporary design, the observation carries a specific weight. He designs for the real world, for real people, for objects that need to be felt and touched and smelled, and what he sees happening around him is a design culture increasingly optimized for the twenty-second scroll rather than the thirty-year relationship between a person and the thing they own. Designs are made to be Instagrammable now, he says, and a spectacular look is winning over genuine engagement with real needs, wishes, and desires. He reaches for an analogy that is pointed without being cruel: some people think McDonald's is the best restaurant in the world. He personally prefers a dinner prepared by a real chef using the best ingredients and their own imagination. True connection, in his view, can only exist in the real world, and he has spent his career making objects that participate in that real world rather than merely representing it on a screen.

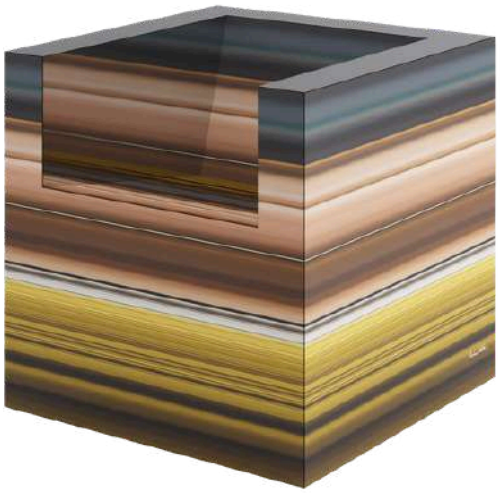
“I do not follow trends; I make them

This is the position of someone who understood, long before the current conversation about authenticity and meaning in design, that the things worth making are the ones that accumulate value through use and time rather than through visibility. Some of his designs have been in production for more than thirty-five years. The Dombo mug, which no company wanted to produce when it was first shown, has now sold over a million units worldwide, and he still receives inquiries from manufacturers wanting to make it. Last year, early pieces from the collection of the late Karl Lagerfeld were shown and sold at an exhibition in Paris. People encountered work that was decades old and experienced it as fresh, almost as if it had just been made. That kind of response, he says, is incredibly meaningful, and it confirms something he has believed since he was a student: being original and sincere is the only way to stay relevant and meaningful for a long period of time.

I cherish the child in me who wonders every day about the world around him.

He arrived at this conviction early. His graduation work from the Design Academy Eindhoven in 1991 was a table-chair, a single object that collapsed the distinction between two familiar forms, and it was subsequently displayed in twenty museums worldwide, which is an unusual trajectory for a graduation piece and a clear early signal of what kind of designer he was going to be. He opened his studio in Rotterdam the same year and two years later, in 1993, presented his work at Milan Design Week for the first time alongside a small group of Dutch designers, Hella Jongerius and Marcel Wanders among them, under the name Droog Design. What they showed was unlike anything else at the fair that year; the work concerned not how things looked but the ideas, questions, and stories that gave them their reason for existing, and the design community that encountered it recognized immediately that something different had arrived. By the week's end, the presentation was so crowded that movement through the space was impossible, with news spreading solely by word of mouth in an age without the internet. By the time the week was over, they were the talk of the town.

Droog Design became one of the most significant movements in contemporary design, and Hutten has described it, without false modesty, as the last real movement the field has produced. In the eighties there was Memphis. In the nineties there was Droog. Since then, he argues, there has been no movement of comparable significance in design, art, or architecture. The point he is making is less about self-promotion than about the rarity of genuine conceptual rupture, about how infrequently something arrives that genuinely changes what is possible to think and make within a discipline. Design had been mainly about aesthetics and beauty, he says. Droog added humor, social awareness, and sustainability to the equation. They stirred up the design community with a human-centered approach, and the design community has not fully recovered from the stirring, which is precisely the point.

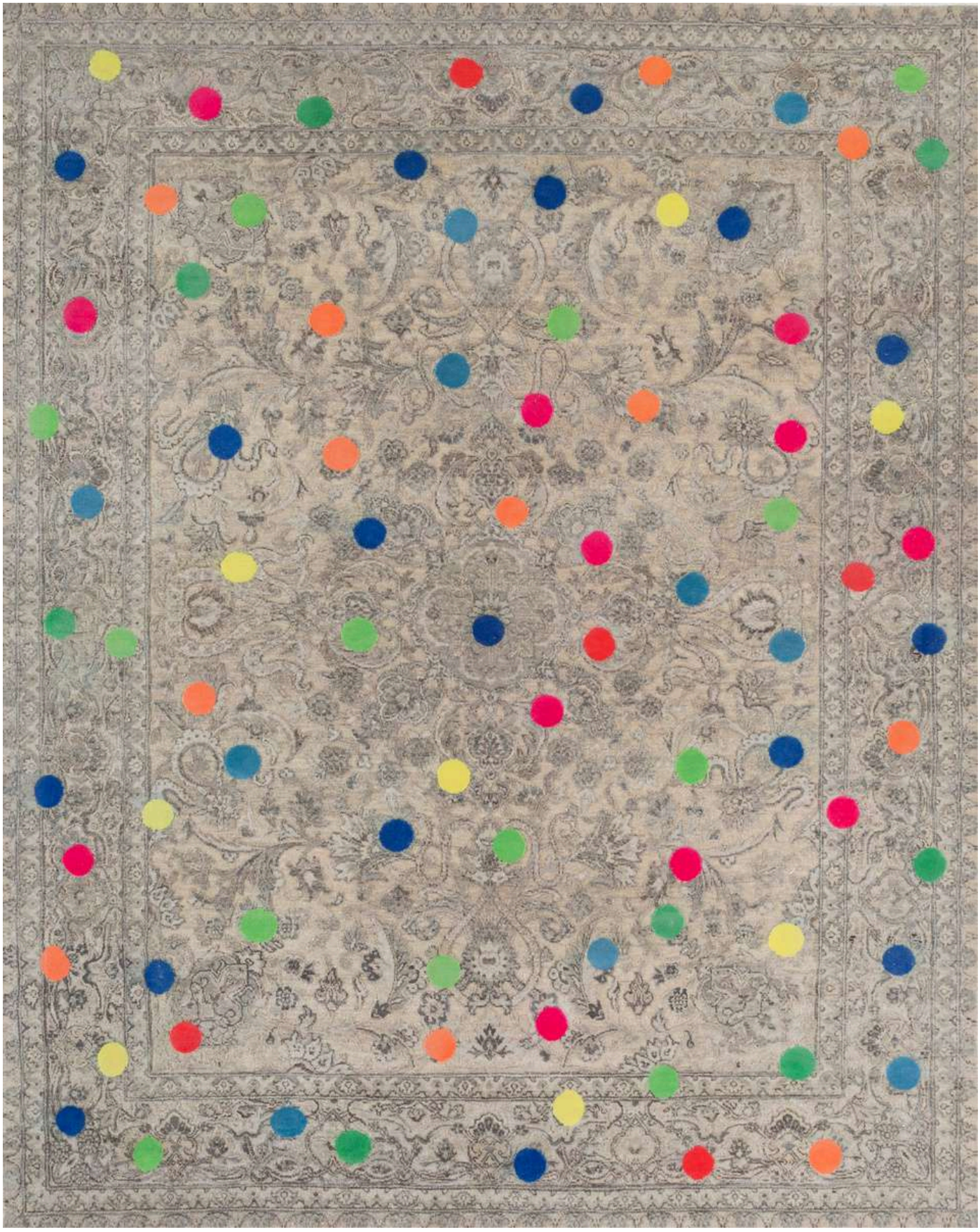


He does not follow trends and is very clear about this. He makes them. Clients come to him not to solve a problem but because they are interested in his perspective, and that distinction matters enormously to him. Design has traditionally been framed as problem-solving, a definition that has never satisfied him because it positions the designer as reactive, as someone who begins with what already exists rather than with what could. His own formulation is the one he has held to throughout his career: he does not solve problems; he creates possibilities. The difference describes a fundamentally different relationship to the design process, one that begins with a concept, with what he calls defining the rules of the game, before anything else happens. Once the rules are in place, the play begins.

Play is central to his practice and to his thinking, though not in the way the word is sometimes understood when applied to design. He is not talking about lightness or whimsy or the absence of seriousness. He is talking about something deeply serious that merely wears the appearance of lightness. The analogy he reaches for is a child with a football: the child does not wait for inspiration to strike before kicking it. He just starts to kick and sees where it ends. That, Hutten says, is how he designs. You begin, you move, and the direction becomes clear through the movement rather than before it. But play without stakes is not play, which is why he also points to the rules: they matter, the boundaries matter, and the concept that precedes the experimentation gives it its direction and its meaning. Freedom without structure produces distraction. Structure that allows for freedom produces design.

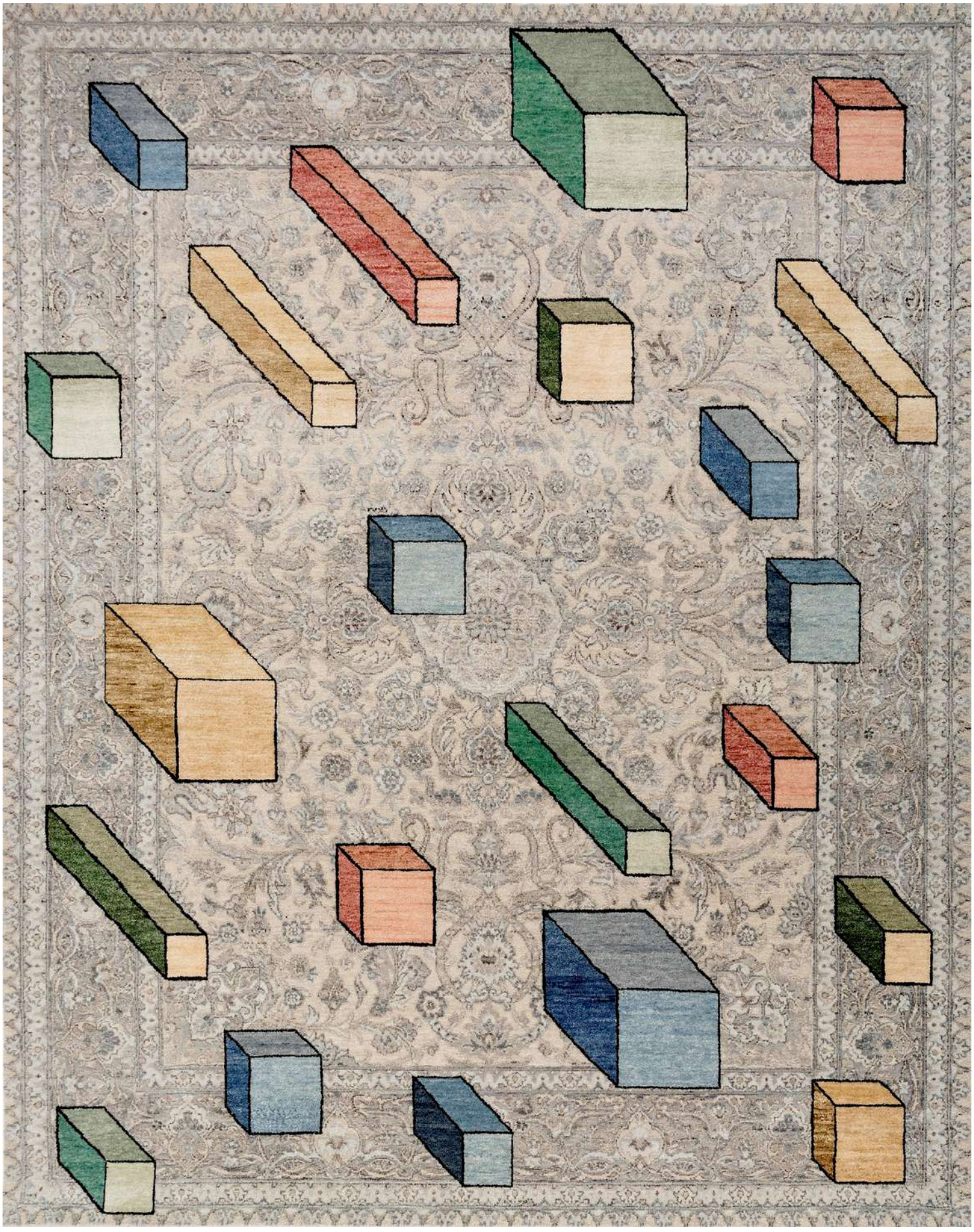
This is why his work can be simultaneously approachable and intellectually rigorous, why it carries a quality that invites people in immediately while rewarding sustained attention over time. The Dombo mug is the most direct expression of this. He designed it with his young son in mind, wanting to create a mug as large and generous as the child himself, and the disproportionately big handles that resulted turned out to also make it more ergonomic and easier to hold for young children and people with limited mobility, an accidental rightness that he did not plan for and that the object delivered on its own. When it was first shown publicly, a child came to the booth, saw it, grabbed it, and refused to let go. The mother had no choice but to buy it. No company had wanted to produce it when he first presented it. The world eventually caught up.

I don't solve problems; I create possibilities.



His thinking about play draws explicitly on the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's concept of homo ludens, the playing human, which Hutten places at the end of a progression that moves from homo sapiens to homo faber to homo ludens: from thinking to making to playing. The final form of any project always follows the concept rather than being imposed from outside, and whether he is working on furniture, a public installation, or an interior, the underlying approach remains continuous. The disciplines have never felt separate to him. They are all different ways of expressing ideas and creating experiences that offer both joy and intellectual engagement simultaneously, and it is that combination, the joy and the intellect together, that he believes design at its best is capable of and currently failing to pursue.

His work is held in the permanent collections of over forty museums worldwide, among them MoMA New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Vitra Design Museum, and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Some of his designs have reached audiences of hundreds of thousands, in some cases millions, not by following what was current but by holding to a clear personal vision and offering something distinctive. Long-term relationships with clients, some of which have lasted decades and become genuine friendships, create the space for dialogue and shared commitment to quality that shorter, more transactional arrangements cannot produce. Since 2008 he has been art director of Gispen, one of the Netherlands' oldest and most established furniture brands, a role that places his thinking at the center of an institution with nearly a century of history behind it. Earlier this year he was named a judge for the Dezeen Awards 2025, a recognition that positions him precisely where he has always been: at the point where the design conversation is being shaped rather than simply observed.



His early work was made when he was young and wild, he says. Now he is older and wiser. But all of it, across thirty-four years and every discipline and scale he has worked in, has been made by the same person, and that person has always been concerned with the same things: love, friendship, connectivity, surprise, joy, beauty, happiness, and meaning. What has remained constant, and what he considers his greatest strength, is curiosity, and alongside it the ability to wonder. He still cherishes the child in him who wonders every day about the world around him, and he says this without irony and without self-consciousness, which is perhaps why it lands as clearly as it does.

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The Atelier at the Edge of the Meadow

Shoreline Studio — Odsherred, Denmark

Fact File
Architecture and Interior Design: Norm Architects
Design Team: Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen, Peter Eland, Victor Ohn-Breumlund, Sofie Bak
Interior Design and Styling: Nathalie Schwer
Photography: Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen, Karl Tranberg Knudsen

> *The atelier responds to its setting through material resonance and proportional continuity. The hardwood facade will weather into a silvery tone, echoing the surrounding pines, while the thatched roof mirrors the hues of coastal grasses.*
>
> — NORM ARCHITECTS

From the meadow, it reads as a single thatched form sitting low against the coastal pine. Move closer and the building begins to reveal its complexity. A main studio structure and a separate timber pergola extending from it, both roofed in thatch, connected by a wide deck of pale weathered timber that steps down gently into the surrounding landscape of wild grass, coastal shrub and large granite boulders that have been left exactly where they were found. Norm Architects chose to work with what the site already offered, building around the granite boulders and coastal vegetation rather than clearing them to make way for something new.

Shoreline Studio is a creative workspace added to an existing family summerhouse in Odsherred, a stretch of northwest Zealand coastline where the land flattens toward the sea and the light comes in sideways across the dunes. The commission was specific: a dedicated space where sustained creative work could happen across extended seasonal stays, separate from the shared rhythms of family summerhouse life but materially and visually connected to everything around it. The family had the main house, what they needed was a room of their own for the work that requires a particular quality of silence.

The building Norm Architects completed on the plot sits in deliberate conversation with the older summerhouse nearby. Its warm reddish-brown hardwood cladding is a study in vertical rhythm, the boards running floor to eave in a consistent cadence that aligns quietly with the proportions of the existing structure without reproducing its form. The two buildings read as belonging to the same family. The thatched roof of the new structure carries the same tone as the coastal grasses growing in the meadow around it. In time, the hardwood cladding will weather to the silvery grey of the surrounding pine trunks, drawing the building further into its setting with each passing season. The architects designed the exterior with this aging in mind, understanding that a building on this coastline should become more itself over years of exposure, not less.

The terrace that connects the old and the new is itself a considered piece of design. The decking and the low stepped retaining walls that frame the outdoor seating area are in a distinctly lighter, greyer timber than the building itself, creating a clear material distinction between the transitional outdoor space and the enclosed studio. Brick flooring runs continuously from the studio interior outward across this terrace plane, dissolving the threshold between inside and out in a single material decision. Large coastal boulders have been cut into the deck rather than placed on it, so the stone reads as erupting from the ground rather than introduced from elsewhere. A small tree planted on the terrace, caught in autumn gold in the photographs, gives the outdoor space a sense of inhabitation rather than mere circulation.

Tucked into the exterior on the northern side, an outdoor shower is mounted directly onto the timber cladding wall beneath the thatched eave overhang, its circular head in patinated bronze already darkening with use. It is a detail that is easy to miss and quietly important — evidence that this building was designed for real extended stays across all seasons, not simply for aesthetic contemplation.

Step inside through the full-height glazed door and the first thing the room does is show you the sea. Across the main workspace, a wide horizontal band of floor-to-ceiling glass frames a view directly over the low coastal meadow, through the scattered pine, to the water beyond. It is not a panoramic view. It is a specific and considered one, a horizontal strip of landscape that pulls the eye outward while the room holds you gently in place. A long low bench of reclaimed timber runs along the base of this glass wall, on which smooth coastal pebbles and small ceramic vessels have been arranged with the same restraint that governs everything else in the space.

The interior is organized around a single open volume. One large work table sits at the center, one dark chair beside it, a round leather pouf nearby. A floor lamp with a pleated fabric shade stands at the corner near the curtain wall. This is the full furniture inventory of the main space. Everything else, storage, shelving, utility, has been absorbed into the architecture itself rather than introduced as separate pieces, and the effect of this discipline is a room with no visual noise at all, only the table, the light coming through the glass, and the landscape beyond it.

Full-length sheer curtains in a fine linen hang across the entire glazed south-facing wall, floor to ceiling. When drawn, they diffuse the incoming light into something softer and more even, spreading it across the brick floor and eliminating the shadow contrasts that direct sun would create. They also give the space something practical and often overlooked in buildings of this type: a way of working without glare during the hours when the sun comes directly through the glass.

In its quietness, the building holds a duality: intimate and tactile in scale, yet almost sacral in its verticality and the way light descends from above. The skylight introduces a soft monumentality, transforming a modest workspace into a contemplative volume.

— NORM ARCHITECTS

The ceiling is where the building's most unexpected architectural decision reveals itself. Looking directly upward, the timber-lined interior rises to a geometric structure of triangular panels meeting at a central square skylight opening. Reclaimed beams cross the space diagonally, their joints connected by slender steel rods that hold the structure with a precision the weathered wood itself seems to resist. The skylight at the apex brings daylight directly into the volume from above, and as the day progresses this light moves slowly across the brick floor below, changing the quality of the interior without anything in it shifting. The room the building contains in the morning is a different room by late afternoon. This quality of temporal change, built into the structure rather than achieved through artificial lighting, gives the space something that most purpose-built creative studios do not manage: a genuine relationship with the passing of time.

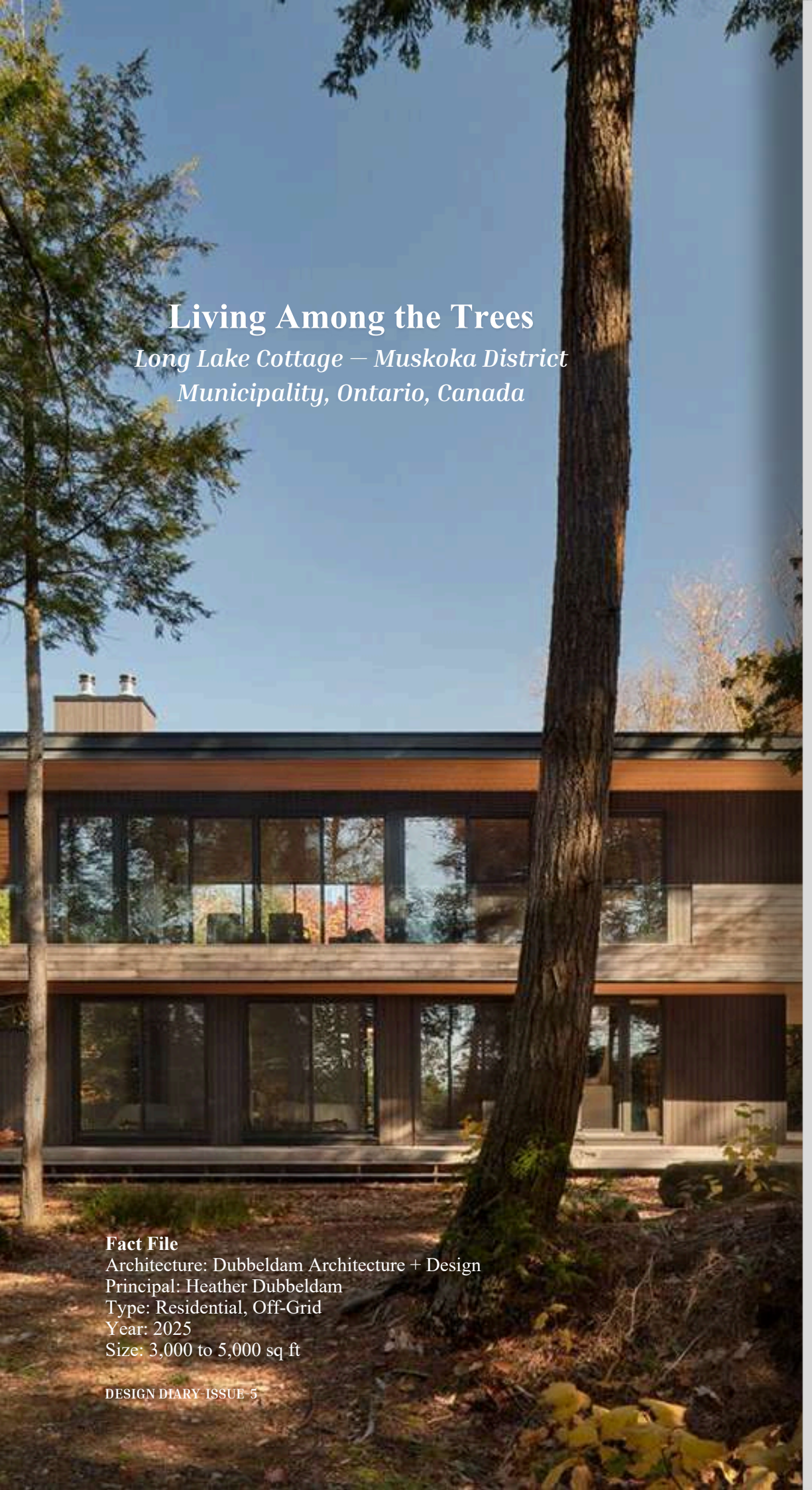
The reclaimed timber beams throughout the interior bear the marks of whatever they were before. Saw cuts, weathering, the evidence of earlier joints and fixings that were never filled or smoothed over. Rather than treating these as imperfections to be concealed, the design treats them as content, as proof that the materials in this building have histories that predate it and will outlast it. This is a consistent position in Norm Architects' practice and it applies here with particular conviction, because in a landscape shaped over centuries by the accumulated effects of wind and salt and seasonal change, a building that shows no evidence of time would simply feel dishonest.

The utility spaces within the building are handled with the same care as the primary workspace. A stainless steel sink is set into a recessed niche framed entirely by timber paneling, so it reads as part of the wall rather than a separate element introduced into it. Behind the sink, a full-height window fitted with vertical timber louvers looks out toward the pine landscape, the light coming through the slats casting a pattern of parallel shadows across the stainless steel surface below. The louvers here serve both privacy and light modulation, filtering the incoming daylight into something that the room can work with across changing conditions outside. On the exterior, the same louver detail appears as a full panel set into the facade between sections of solid cladding, its vertical rhythm echoing that of the cladding itself and creating, in certain light, a surface that is as much about shadow as about material.

Solar panels on the thatched roof and a rainwater harvesting system support year-round occupation of a building that was conceived as a place for extended seasonal stays rather than occasional visits. These are decisions that affect how the building is used rather than how it appears, and they speak to a client brief that was serious about sustained occupation rather than the aesthetic of retreat.

What Norm Architects have built in Odsherred is modest in scale and completely unambiguous in its intentions. Every decision in it, from the placement of the building on the plot to the arrangement of pebbles on the windowsill bench, has been made in the same direction: toward stillness, toward material honesty, toward a building that earns its place in its landscape by paying close attention to everything around it and asking very little in return.

normcph.com



Living Among the Trees

Long Lake Cottage — Muskoka District Municipality, Ontario, Canada

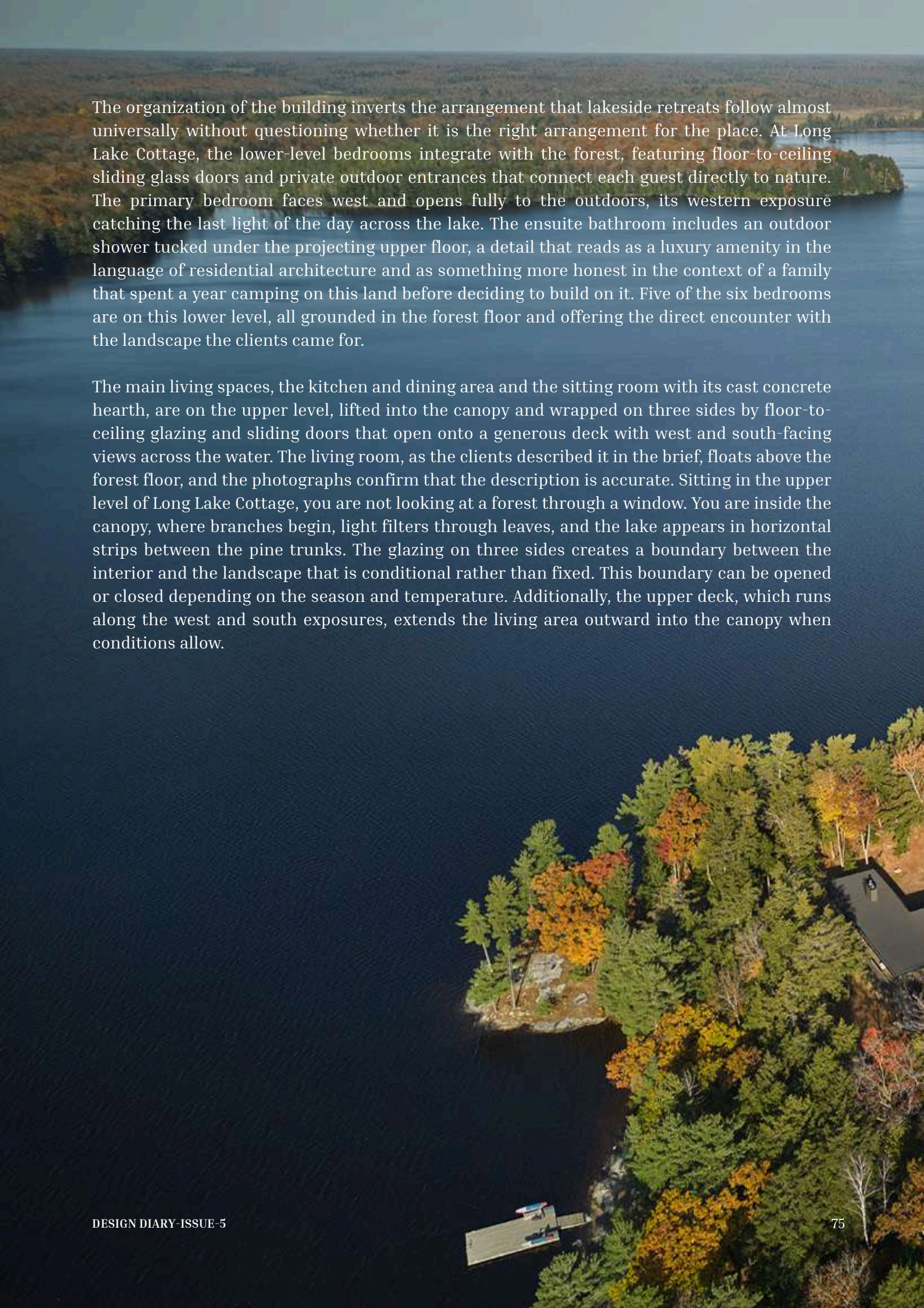
Fact File
Architecture: Dubbeldam Architecture + Design
Principal: Heather Dubbeldam
Type: Residential, Off-Grid
Year: 2025
Size: 3,000 to 5,000 sq ft

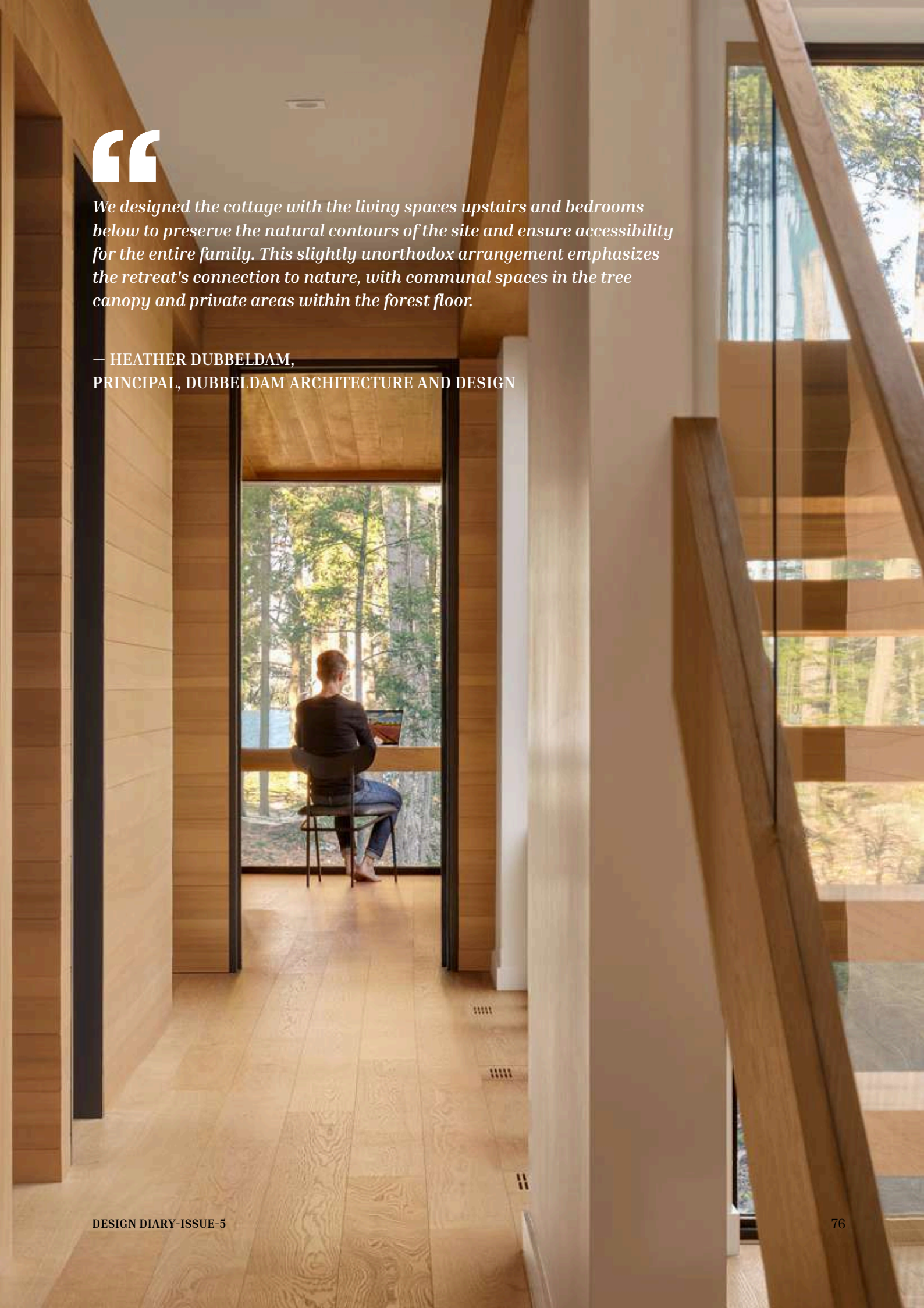
Before a single line was drawn, the clients spent a year camping on the land. Every weekend, through the full cycle of Ontario seasons, they lived on the forested peninsula above Long Lake in Muskoka, understanding the site the way only sustained occupation can teach you to understand it: where the light came from in the morning, how the wind moved through the pines in the afternoon, which outcroppings of exposed bedrock defined the ground beneath the forest floor, where a building might sit without disturbing the particular quality of the place they had spent a year learning to love. When they finally came to Dubbeldam Architecture and Design with a brief, it was precise in a way that a year of camping produces and a meeting room cannot. They wanted to live among the trees, not beside them. They wanted the communal spaces of the house elevated into the canopy rather than placed at ground level looking up at it. They wanted a building that accommodated multigenerational living, including full accessibility for a family member who uses a wheelchair, and they wanted something that would work not just through the brief warmth of a Muskoka summer but through all four seasons, including the hard ones. What Heather Dubbeldam delivered was a building that answers all of these requirements through a single spatial idea, and that idea is the inversion of almost everything a lakeside cottage conventionally does.

The two-level cottage sits below a ridge of exposed Canadian Shield bedrock on a secluded peninsula on a motorboat-free lake, the kind of lake that still exists in the Ontario wilderness if you know where to look and are willing to travel to find it. From the aerial photographs, the building is nearly invisible, its dark roof absorbed into the autumn canopy of the peninsula with only the solar array on an adjacent outbuilding visible as evidence from above that anything has been built here at all. This quality of concealment is not accidental. The charcoal-stained spruce that clads the upper level was chosen specifically because it recedes into the forest rather than announcing itself against it, and the greyed cedar of the lower level reads against the bedrock outcroppings around it as something that has settled into its surroundings over time rather than been placed upon them. Both species will continue to weather toward the tones of the forest with each passing season, which means the building is designed to become less visible as it ages. This reflects a commitment to the site that most architecture expresses in words but few manage in practice.

The organization of the building inverts the arrangement that lakeside retreats follow almost universally without questioning whether it is the right arrangement for the place. At Long Lake Cottage, the lower-level bedrooms integrate with the forest, featuring floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors and private outdoor entrances that connect each guest directly to nature. The primary bedroom faces west and opens fully to the outdoors, its western exposure catching the last light of the day across the lake. The ensuite bathroom includes an outdoor shower tucked under the projecting upper floor, a detail that reads as a luxury amenity in the language of residential architecture and as something more honest in the context of a family that spent a year camping on this land before deciding to build on it. Five of the six bedrooms are on this lower level, all grounded in the forest floor and offering the direct encounter with the landscape the clients came for.

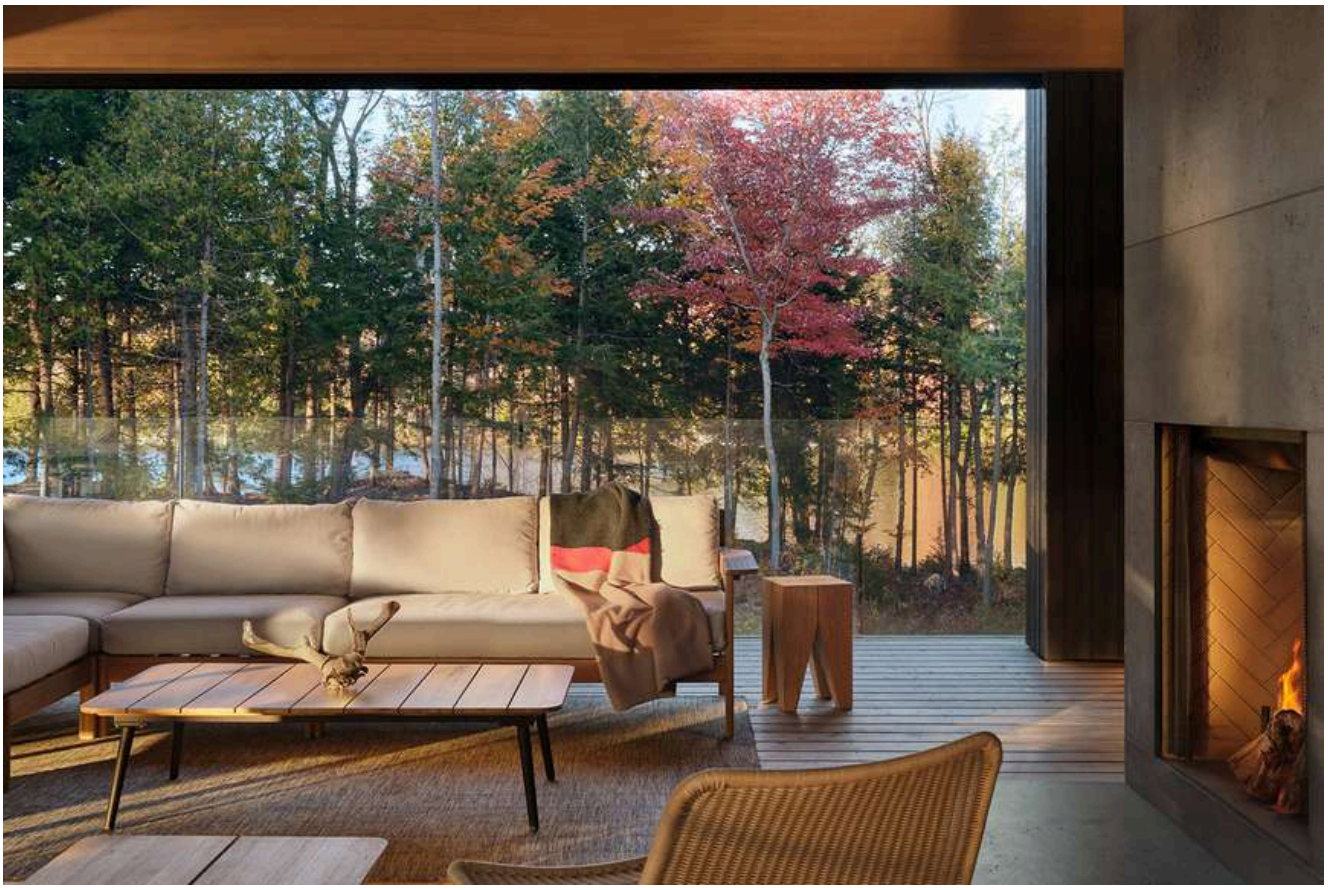
The main living spaces, the kitchen and dining area and the sitting room with its cast concrete hearth, are on the upper level, lifted into the canopy and wrapped on three sides by floor-to-ceiling glazing and sliding doors that open onto a generous deck with west and south-facing views across the water. The living room, as the clients described it in the brief, floats above the forest floor, and the photographs confirm that the description is accurate. Sitting in the upper level of Long Lake Cottage, you are not looking at a forest through a window. You are inside the canopy, where branches begin, light filters through leaves, and the lake appears in horizontal strips between the pine trunks. The glazing on three sides creates a boundary between the interior and the landscape that is conditional rather than fixed. This boundary can be opened or closed depending on the season and temperature. Additionally, the upper deck, which runs along the west and south exposures, extends the living area outward into the canopy when conditions allow.





We designed the cottage with the living spaces upstairs and bedrooms below to preserve the natural contours of the site and ensure accessibility for the entire family. This slightly unorthodox arrangement emphasizes the retreat's connection to nature, with communal spaces in the tree canopy and private areas within the forest floor.

— HEATHER DUBBELDAM,
PRINCIPAL, DUBBELDAM ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN



The entry to the upper level is through a bridge, not a staircase, and this decision is the one that shaped the entire spatial sequence of the building. The accessibility requirement for a family member who uses a wheelchair produced an entry condition that changed the experience of arrival for every person who visits the cottage, not just the one the bridge was designed for. You approach the building from the ridge behind, at canopy level, and cross a timber bridge that delivers you to the upper floor without descent so that the first interior space you encounter is the main living area with its lake views and its cast concrete hearth rather than a lower-level entry hall looking up at the spaces above. The building unfolds downward from this point rather than upward, which is precisely the opposite of how most buildings work and precisely right for a site on a forested peninsula where the most compelling spatial experience is the one that puts you among the trees at their most expressive level.

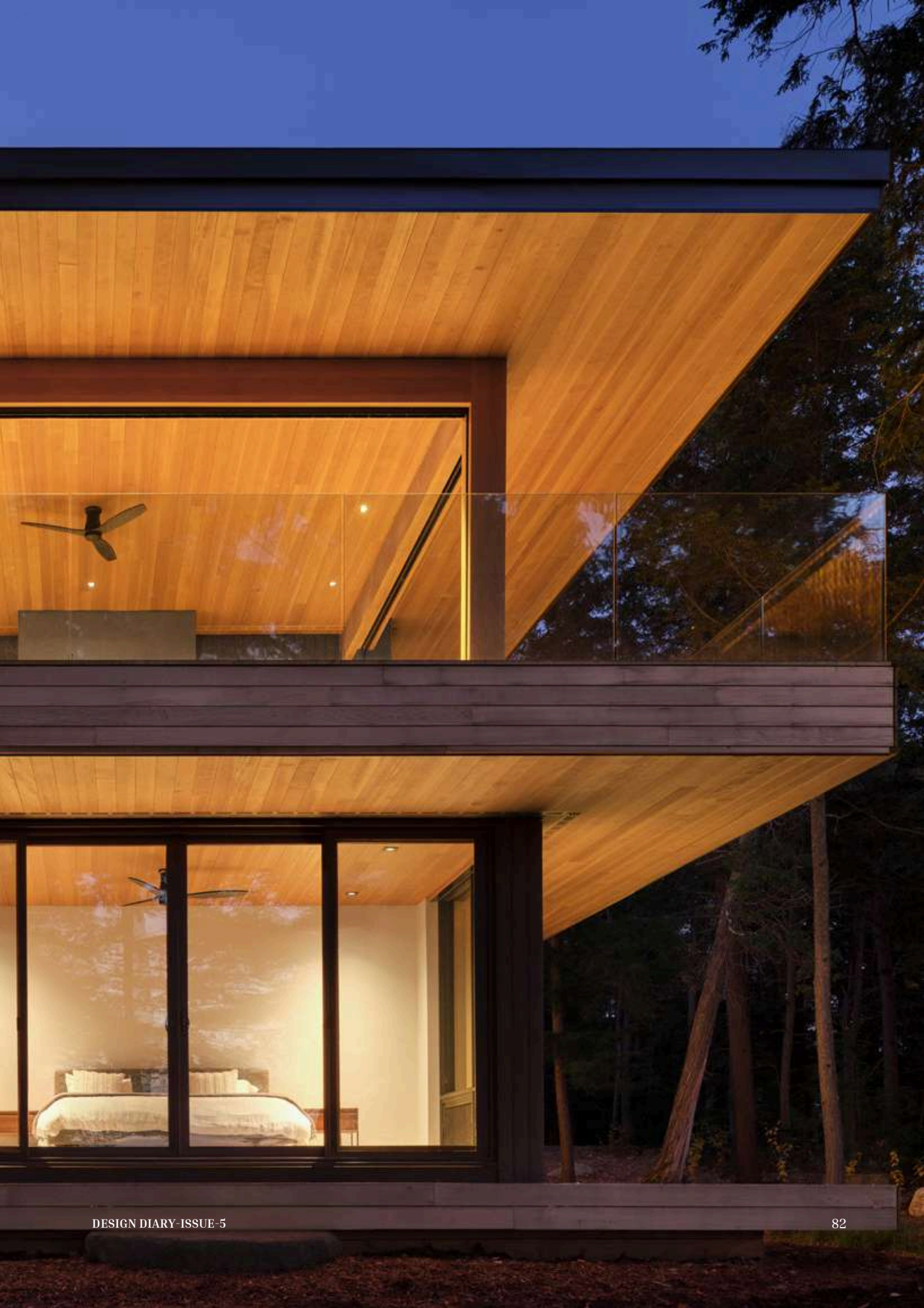
The bridge itself is detailed with the same cedar cladding and timber handrails as the decks, its pale horizontal boards running continuously from the exterior approach to the upper deck in a single material gesture that connects the arrival sequence to the outdoor living spaces without visual interruption. The bedrock outcroppings that sit at its base give the approach the quality of landing on a landscape rather than arriving at a building, the exposed Canadian Shield granite worn smooth by millennia of freeze and thaw and glacial movement visible at the foot of the bridge as evidence of the geological time that shaped the peninsula long before anything was built on it.

The cast concrete hearth, a full-height board-formed structure, serves as the most architecturally assertive element in the upper living area, contrasting with the surrounding warm timber surfaces. The concrete is not the same grey as the bedrock outside, but it reads as a reference to it, bringing the geological character of the site into the interior in a material that has the thermal mass and the visual weight to hold the large open-plan space together around it. Seating is arranged on three sides, and a seventeen-foot built-in window bench along the south glazing with integrated storage beneath it runs the full width of the living area, offering another position from which to watch the lake and the forest through the glass. The bench is one of several built-in elements throughout the cottage that absorb storage and secondary seating into the architecture rather than introducing them as separate pieces of furniture, keeping the visual field of the upper level as open and as spatially connected to the landscape outside as the brief required.

The kitchen occupies the northern end of the open plan, its white oak millwork and engineered stone counters introducing a lighter and more refined palette alongside the warm brush-finished oak flooring that runs across the entire upper level. A long island with a bar sink and generous seating defines the cooking area without enclosing it, drawing the kitchen into the social life of the upper floor rather than separating it into a functional zone that faces away from the living and dining spaces. The millwork is precise and considered, with open shelving between the upper cabinets allowing the kitchen to breathe within the warmth of the timber-lined ceiling overhead, the continuous western hemlock boards that run from the interior outward through the glazing and across the underside of the deck soffit making the kitchen and the canopy feel like parts of the same room.

That hemlock ceiling is the material decision that most defines the spatial experience of the building. Running without interruption from inside to outside, it passes through the wall plane of the glazing and continues across the exterior soffit of the upper deck, so that the distinction between the enclosed living area and the open deck above is a change of enclosure rather than a change of material. Standing on the upper deck with the lake visible through the trees to the west and south, the hemlock overhead is the same hemlock that covers the ceiling of the sitting room behind you, and the continuity is not a decorative detail but an architectural argument about where the inside ends and the outside begins, which in this building is never quite where you expect it to be.

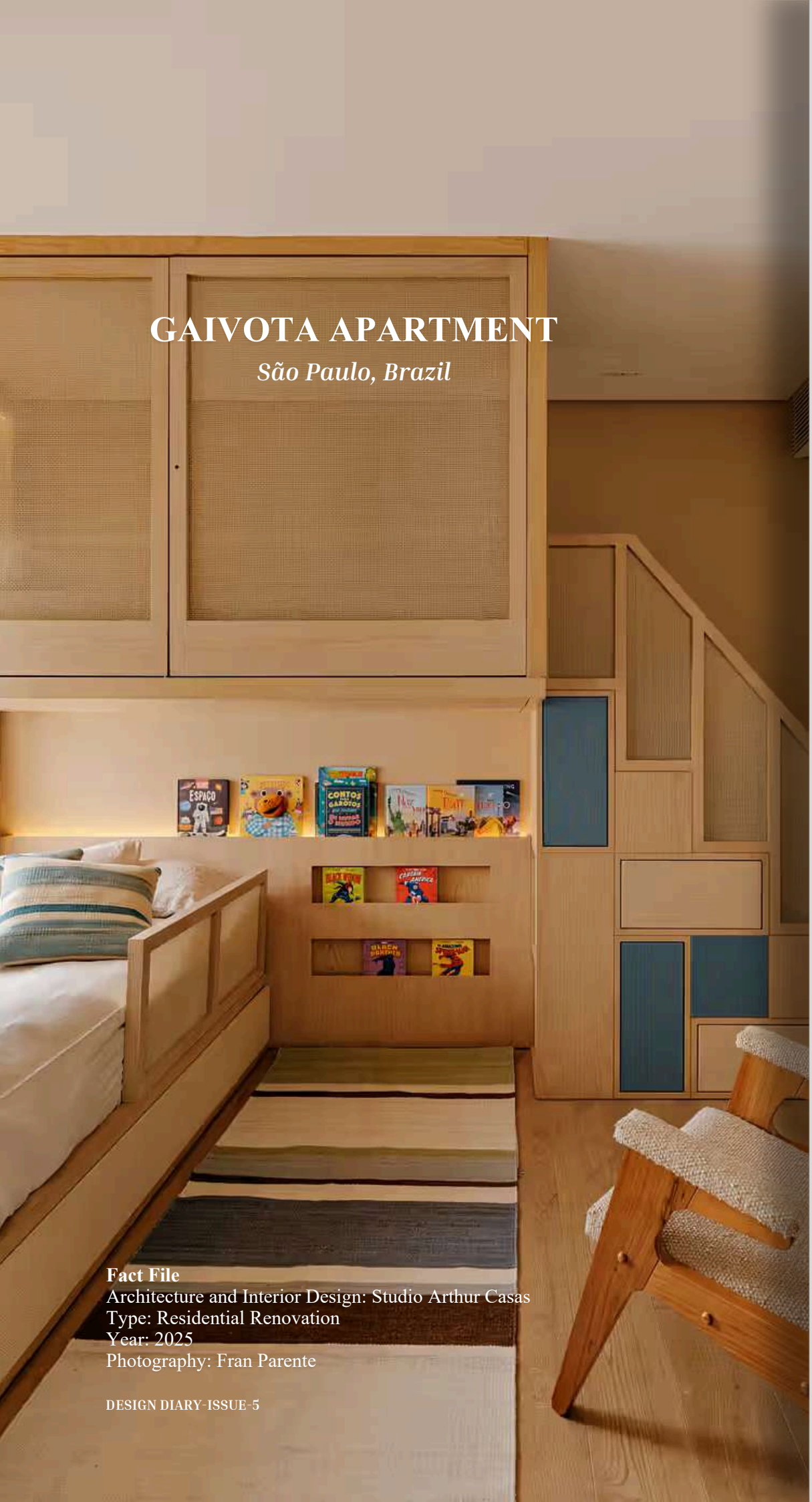
The upper deck is generously proportioned, with retractable screens for protection from the insects that make summer evenings in Muskoka complicated without the right precautions, and an outdoor wood-burning fireplace that echoes the cast concrete hearth inside and extends the deck's usefulness well into the shoulder seasons when the temperature drops after dark but the light on the lake is worth staying outside for. The lower deck, tucked in the shade beneath the projecting upper floor and nestled against the bedrock outcropping, operates in a different register entirely, cooled by the stone below and the cross-breezes off the lake, its protected position making it the preferred space on the hottest days of summer when the full exposure of the upper deck is more light and heat than anyone wants. The two decks emerged naturally from the building's section, shaped by their offset levels rather than being designed as separate elements.



The cottage is fully winterized and entirely off-grid, powered by a large solar array sited on an adjacent outbuilding and constructed from sustainably harvested wood species, including timber milled nearby on the peninsula. Siting the solar array separately from the main building maintains a clean roofline for the cottage and reinforces its connection to the forest instead of appearing as modified infrastructure. The all-wood construction and the sustainably sourced material palette reflect the same commitment to the site that the year of camping before the brief established, the understanding that a building on a motorboat-free lake in the Ontario wilderness owes its surroundings a certain quality of attention that shows up not only in the spatial decisions but also in the material ones.

Fully winterized, Long Lake Cottage is designed to be occupied across all four seasons that Muskoka delivers, from the deep snows and hard frosts of January as much as the long evenings of July, and the stillness of the lake in February as much as the autumn color that the aerial photographs capture in such extraordinary abundance. The building that a year of camping produced is one that knows how to be present in all of them.

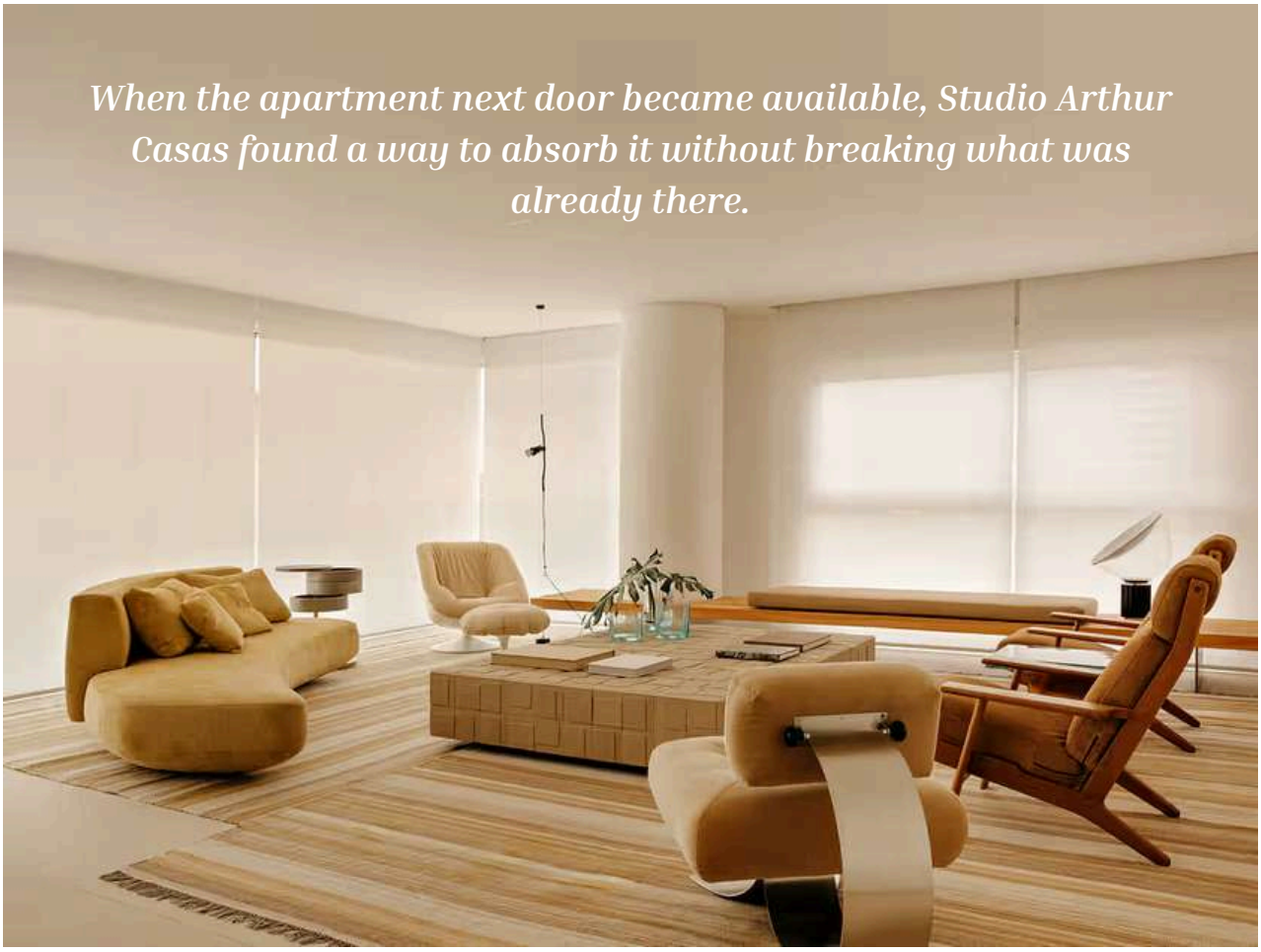
www.dubbeldam.ca



GAIVOTA APARTMENT

São Paulo, Brazil

Fact File
Architecture and Interior Design: Studio Arthur Casas
Type: Residential Renovation
Year: 2025
Photography: Fran Parente



The project begins with a premise that most renovation briefs do not contain. The apartment is already finished, designed, decorated, inhabited, and resolved. Studio Arthur Casas has completed a home for a young couple in São Paulo's Gaivota district, and the family has settled into it, and then the apartment next door becomes available. The practice now faces the question of how to extend an existing home, not how to design a new one, while preserving the existing internal logic, which is more demanding than it appears, because the difficulty of addition lies in managing to avoid disturbing the existing structure.

The family is young and growing, a couple with three small children, and what the additional unit needed to provide was scale, more room for gathering, a proper place for the children, a guest suite, and the ability to receive people at the kind of generous São Paulo scale that a single apartment, however well designed, could not accommodate. The second unit, adjacent to the first and connected through the gourmet area, needed to be integrated seamlessly to create a single interior rather than two separate homes.

The device that resolves this is a large bookcase in deep-stained timber that runs the full height of the connecting wall between the two units, its open shelves holding books, sculptures, and objects in the manner of a library rather than a partition, broadening sightlines from one unit into the other while establishing a visual threshold that the eye crosses without registering as a structural boundary. Standing at the gourmet island in the second unit and looking back through the bookcase toward the first, the apartment reads as a single deep interior, with the large geometric artwork in the original living room visible in the distance through the timber shelving and the park view beyond the full-height glazing framing the whole sequence. The join is visible if you look for it and invisible if you simply live in the space, which is precisely what the project required.

The gourmet island, which connects the two units, is designed with the same economy of means that governs the entire renovation. Its stone countertop is completed using reused material, and a new metal foot is designed to relate to the proportions and character of the original piece rather than replace it. The bar stools at the island, upholstered in tan leather and mounted on black pedestal bases, are positioned against the bookcase wall. This arrangement allows the act of preparing food and the act of crossing from one section of the apartment to the other to share the same territory, with the kitchen and the threshold occupying the same moment in the plan.

The first section of the home, the original apartment, organizes the social life of the family around an island sofa of substantial scale in off-white upholstery with mustard scatter cushions that anchors the living and home theater space in a configuration generous enough to hold an extended family gathering and relaxed enough for a weekday evening with three children. A large geometric artwork in black and beige occupies the wall beside the television unit, a piece in dark wood with oak accents that sits low along the wall and grounds the artwork above it. The retractable projection screen disappears when not in use, allowing the room to shift from cinema to daily occupation without the visual weight of equipment asserting itself between screenings. To one side of the living area, two tan leather armchairs in the Brazilian vintage tradition, low and reclined and deeply comfortable, face across a rosewood coffee table with a glass top toward the main sofa, the arrangement giving the room a second social register alongside the island sofa, a place for conversation at a different scale and in a different proximity.

The park view along the glazed perimeter showcases São Paulo's dramatic greenery, a sweeping tree canopy that enhances the need for thoughtful interior choices. The plaster ceiling runs continuously across the enlarged apartment, uninterrupted from one unit to the other, and the large-format ceramic tile floors of the social areas establish a visual continuity that the bookcase then reinforces, the material logic of the floor and the ceiling making the junction between the two former units feel like a spatial decision rather than an architectural fact.

The second unit introduces a larger living room with a more intimate character than the first despite its scale. A curved organic sofa in mustard velvet introduces a different form language from the rectilinear island sofa of the original unit, and the furniture here, a sculptural cantilever lounge chair, a wooden coffee table in a gridded block pattern, and vintage wooden armchairs, all assemble with the ease of a room that has been lived in rather than staged. Roller blinds filter the São Paulo light rather than admitting it directly, giving the room a diffused quality that the full-height glazing of the original apartment does not have, and the effect is of two living rooms that feel genuinely different in atmosphere despite the consistency of material and palette that connects them.

The dining table in the gourmet area scales up to accommodate the larger gatherings the expanded apartment was commissioned to host, its chrome-framed chairs mixing vintage Brazilian pieces with more contemporary selections in the manner of a table that has accumulated over time rather than been assembled at once. Above it, on the timber-paneled accent wall, an abstract artwork in gold and cream provides the warmth that the neutral palette of the social areas deliberately withholds, leaving the artworks and the furniture to bring texture and emphasis to rooms that have chosen restraint as their primary register.

The private spaces shift the material language of the apartment perceptibly. In the primary bedroom, a channeled upholstered headboard in warm wheat fabric spans the full width of the bed and extends sideways, its fluted vertical panels continuing the room's material warmth while the textured wall covering above it, in the same amber-honey tone, gives the bedroom a depth and enclosure that the white walls of the social areas do not attempt. A vintage rosewood desk with a leather desk chair sits to one side of the bed, the kind of furniture that takes decades to acquire the particular quality of presence it now has, and the combination of it with the bespoke headboard and the warm wall treatment produces a room that reads as the most personal space in the apartment, the place where the clients' accumulated choices are most legibly themselves.

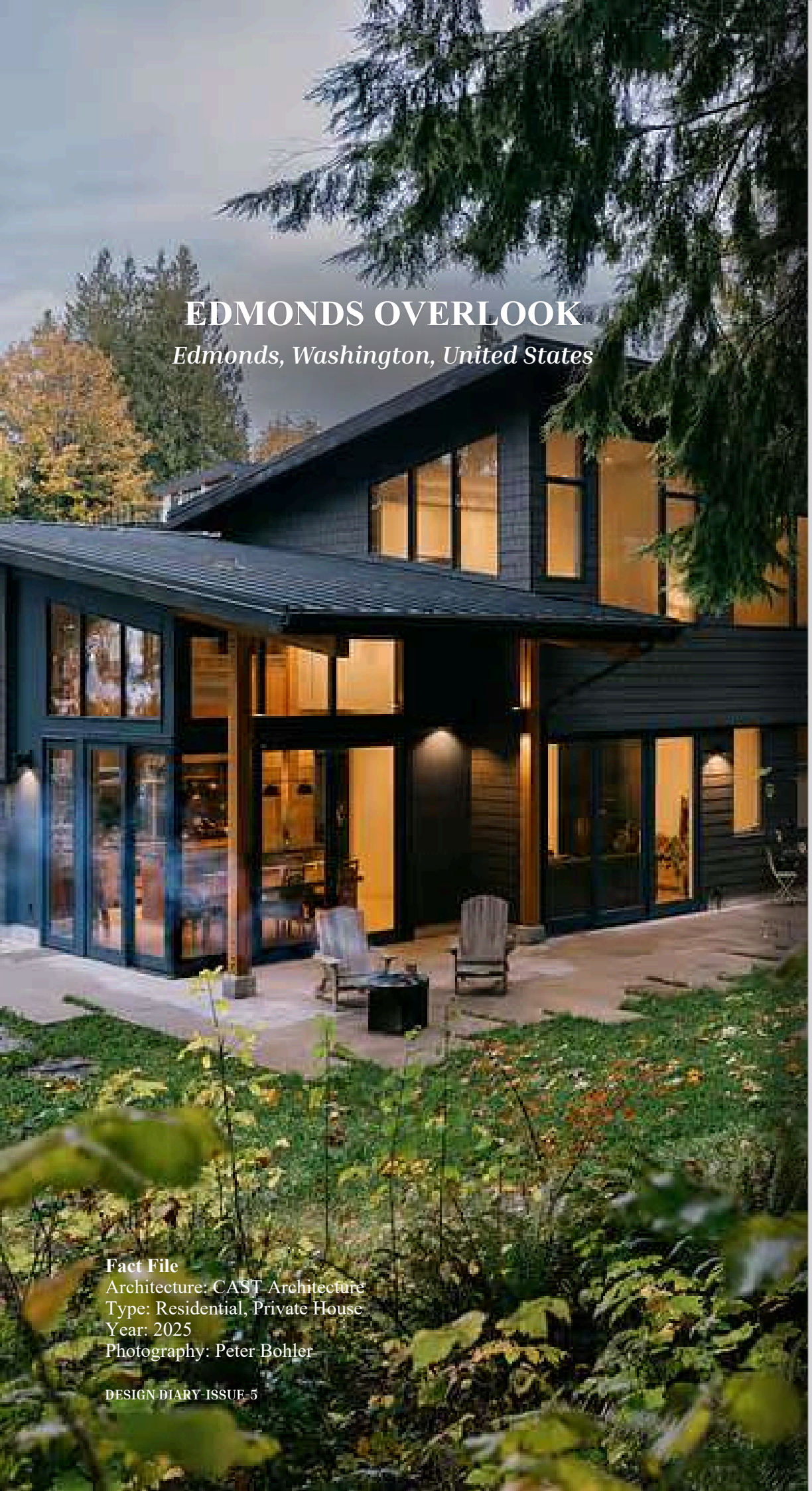
The children's room in the second unit is the most architecturally inventive space in the project and is clearly designed for its specific users. A complete bespoke timber system in pale natural maple occupies the entire primary wall: a lower bunk bed with integrated open book ledges displaying the children's books along its face, overhead storage with perforated cane panel doors above it, and a staircase to a loft sleeping area whose risers incorporate drawer storage painted in a warm denim blue, the only color accent in an apartment that has otherwise held firmly to its neutral palette. The system is complete and considered in the way that the best children's furniture always is, which is not the way of visual playfulness but the way of genuine thought about how children actually inhabit a space and what they need from it across different hours of the day.

The guest room has been designed with its future in mind. Its current use as a guest suite is built on a spatial logic that anticipates its conversion into a third children's bedroom as the family grows, and the decision to build that future change into the current floor plan rather than leaving it to a subsequent renovation reflects the broader intelligence of a project that treats flexibility not as a concept but as a specific set of spatial decisions made in the present to accommodate needs that are not yet present but will be.

In the bathroom, natural oak cladding covers the vanity unit and the surrounding walls in a continuous grain, topped with a dark stone basin whose surface reads almost like slate against the warmth of the timber around it, a black matte faucet providing the single precise contemporary note in a material combination that is warm, specific, and entirely consistent with the private register the bedroom spaces establish. Warm indirect lighting behind the vanity panel creates an amber glow at floor level that makes the bathroom feel inhabited rather than functional, the kind of light that the social areas of the apartment, with their plaster ceilings and their park views, have no need to provide.

What Studio Arthur Casas has produced in Gaivota Apartment is a renovation that absorbs the fact of its own expansion so completely that the enlarged home reads not as two apartments joined but as a single interior that has always been exactly this size, which is a more difficult achievement than the seamlessness of the result makes it appear. The bookcase that joins the two units is the evidence of the work. The apartment that surrounds it, moving from its park-facing living room through the gourmet junction to the new dining scale and the second living room and the children's timber world beyond, is the result.

arthurcasas.com



EDMONDS OVERLOOK

Edmonds, Washington, United States

Fact File
Architecture: CAST Architecture
Type: Residential, Private House
Year: 2025
Photography: Peter Bohler

The answer is a plan organized around an absence. The house is composed of two wings that cradle the meadow between them, holding it as the project's most important room rather than filling it with structure. The wings are kept close to the perimeter of the site, leaving the center unbuilt and the clearing intact so that the meadow reads from within the house not as the space between buildings but as the primary space around which the buildings have been arranged. It is a planning decision that requires considerable restraint and produces, in the completed building, a quality of relationship between the architecture and the landscape that a more conventional siting could not have achieved, the house belonging to the clearing rather than the clearing belonging to the house.

On a wooded bluff just north of Seattle, within the city limits of Edmonds, there is a clearing in the trees that opens to one of the more extraordinary views available from private land in the Pacific Northwest: Puget Sound in the foreground, the Olympic Mountains beyond it, the water and the peaks visible across a sweep of landscape that the surrounding Douglas fir and cedar frame rather than obstruct. When CAST Architecture first visited the site, they found a secluded forest glade with these vistas perched atop a high seaside bluff, and the design challenge they faced was not how to take advantage of the view but how to take advantage of it without taking it apart—how to build a family home on the site while keeping the clearing that made the site worth building on at all.

The approach to the building is deliberately withheld. Rather than revealing the house on arrival, the design sequences the experience so that the clearing and the view are discovered progressively rather than announced immediately. A covered bridge with a green roof connects the upslope garage and office to the main house, doubling as a front porch and marking the threshold between the arrival sequence and the domestic interior without making that threshold feel abrupt. Between the two structures, a gentle stair pulls visitors down through the gap and toward the meadow, establishing the balance between shelter and exposure, compression and release, that the project sustains throughout its interior organization.

The site required considerable technical resolution before the architecture could begin: located on a steep slope in a landslide-prone area, the project demanded a twenty-month land-use and building permit process led by an expert team of engineers addressing vehicle access, fire access, stormwater management, erosion mitigation, and potential earth movement. The clearing and the view are there because someone spent twenty months ensuring they could be responsibly built upon. Inside, the floor plan is efficiently organized and closely tuned to the routines of a family's daily life, each room sized to its purpose without the excess that a view site can encourage when the temptation to make every space a viewing platform overrides the need to make every space functional.

The house opens fully to the Sound and the mountains, but it also maintains a close relationship to the trees and planted ground around it, the two conditions in productive tension rather than resolved in favour of either. The most striking moment in the plan is an open-corner dining area defined by double-height windows at a corner left deliberately free of structure, so that the room reads less as an enclosed box than as an extension toward the landscape, the corner dissolving into the view in a way that connects the act of sitting at a table to the act of looking across water at mountains. An outdoor extension of the great room offers a more intimate and sheltered threshold between the interior and exterior than the main deck or meadow, creating a domestic middle ground.

Smaller gestures keep the experience of the house from becoming only about the panorama. A window seat along the stair offers narrower, more specific views through the trees, the kind of framed glimpse that a large unbroken window cannot provide and that gives a house the quality of having multiple relationships to its landscape rather than one sustained confrontation with it. The second-floor primary suite sits in the canopy, its elevated position giving it a character that the practice describes as having treehouse vibes, an image that fits the project's consistent closeness to the site's mature trees, which are as much a part of the design as the views they frame and the clearing they surround.

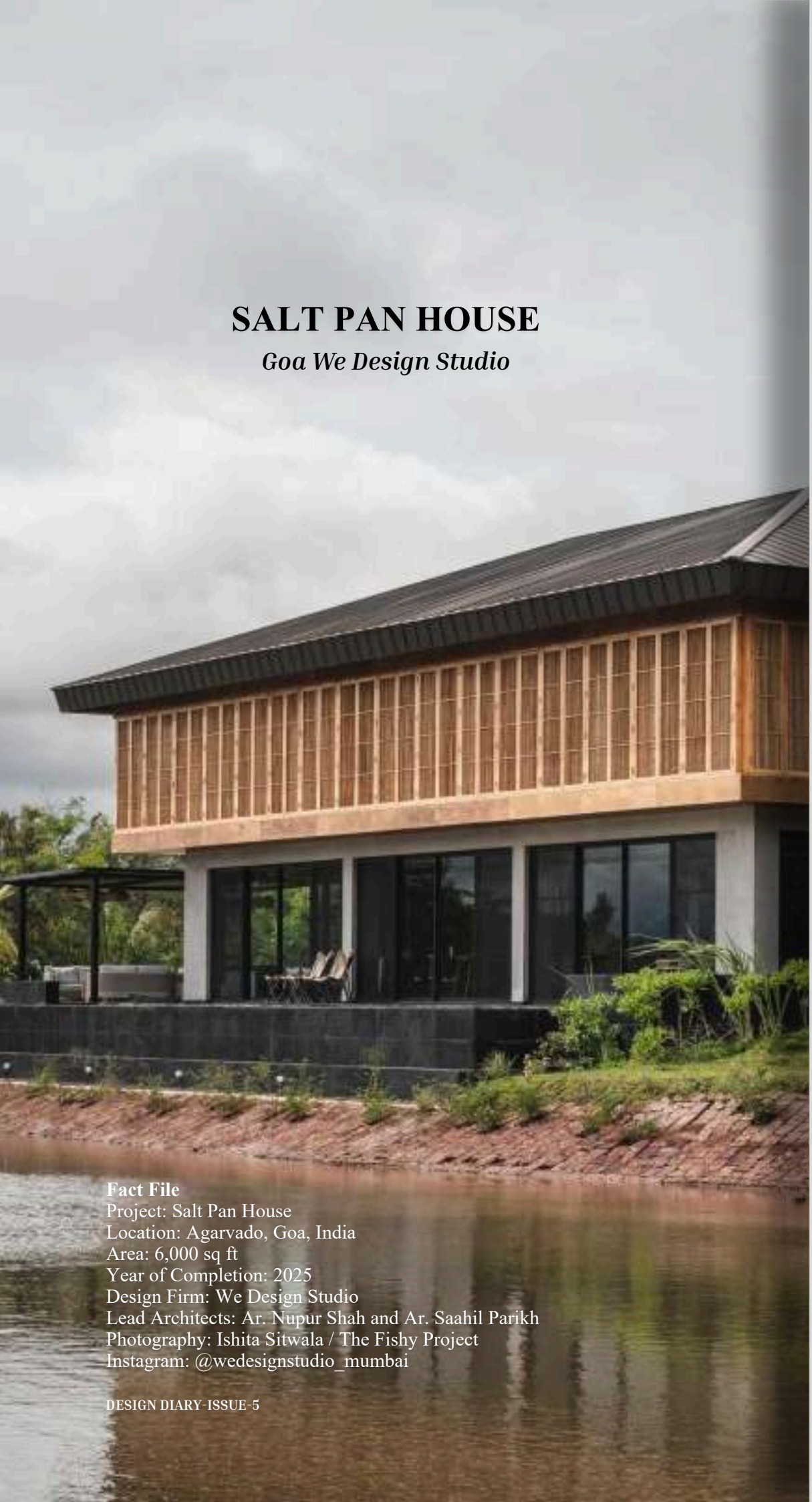
The material palette inside is warm without being heavy. Clear-finished fir runs across much of the interior, giving the light-filled rooms a warm cast during the grey Pacific Northwest winters when natural light is limited and the quality of the interior surfaces plays a larger role in creating the atmosphere. In the kitchen, white oak cabinets bring a lighter tone alongside the fir, and the combination of the two species within the interior reflects the same material logic that governs the exterior, where the house is clad in materials chosen for their relationship to the wooded setting rather than their contrast with it. The house is compact compared to similar homes in the area. This decision reduces both the carbon impact of construction and the ongoing energy consumption during occupancy. The project's environmental ethic extends from preserving the clearing to the sizing of the conditioned space within it.

What CAST Architecture has built on this wooded bluff above Puget Sound is a house organized around the discipline of not building where it was not necessary to build, and the result of that discipline is a site that retains the quality that made it worth designing for in the first place. The meadow is still there. The trees still frame the water and the mountains. The house sits at the perimeter of the clearing, looking inward at what it preserved and outward at what the land already had. The experience of being inside it is that of a building that understood its own limits clearly enough to stay within them.

www.castarchitecture.com

SALT PAN HOUSE

Goa We Design Studio



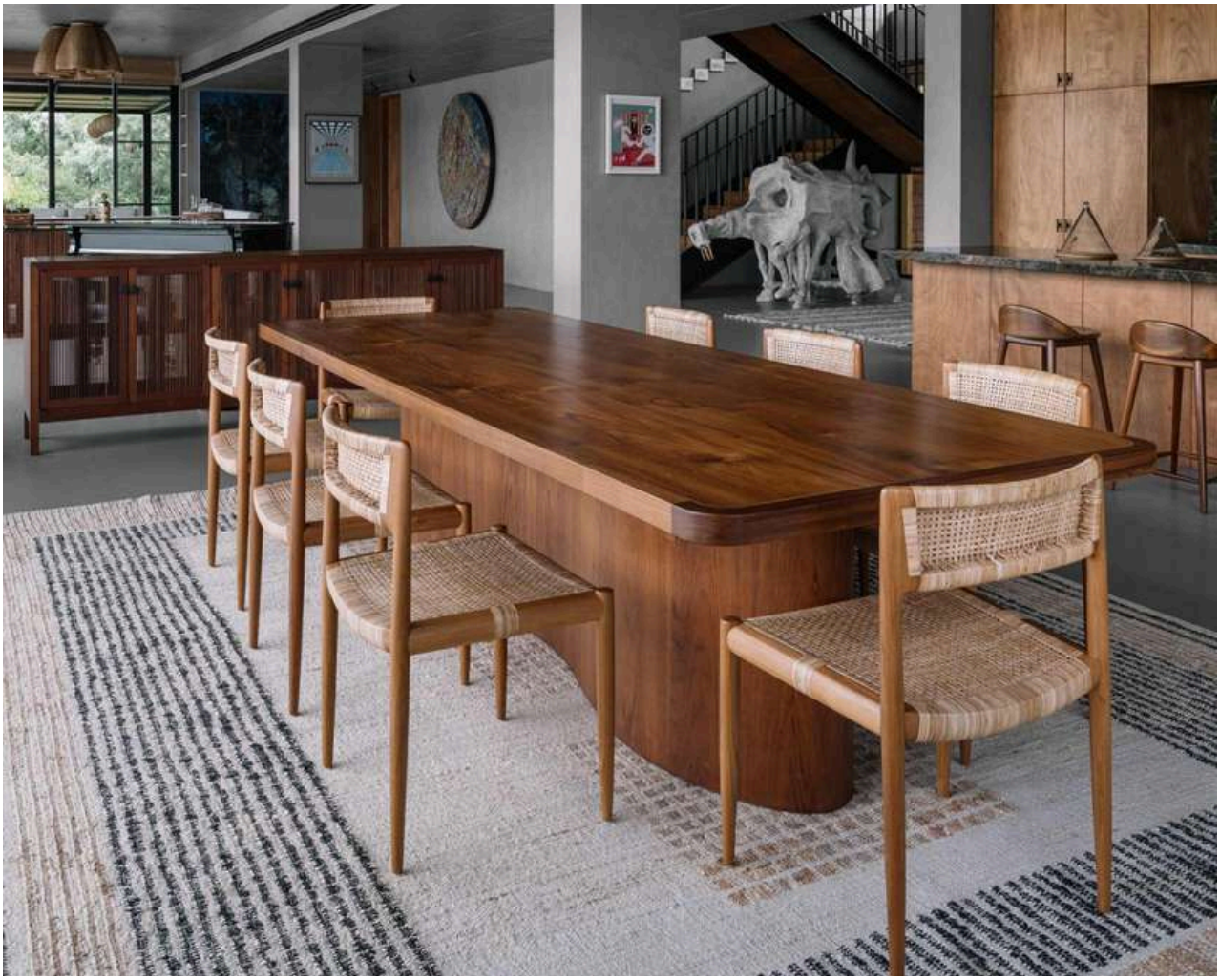
Fact File
Project: Salt Pan House
Location: Agarvado, Goa, India
Area: 6,000 sq ft
Year of Completion: 2025
Design Firm: We Design Studio
Lead Architects: Ar. Nupur Shah and Ar. Saahil Parikh
Photography: Ishita Sitwala / The Fishy Project
Instagram: @wedesignstudio_mumbai

The ten-acre property in the village of Agarvado took a decade to acquire. Nestled between the Chapora River and a dense mangrove belt, the ten-acre property features three man-made salt pans that predate any architect's arrival, making it a site that requires patience. When Saahil Parikh and Nupur Shah of We Design Studio first visited, it was monsoon season. The terrain was so waterlogged they could barely cross it, with mud climbing to their ankles before they had covered much ground. They came back anyway and kept coming back until what finally emerged from that marshy, specific, quietly extraordinary landscape was a house that looks as though it was always going to be exactly here.

Coastal regulations in Goa limit how much you can build and where, which meant that 6,000 square feet had to carry five bedrooms, six bathrooms, a full program of living and dining and kitchen and bar, and a spa below the pool deck, without the excess that a less considered brief might have allowed. Parikh and Shah responded by placing the house at the southern edge of the largest salt pan so that the reflective body of water sits in constant, shifting view and by letting the logic of the site and the demands of the tropical climate set the terms for everything else. The result is a house of three distinct layers that reads from the outside, particularly from across the pool where the infinity edge dissolves into the saline water and the mangroves stretch beyond it, as a single unhurried object held carefully against the Goan sky.

The ground floor is raw concrete, low and heavy, anchored to the earth. The living and dining rooms, the kitchen, a bar, and a guest bedroom that faces south toward a belt of dense foliage all occupy this level, opening through full-height glazing to the pool deck and the salt pan beyond. Above it, a cantilevered volume entirely wrapped in openable teak louvered screens holds four bedrooms and a family lounge, the warm grain of the teak sitting against the grey of the concrete below with the ease of materials that belong in the same landscape. A titanium-zinc alloy roof, dark and precisely pitched, sits over everything, its clean edge cutting against the grey monsoon sky in photographs that make the building look as though it has always been part of the horizon it interrupts. At night, the light filtering outward through the teak screens gives the upper floor a lantern quality, visible from across the water.

Arrival is from the land side, up black stone steps beneath a steel-framed entrance canopy flanked by laterite brick walls, the red of the laterite warm against the grey of the concrete and the dark of the steel. The entrance frames a view straight through the double-height interior to the salt pan on the other side so that the landscape the house sits within is present from the very first moment of entry. Inside, the ceiling rises to follow the pitch of the roof, with grey cement plaster walls running uninterrupted from the floor to the exposed timber beam. Two low grey linen sofas sit around a long solid wood coffee table on the polished concrete floor, a large woven rattan pendant overhead, its form organic and voluminous, more closely related to something found on a shoreline than to anything manufactured. Bamboo roller blinds on one side, the full width of the salt pan through the glazing on the other. On days when the light is flat and the water is still, the pool and the pan beyond read as a single continuous surface, the boundary between the built and the natural genuinely indistinct.



An ancient carved wooden panel leans against a column near the staircase. The art in this house is not decorative in any conventional sense. It accumulates through the rooms the way a personal collection does over decades, which is to say without a single governing logic, each piece present on its own terms. A dark abstract work is mounted on the wall of the living room. A circular painting anchors the dining area. Framed works in various registers punctuate the grey plaster at intervals across the ground floor. At the base of the black steel staircase, a large, imposing pale grey sculptural form takes up the floor with authority, dramatically altering the character of the space around it. It sits beneath the staircase the way a significant work always sits: as though the room was arranged around it rather than the other way.

The dining table is solid teak, long and rounded at both ends, surrounded by cane-back chairs. A brass and glass industrial pendant hangs above it. The bar and kitchen cabinetry behind is warm oak, floor to ceiling, set against countertops and a backsplash in richly veined dark green granite, the stone so particular in its patterning that it reads almost as a geological specimen. An aged brass pendant hangs over the island. The concrete floor continues through. It is a kitchen that is completely resolved without drawing attention to itself, which in a house so full of things demanding attention is its own kind of achievement.

The black steel staircase climbs through the double-height void beside a large, bold painting in vibrant yellows, reds, and oranges, the only vivid element in an otherwise muted house. At the upper landing, looking across the black railing, a full-width picture window frames an unbroken wall of tropical green, the mangrove canopy so close it reads almost as a painted surface. Organic nest-like pendant lights cluster from the timber ceiling of this landing, echoing the nearby vegetation and blurring the boundary between the manmade and the natural.

The first-floor corridor runs between the bedroom doors on one side and the teak louvered screens on the other, and on a sunny day the slats cast long parallel lines across the grey cement floor that shift and narrow as the hours pass.

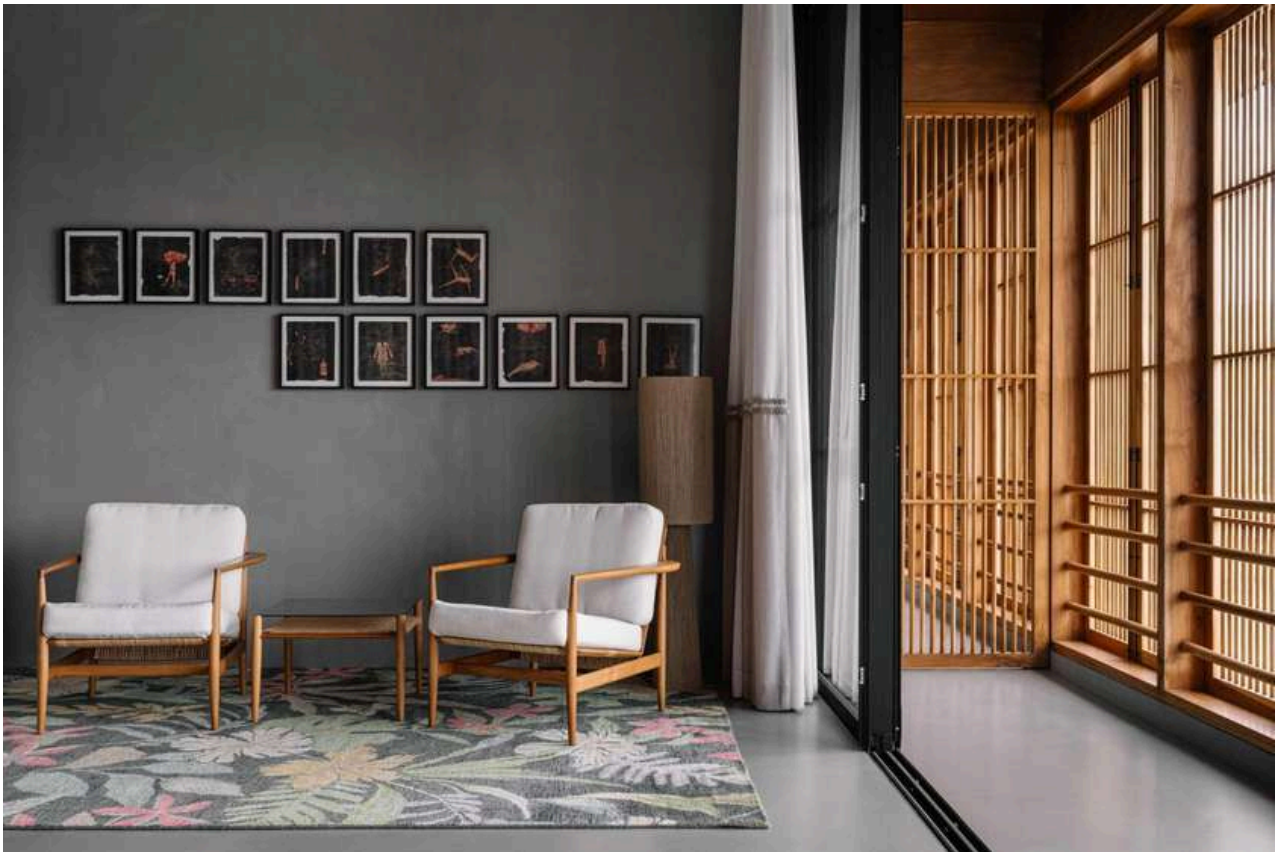
It is the kind of incidental architectural experience that photographs well but feels better in person, the quality of light so particular to this building and this landscape that it could not have been produced by any other combination of materials and orientation.

The family lounge at the end of this corridor is the warmest room in the house: a large curved pleated sofa in pale grey, round armchairs, a circular jute rug, a dark wood coffee table, and a bronze pendant light shaped like a cluster of tropical leaves hanging from the timber ceiling, the teak screens filling the full wall behind the furniture, the landscape beyond them present in fragments.

The bedrooms share the same material ground throughout: grey cement plaster, dark timber ceilings, ceiling fans, teak screens, and full-height glass opening to the continuous balcony that wraps the entire first floor. Within that shared register, each room has its own character. One has a platform bed with a solid wood desk integrated behind the headboard, a framed artwork in deep red and grey above it, a patterned rug, and through the glazed wall, nothing but a tropical canopy. Another has a walnut bed with paired side tables and lamps, a cane bench at its foot, black sculptural wall sconces flanking a framed figurative work, and the salt pan landscape reading through the louvered screens in long horizontal lines of water and sky. A third room features floor-to-ceiling glass opening to a private garden, warm timber flooring, and upholstered armchairs facing the lush Goan green, blurring the boundary between the room and garden.

The bathrooms are where the house allows itself the most freedom. One bathroom features black textured stone, an organically shaped mirror in a rope-wrapped surround above a black undermount sink, and sculptural black sconces with globe bulbs. It is so monochromatic and so still that it reads more like a room designed for thought than for grooming. The other goes somewhere entirely different: dark green-veined marble covering every wall and surface, the stone's white veining catching the light in ways that change depending on where you are standing, a ceiling installation of glass and ceramic beads in green and white forming botanical and tropical leaf shapes overhead, a white ceramic vessel sink on a timber vanity, and brass fittings throughout. In two rooms of the same house, there are two completely different understandings of what material intensity can achieve when it is given enough confidence to follow through.


INSECTS



Below the pool deck, reached by a separate stair, a spa with a steam room, sauna, and changing rooms occupies a subterranean level that completes the program without altering the building's profile from the outside. The ten acres beyond the house hold a pickleball court, an all-weather gym fitted with equipment made from recycled timber, a yoga pavilion, a greenhouse growing produce for the household, and a private jetty that reaches toward the river. Each element is thoughtfully integrated, harmonizing with the house and the surrounding landscape.

Building within a coastal regulatory zone in Goa brought specific technical demands. A coffer dam was required for the pool. An open municipal drain had to be integrated into the site planning. Each problem was resolved within the design rather than around it, making the house more thoughtfully designed as a result.

What Parikh and Shah have built on this salt pan in Agarvado is a house that is deeply specific to where it stands, to the quality of light that moves across that water, to the weight of the monsoon sky, and to the way the mangroves hold the horizon at a particular height. The materials are local, the logic is climatic, and the art that fills the rooms is personal in the way that only a collection gathered over decades can be. It is 6,000 square feet on ten acres, and the proportion feels exactly right.

www.wedesignstudio.co.in

Bocado Lobo — Sancho Armchair

The Sancho armchair arrives as a functional sculpture, its monumental split base reimagined in walnut root veneer whose swirling grain carries the compressed history of centuries of growth. Cast brass details interrupt the wood at precise moments, creating a deliberate duality between the organic warmth of the timber and the cold brilliance of the metal. The seat is upholstered in Wild Thing, a bouclé-effect jacquard that completes a piece built entirely around the tension between materials.

bocadolobo.com

Bernhardt — Lomani Outdoor Sofa

The Lomani outdoor sofa from Bernhardt is built around the shelter back, a curved rope-woven structure in Driftwood finish that wraps around the plush seat and grounds the piece in the outdoor living tradition without conceding any of its architectural presence. The seat flows down to rounded block feet, and knife-edge back cushions complete a design that is as considered in its comfort as in its silhouette.

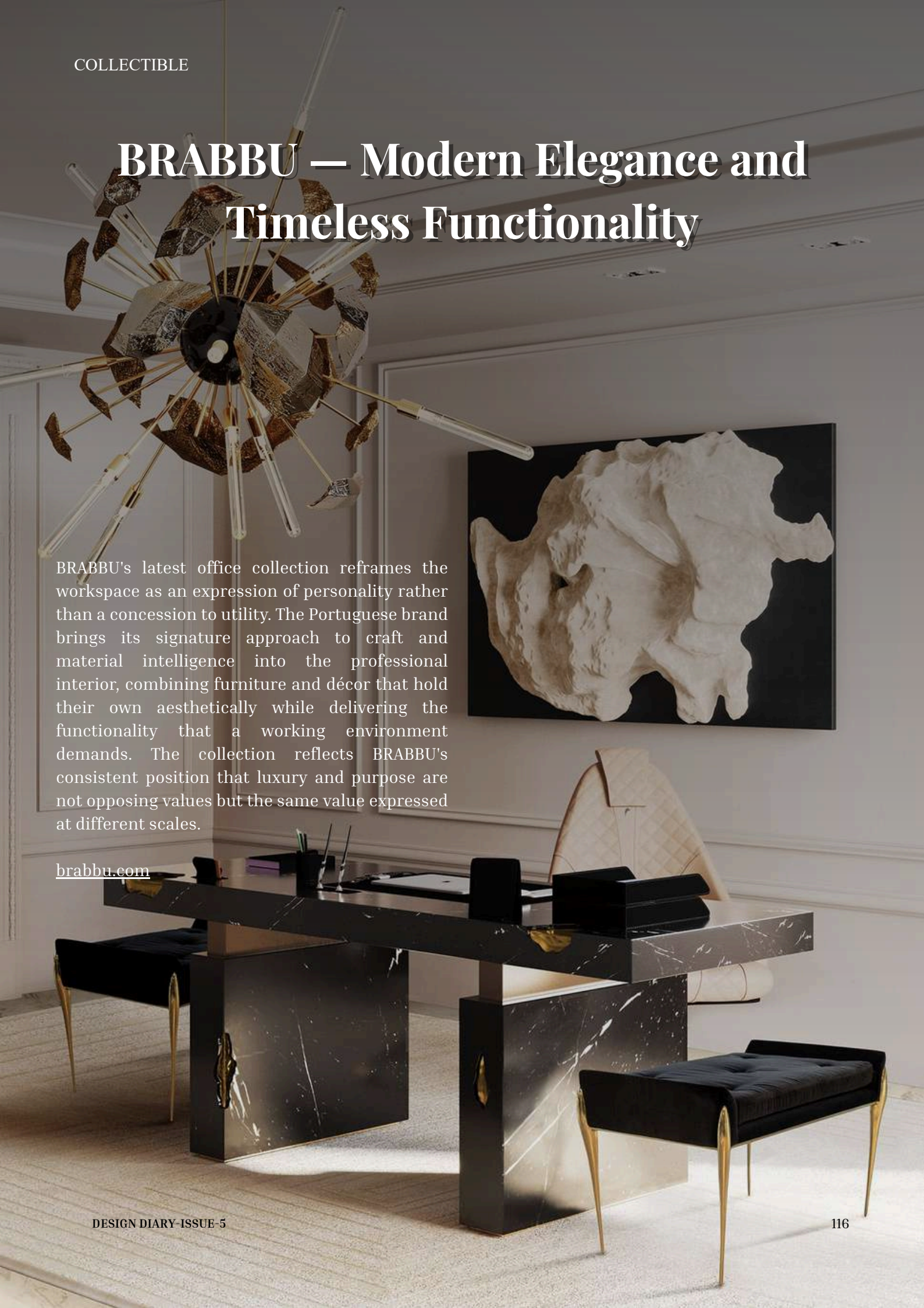
bernhardt.com

Cittá — Port Table Lamp

Designed in Cittá's New Zealand studio by David Moreland and Haydn Nixon, the Port Table Lamp extends the Port lighting family with a mouth-blown opal glass form whose rounded silhouette draws directly from the contours of a port bottle. The opal glass diffuses light into a warm ambient glow while discreetly housing the bulb holder within the form, keeping the silhouette clean from every angle. A dimmable in-line switch and E14 fitting complete a lamp that earns its place on a surface through considered restraint rather than gesture.

citta.com

BRABBU — Modern Elegance and Timeless Functionality



BRABBU's latest office collection reframes the workspace as an expression of personality rather than a concession to utility. The Portuguese brand brings its signature approach to craft and material intelligence into the professional interior, combining furniture and décor that hold their own aesthetically while delivering the functionality that a working environment demands. The collection reflects BRABBU's consistent position that luxury and purpose are not opposing values but the same value expressed at different scales.

brabbu.com

UCUORO—Pet Furniture Collection

UCUORO, the Indian design house known for its material-led approach to luxury furniture, turns its attention this summer to the one category the interiors industry has consistently treated as an afterthought. The brand's first Pet Furniture Collection launches with ten designs across feeding, sleeping, playing, and storage, developed through a year-long research process involving veterinarians, pet behaviorists, and interior designers. The result is furniture built with the same material integrity and ergonomic consideration as UCUORO's main collection, pieces that belong in a considered interior rather than being hidden from one.

ucuoro.com

The Object That Glass Has Never Surpassed

The Portland Vase. Roman, 1 to 25 AD. Cameo glass. Height 24.5 cm, diameter 17.7 cm. British Museum, London, Room 70

It is smaller than you expect. Standing in Room 70 of the British Museum, looking at the object that has been called the finest piece of glass ever made, the first thing that registers is not the grandeur of a ceremonial vessel but the intimacy of something that could be held in two hands, a dark cobalt blue amphora of 24.5 centimetres in height and 17.7 centimetres at its widest point, its surface carrying a continuous band of white carved relief figures moving through a scene that scholars have been arguing about for four centuries without reaching agreement, the figures themselves serene in the way that objects made with absolute conviction tend to be serene, indifferent to the centuries of interpretation that have accumulated around them and to the extraordinary technical achievement that produced them, which is one of the most sustained acts of craft skill in the history of any material in any civilisation.

The technique that produced those white figures against that dark ground is called cameo glass, and it was practised in the Roman world for approximately two generations, from around 50 BC to around 50 AD, a window of perhaps a century during which a small number of workshops in the ancient world understood how to do something that nobody before them had done and that nobody after them would fully recover for more than a thousand years. The Portland Vase is the finest surviving example of this technique, the largest and the most completely resolved, and it is also the most studied single object in the history of glassmaking, with research consistently producing both technical admiration and continued uncertainty, because the vase is an object that reveals the more clearly you look at it how much remains unknown about who made it, when exactly, for whom, what the scenes on its surface depict, and by what precise sequence of operations a workshop in the ancient world produced a surface of this quality in a material as unforgiving as glass.

The making begins with the dark blue glass itself, a cobalt-rich silicate of a depth and purity that the Roman glassmakers achieved through the addition of specific mineral compounds to the molten batch in proportions that varied by workshop and period and that were not written down in any surviving text. Recent research by Associate Professor Richard Whiteley of the Australian National University has challenged the long-held classification of the Portland Vase as blown glass, presenting evidence that it may have been cast rather than blown, a distinction that would significantly alter the understood sequence of its making. What is not disputed is the dip-overlay method by which the dark blue vessel was partially submerged in molten opaque white glass while still hot, the white layer adhering to the surface of the blue and cooling with it into a compound object of two colours fused together, the evenness of that white layer across a vessel of this size representing a technical achievement whose difficulty anyone who has worked with glass will understand and anyone who has not will tend to underestimate, because glass at the temperature required for fusion is a material of extremely narrow tolerance and the margin between the white layer adhering correctly and the entire object cracking from thermal stress is not wide.

Once cooled, the white layer was given to a carver, and it is here that the making of the Portland Vase becomes something that the distinction between craft and art was invented to describe and cannot finally contain. The carver's task was to remove the white glass wherever it was not required, leaving raised figures in relief against the dark blue ground that showed through wherever the white had been taken away, using metal points and abrasive wheels of the kind used by gem engravers, grinding the surface fraction by fraction in a process of such precision and such slowness that the figures which remain tell you almost nothing about the effort of their removal. The raised areas vary in height across the surface of the vessel, the deepest relief giving the foreground figures their three-dimensionality, the shallower carving suggesting recession and atmosphere in a material that contains no middle distance of its own. The modelling of the flesh, the drapery falling across the figures, the musculature of the male forms and the softness of the female, the snake that appears between the two scenes, all of it is achieved through the removal of glass rather than its addition, through a process of controlled subtraction that is as close to sculpture as to craft and as close to drawing as to either.

Seven figures appear across the two scenes separated by bearded horned heads below the handles, arranged in a composition of considerable pictorial intelligence, their relationships implied through gesture and gaze rather than stated explicitly. The most widely accepted identification is the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, the mortal king and the sea goddess whose union produced Achilles, with the deity Oceanus presiding from one side. Other scholars have proposed the story of Mark Antony and Octavia, or an allegory of the afterlife connected to the Eleusinian mysteries. None of these identifications has been conclusively established, and the vase keeps its narrative to itself with the same opacity that the dark blue glass keeps its depth.

The vase was found in Rome at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in a tomb on the Monte del Grano that was believed at the time to be that of the Emperor Alexander Severus, though this attribution has not been confirmed. Its first recorded appearance in a collection is in a letter from the French scholar Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who noted it in 1600-1601 in the possession of Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, one of the most significant collectors of the Roman Renaissance and a man whose eye for quality was so consistently reliable that the vase's presence in his collection was itself a form of authentication. From Del Monte it passed to the Barberini family, who held it for approximately 150 years, during which period it became known as the Barberini Vase, its reputation as the supreme example of ancient glass established through a combination of genuine technical admiration and the social currency that attached to ownership of an object this universally acknowledged to be exceptional. Peter Paul Rubens saw it and wrote about it. Its fame spread through Europe by word of mouth and through the letters of connoisseurs, and it was this accumulated reputation, built over a century and a half of Barberini ownership, that gave the vase the cultural weight it carried when it left Rome under the most undignified circumstances imaginable, because it was lost in a card game. Sometime before 1778, Princess Cordelia Barberini-Colonna sat down to a game of cards and came away without the vase, which passed to a Scottish art dealer as settlement of her debt, beginning the journey that would bring it to England.

In 1778 it was purchased by Sir William Hamilton, the British Ambassador at the Court of Naples, whose collection of antiquities was among the most significant private collections of the period, and who brought it to England and sold it in 1784 to Margaret, the Dowager Duchess of Portland, for a considerable sum, after whom it takes the name by which it is now universally known. Two years after the Duchess's death, her son the third Duke of Portland made the decision that would determine the vase's subsequent cultural history more than any other act of ownership, lending it to Josiah Wedgwood, who had been attempting to produce a replica in his newly developed jasperware and who understood the Portland Vase well enough to know how far he was from achieving it. The project consumed four years of his most intense effort, repeated visits to study the surface, trial pieces, refined jasper bodies, rejected results that a less exacting practitioner would have accepted, until he finally produced in 1790 what he considered a satisfactory copy and offered the first edition of fifty pieces at fifty guineas each, an extraordinary price that reflected his own assessment of what he had achieved. Those first-edition Wedgwood Portland Vases are now in museum collections across the world, their value a function of both their own quality and the quality of the object that inspired them, the copies made precious by proximity to the original in a way that makes no logical sense and perfect cultural sense simultaneously.

The vase was deposited in the British Museum by the fourth Duke of Portland in 1810 and remained on loan from the Portland family for over a century, displayed and studied and copied and argued about, until the seventh Duke sold it to the museum in 1945 for a sum that has never been made public. On 7 February 1845, an Irish visitor named William Lloyd entered the museum and threw a nearby Assyrian stone sculpture against the case containing the vase, shattering it into more than two hundred fragments. The popular legend that Lloyd was drunk when he did this has been repeated so consistently that it has acquired the authority of fact, but contemporary accounts do not conclusively support it. What is clear is that the fragments were gathered, the first restoration was attempted in the same year, a second restoration followed in 1948, and by 1986 the joints of that second restoration rattled when the vase was gently tapped. The third and current reconstruction was completed in 1987 by a new generation of conservators using new adhesives and a new understanding of the object's physical history, and the Portland Vase as it stands in Room 70 today is the product of this third reconstruction, with a small number of fragments that could not be placed stored separately, and the cameo glass disc showing a pensive figure in a Phrygian cap that was attached to the base from at least 1826 displayed independently, its original relationship to the vase still an open question.

The shattering and the restoration enhanced rather than diminished the vase's reputation, in the way that the breaking and mending of significant objects sometimes does, by adding to their story a chapter of vulnerability and survival that makes them feel more human than objects of pure perfection can ever feel. The Victorian period that followed the 1845 restoration saw the Portland Vase become the inspiration for an entire craft revival, when Benjamin Richardson of the Red House Glassworks at Wordsley offered £1000 to anyone who could reproduce it in cameo glass. The challenge was taken up by Philip Pargeter, who in 1873 supervised the production of the first cased glass blank shaped like the vase, blown by Daniel Hancock, and by John Northwood, who between 1873 and 1876 carved one of Pargeter's blanks into the first modern glass replica made by the cameo technique, an achievement that led to a flood of commissions and a Victorian vogue for cameo glass that lasted until the end of the century and produced some of the finest decorative glass made in England before or since. Northwood's replica is now held at the Corning Museum of Glass in New York, a copy of the original that is itself now a museum object, the replica acquiring the dignity of the thing it replicated through the quality of its own making.

The contemporary world has not lost interest. In 2024, the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento mounted an exhibition titled The Portland Vase: Mania and Muse, featuring more than sixty works by contemporary artists including Viola Frey, Squeak Carnwath, Hitomi Hosono, Clare Twomey, Roberto Lugo, and Michael Eden, each engaging with the vase as both a historical object and a cultural provocation, questioning why a single ancient vessel continues to exert such authority over the artistic imagination more than two thousand years after it was made. In 2012, the Stourbridge glass community produced a twenty-first century cameo glass replica of the Portland Vase to celebrate four hundred years of glassmaking in the region, with support from the British Museum's own curators, an act of homage that demonstrated how completely the vase had become the benchmark against which the entire tradition of cameo glass measures itself. The words Portland Vase yield over sixteen million results in a Google search, appearing as aspirational photographs, tattoos, non-fungible tokens, and commercial replicas in every material and at every price point, a measure of how thoroughly a Roman workshop's achievement between the years of 1 and 25 AD has penetrated the visual culture of a world that did not exist when it was made.

What made it museum worthy, to answer the question that the museum is always implicitly being asked to answer about every object in its collection, is not its age alone, nor its survival, nor even the undisputed beauty of its surface, though all of these contribute to its standing. What made it museum worthy is the convergence of qualities that very rarely appear together in a single object: a technical achievement so complete that it has never been fully surpassed in the same material, a pictorial intelligence that rewards sustained attention without yielding to it entirely, a history of ownership and influence that encompasses some of the most significant figures in the history of art and craft across four centuries, a destruction and restoration that added to its meaning rather than subtracting from it, and a continuing capacity to inspire, provoke, and instruct makers across every medium who encounter it in the glass case where it has been standing since 1810. The Romans who made it between the first century before and the first century after the common era could not have anticipated, even in their most ambitious conception of their own work, that two thousand years later it would be in a museum in a city that did not yet exist, generating sixteen million search results in a technology that lay further in the future than Troy was in their past, still debated, still studied, still copied, still the object by which glassmakers measure the distance between what they can do and what has already been done.

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