



212box

Collaborations: A Houston Penthouse

Cordiality, affability, and geniality are synonyms for warmth. For the array of social gatherings this penthouse was born to accommodate, the meanings of these words are also resonant. There are two points of access to this residence—a private entrance in sultry shades of brown and dark gray, and a public entrance in resplendent white. The darker tones prevail in the private ingress. The patterns swirling along the surfaces of the torched-wood vertical elements and the staccato terrazzo flooring produce a magnetic sense of movement in the area. But only the long spine of timber flooring that creates a runway through the entire length of the main living spaces and extends into the guest bedroom is obvious when the doors to the elevator open.

One has to turn around to realize this entrance to the penthouse unfolds through mystifying millwork that disguises intriguing elements while also being a model of form and function. It's a Curiosity Cabinet with an array of doors, drawers, and insets that make up a twenty-five-foot-long installation, a necessity we employed to create harmony from irregularity. Between the columns on the wall where the cabinet is installed, volume widths and depths varied dramatically, at times offering as little as eighteen inches of space. This built-in allowed us to save every inch possible while also actualizing a highly refined feature that became a puzzled linear composition of boxes in a pinwheel pattern.

Once the exterior was strategized in size and scope, we went carcass-by-carcass to introduce function, designing a logical storage system where there is a place for every single item. If the homeowners need an adhesive bandage from a first-aid kit, we reasoned, why not make the drawer as beautiful as possible? It was the same for many other hideaways, such as the compartment holding the tool kit, which includes perfectly

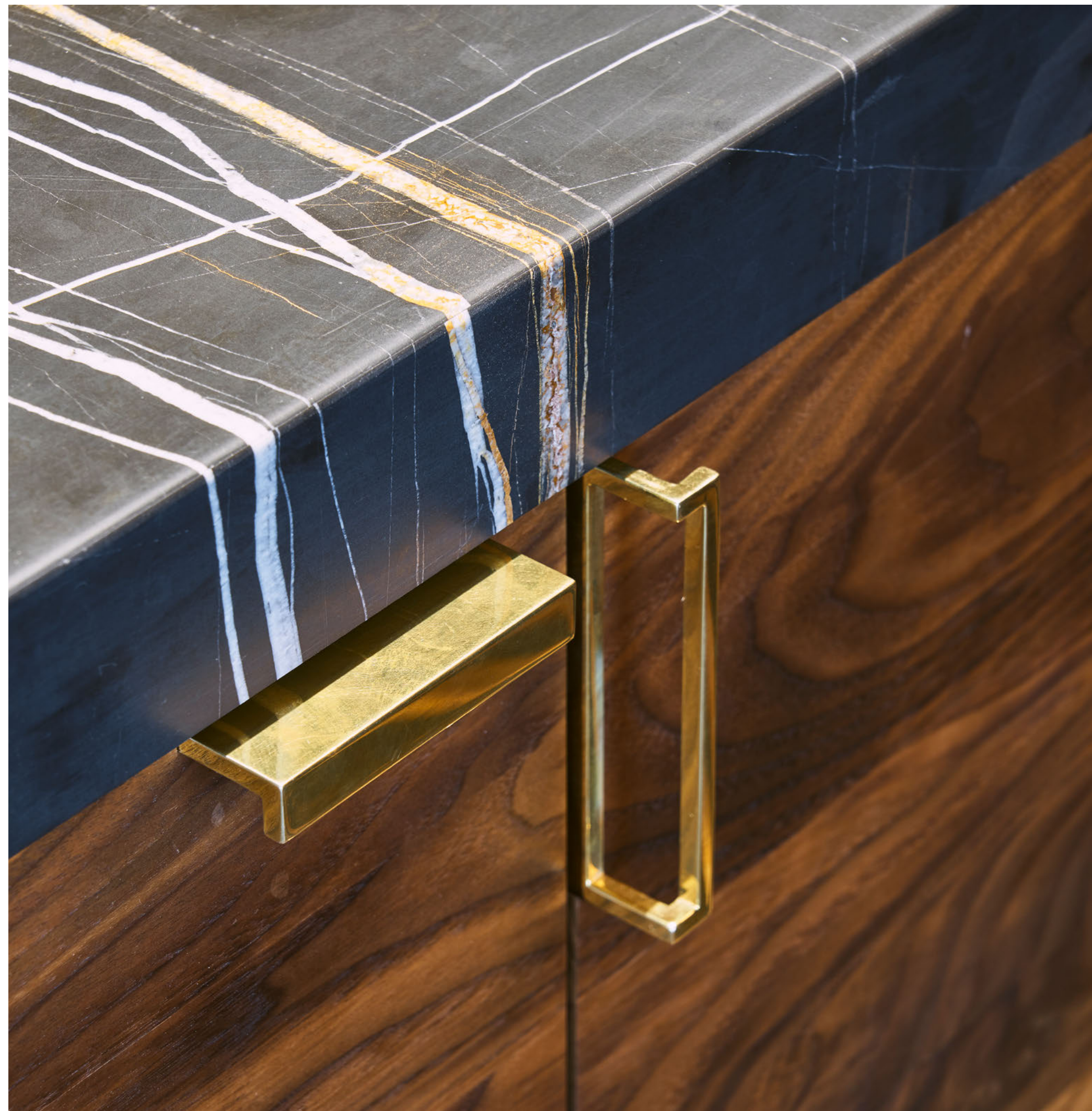
fitted recesses so that every instrument stays in place. By putting so much thought into the cabinet before we fabricated it, we were able to cleverly conceal objects and create small surprises.

The latter includes the fact that the cabinet doors open in differing directions, which makes interacting with them an exercise in riddling through a puzzle. The surfaces are solid wood, and after the front faces of the walnut were torched so that the sugars in the grains burned off to accentuate the textures, they were clear-coated. To make the composition more complex aesthetically, we flipped the direction of the graining so that each panel was perpendicular to the one adjacent, following a logic system that jumped from one flat surface to the next to create a dynamic layer of patternmaking.

We turned to the talented Gregory Madzio, the founder of HIICompany Corp., to help us build these into a solid working whole. In fact, the millwork in every room in the penthouse except the kitchen was realized by his talented team. Madzio's passion for woodworking, which we share later in this chapter, has been all-consuming for most of his adult life. Into the framework that his team built, we fitted varying stones, brass and glass shelving, and extremely thick ribbed glass panels created by Nathan Allan Glass Studios. The textured pieces of the latter run behind one section of the bookshelves and are inset into the powder room door. We tapped this Canadian firm, whose profile is included in this chapter, because they are master craftspeople at producing kiln-formed glass. The sheets we included throughout the penthouse are a half-inch thick. The quality and purity of the material given this depth, and the fact that it is at times fluted, fritted, or smoked, is impressive.











We amped up our sense of playfulness in the inner formations of the cabinet with secret buttons behind the lower doors that open the tallest compartments. When one button is pressed, for instance, doors swing open and Siri declares “party mode,” which triggers music to blast through Bose speakers, and laser lights to pop on and rotate. Suddenly, the penthouse has become a disco! Other features of this labyrinthian built-in include a ladder that pulls out to allow easy access to the upper cabinets meant for storage; and stationery trays next to a flip-down desk. A stool with a minimal handle-like backrest is tucked away in the study, the t-shaped back making it a breeze to retrieve.

The door to the powder room at one end of the Curiosity Cabinet isn’t obvious because it is deeply inset; at the opposite end are shelves in front of a backlit onyx panel. The private elevator is tucked into the cabinetry between a dry bar and a hard-liquor bar, each of which is ornamented with shelving we designed to showcase contemporary art, glass decorative pieces, vintage and antique bottles, liquor, demitasse cups, wine goblets, and other cocktail-hour paraphernalia. The shaping of the shelving was based on a gift Eric’s son gave him, a brass triple-cross puzzle like a small jack with six cylinders that come together to make a cross. It sits on his desk so he often studies it when he’s talking on the phone or contemplating projects.

One day while he was staring at it, he realized it held the answer to an artful way he could design the multiple cylinders and support systems for the glass shelves in the Curiosity Cabinet. It was great in theory, as ideas like this often are, but

when we tried to build it, it was a conundrum. Fortunately, we were able to turn to Rhett Butler and Kiki Clark of E.R. Butler, one of the oldest hardware manufacturers in New York—the profile that shares Butler’s point of view to follow is a fascinating story. Though the company has evolved into so much more, the deep knowledge their metalsmiths have in problem-solving makes them an important resource; and though knobs, pulls, and handles are still at the heart of this manufacturer’s offerings, the showroom is filled with an array of furnishings that include sculptures, housewares, tabletop items, and lighting.

Coming to our rescue in this instance was a talented fabricator Butler had on staff who was able to strategize a process to connect the shelving that wasn’t obvious to us. The challenge was in welding the metal pieces together because they needed to be soldered multiple times. By the second weld, the first weld was being undone by the heat. As he problem-solved the design, he discovered that the first connections could be welded and each one thereafter could be fastened by hidden screws. This was one of those moments in the realization of this project when we appreciated the skill of those involved. These shelves made of brass and glass have a minimal feel thanks to the thinness of the tubes. This is one of many examples of how E.R. Butler’s products and team helped us achieve the pared-down aesthetics we sought to create, which unfold during so many lovely moments throughout the rooms in the penthouse. It is this company’s handsome hardware that gleams on the doors and drawers of the Curiosity Cabinet.





Stone "pupil" found at Boullé Claude Galerie in Paris, and all glassware, including marble goblets, collected from various antique markets.





Inside many of the sections of the installation, a treasure trove of playfulness awaits. Among the featured decorative accessories are leather animals made by the German company Deru during the 1960s; and pieces by Claude Boullé, the French artist and mineralogist who slices stone to fool the eye into thinking the sections he harvests are landscape paintings. We found his work in Paris and grew fascinated with his process. He goes on location and tells his men to begin digging where he senses fine specimens of stone may be. They then unearth them and split them on-site so he can judge whether any given stone holds a worthy composition. We fastened the small marble vignettes we bought to the backs of cabinet doors where they read so convincingly as intricate landscape paintings.

One piece of art that is visible in an exterior niche was sourced when we were traveling in Hong Kong. We came upon Upoint Studio, represented by a dynamic shop in Pacific Place where we were mesmerized by an eclectic mix of kinetic sculptures, particularly *The Wing*. We were just in time to purchase the last of the limited-edition run, as only one hundred were made and all but two were sold. The mechanical work of art has appendages that mimic the feel of thin rowing oars within a supporting sphere. The brass sculpture was designed by two architects who were inspired by the idea of combining motion and eternity.

Also sourced from Upoint Studio are assemblages of cast brass that depict animals and insects. These are backlit in a warm glow as light filters through the amber-hued onyx behind them. We became even more enthralled with the brand when we learned they provide opportunities for students to actualize their ideas, the creatives given carte blanche to realize anything they can dream up as long as they can prove it can be engineered. The atelier is known for its rigorous experimentation, such as using 3D printers to develop new technology that will replicate old casting techniques. This is a move that perfectly melds with our philosophy of using innovative know-how to transform solutions invented during the industrial age.

We also chose the decoupaged glass trays by John Derian because we appreciate how he has resurrected a traditional technique to create unique decorative elements. Handmade

in his New York City studio, the trays bring new life to reproduced imagery from his vast collection of antique and vintage prints. Trained artisans cut and collage the designs onto the handblown glass and each piece is made-to-order. Another colorful element displayed in an exterior niche is *Lilah*, a feathered skull by Laurence Le Constant, which we found at Galerie Géraldine Banier in Paris. The clients for whom we designed the penthouse were with us on the trip abroad when we came upon the sculpture. We had a jam-packed day of scheduled stops but as we were walking down rue Jacob, which is one of our favorite Left Bank streets for sourcing interior elements, the wife seemed to be riveted by the array of art in the window of this gallery. When she stopped to study it, we decided to take the time to look around, and we came away with the piece by Le Constant and another composition by a different artist featured in one of the hallways.

You will find a fuller profile on Le Constant after this presentation of the room. She is a fascinating artist who learned the art of *plumassière* in the haute couture studios of Chanel and Dior. She sculpts the skulls over which she wraps guinea fowl, duck, and pheasant feathers from resin, creating pieces of art that exude mystery and power in the process. The idea of displaying this very special piece of art, along with *The Wing*, in exposed niches was inspired by our sixteen-year relationship with Christian Louboutin. One of his signature concepts is singly showcasing each of his shoes in an entire wall of arched niches. When the arches are filled, the effect reads like a dovecote, each shoe reminiscent of the birds that would normally be perched within them. This wasn't merely an aesthetic move on his part; it was born from his love of each object he crafts: he wants every design to stand out, to be its own work of art.

In fact, he gives every shoe a name, one that reflects its personality. Just as the doves are to those who care for them, each of his creations is a soul exhibiting every nuance of emotion. Laurence's sculpture is similarly showcased on its own glass shelf because it is aesthetically dynamic. Each of her creations is slightly different than the next, which is why they remind us of Christian's shoes. Examine the skull for any length of time and it will transform to exhibit fabled features, as if it has its very own mythology. This enthralling section





Backlit onyx silhouettes, purple glass vessels circa 1885–1914 (top);
Deru leather animals—crafted from origami-like techniques of
crimping, cutting, and folding a single piece of leather (throughout);
antique candlestick phone (bottom right); *Octopus* bronze sculpture by
Upoint Studio (bottom middle); mechanical brass insects (throughout);
fish bottle-opener in mother-of-pearl (bottom left).







of the entrance to the penthouse is one of the most nuanced we've ever produced. The scope of the experimental as it evolved made us push ourselves to design what is in essence a storage system, but one that is so much more than this because it is loaded with meaning.

On the wall where the Curiosity Cabinet ends is an illuminating element: a massive split-faced geode shimmers from a niche clad in pale marble. Behind this is hung a white hair-on-hide mural created by Kyle Bunting named *Crossfire*. The white tone-on-tone leather piece softens the cold white marble while working in concert with it to create a bright contrast to all the warm elements in the entrance. Kyle's journey to working with this time-honored material is described in this chapter after we've completed the tour of the area. The alcove holding the mural and the geode is lit to draw the eye to the elements as soon as the threshold to the penthouse from the private elevator is crossed.

Leading the eye away from the mural is the plank bridge created by the Foresso flooring, which one passes over each time the central core of the penthouse is traversed from any number of rooms. The products the company creates were born of a dynamic collaboration we had with the United Kingdom-based manufacturer whose profile we feature later in this chapter. Design-wise, their participation

was ideal because we were able to produce a new product to break up the seventy-five-foot-long passageway that spanned the interior of the penthouse. This spine came to life when we specified their terrazzo floor to be embedded with plank tiles in varying sizes in a track pattern. These were accentuated with the smaller chips of wood that would normally be sprinkled into their surfacing materials. The varied shapes create a beautiful rhythm, as if sheet music was left on the floor so that each step could produce a cohesive cadence. To assure that the flooring would maintain a cohesion throughout the main living spaces, we chose the Foresso terrazzo with the small wood chips flecked into it for the rest of the living room and dining room, and for the study and guest suite.

One of our favorite aspects of the path the planks create is how the darker background contrasts with the brightness of the walnut. And, like many of the elements in the penthouse, there was a deeper meaning to the use of reclaimed wood elements in the interiors because the husband owns a lumber company he founded with a friend that is dedicated to sourcing reclaimed and salvaged wood. They scour the East Coast and Europe to find exemplary specimens, so including as much reclaimed wood in the residence as the aesthetics would support was our homage to this effort.





It was Oliver Wendell Holmes who said he didn't give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity but he would give his life for the simplicity the other side of complexity. Gregory Madzio of HIICompany Corp., who contributed so many solid yet intricate elements to the interiors of the penthouse, has dedicated his career to the same quest. He's done so by creating beauty from one primary material: wood. In every room in this residence but the kitchen, the refined millwork was crafted by Madzio's team of cabinetmakers. "Our work can be very complicated," he says. "I like challenging projects in terms of technical skills, as well as creative projects that require imagination. When these come in one package, everything we do is prototypical."

About the team who helps him achieve these involved projects, he says, "I'm very fortunate that my crew is made up of old-fashioned European cabinetmakers who have amazing intelligence in their hands." Though they are not great in number, each professional can do "pretty much anything a client can conceptualize with a piece of lumber." He believes this is because they have an ability to think three-dimensionally, which he says is a must for a good craftsman working in wood. The sophisticated quality for which his brand is known and Madzio's drive to concentrate on making beautiful things propelled us to want to work with him, and we are proud to be among those clients who push his team to achieve inventive interior elements.

We knew him for several years before we found the right projects that would do his artistry justice. "A few years after I met Eun, I met Eric and we began collaborating on bringing his visions into being," Madzio says. "We had long afternoons looking at handmade sketches—wild sketches in some cases—and he would ask, 'Can you make this?' I would counter, 'Out of what?' He would up the ante by asking, 'And what happens if we do this?' I would answer, 'It would collapse!' He's very expressive so that kept the conversations going and we spent many afternoons moving through these types of exchanges."

It is the depth of Madzio's know-how that enabled us to bring the many complex ideas for the spaces in the penthouse to life. He is remarkable at suggesting materials that could be used and is adept at explaining to us how we can accomplish what we have in mind. "I enjoy working with clients like Eun and Eric because they like to collaborate, and they are curious about different possibilities," Madzio says. "Our role is to help them to execute their vision."

In this particular project, only a few of the elements had custom veneers; most of the millwork was made from solid wood, which can be extremely demanding. "It is challenging to make a nine-foot door that is three feet wide and one inch thick out of solid wood that will actually work and stay true," Madzio explains. "That's pure craftsmanship because of the stress and the pressure within the material. You have to have the ability to recognize what wood will do. If you treat it with respect, you can make it do what you want it to do. We have developed techniques that release all the pressure from the material, and this takes skill and patience and time, which is similar to other aspects of life if you think about it."

Madzio is most often called in on projects as early as the design phase because his knowledge of what can and can't be accomplished within certain budgets is key to the success of a collaboration. He not only works with interior designers and architects, he creates the backdrops in which fine art is shown for an A-list of New York City galleries. Looking back on a career that has amassed him an impressively sophisticated clientele, he can trace his passion for wood back to his childhood in Warsaw, Poland, where he began making model airplanes as a young boy.

"I was working with wood and parchment paper, and I kept trying to make them more complicated," he explains. "As a young man, I set my sights on furniture and took a year off from my studies in law to make pieces." When he graduated from this coursework, earning his law degree, he left Poland for a year in London. The pleasure in experiencing another culture spurred him on, this time to America, which had always held a fascination for him. He made his dream of coming to the United States a reality in 1986. "In London, I worked for a company that made old-fashioned millwork on-site, installing it then and there," he says. "I learned how to make staircases and such, and I continued to build interior elements in the United States so I could travel around the country. I went to Alaska, which was a dream, and spent a few months there. I liked this country very much so I decided to stay."

At twenty-five years old, Madzio made his way to New York City. "I wanted to see two things in the city—Central Park and the Museum of Modern Art," he remembers. "When I went to MoMA, they had on display some wonderful pieces of furniture. I still have the pictures of the specimens on view, which were beautiful, and were made of solid wood and veneers. I already knew that doing intricate veneer-work takes great skill, but seeing these furnishings in the Museum of Modern Art made me realize how furniture could be considered artful; and how showing it wasn't merely a celebration of the designers who envisioned the pieces. The great craftsmen who built them were respected as well."

A similar experience took place when he visited an extensive exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "It was filled with furnishings made by French craftsmen, who were artists, though they didn't call themselves artists," he explains. "These people created original things that we still value. That's what drives me to do what I do; to make things that I would enjoy looking at myself." All those years ago, when Madzio was settling in New York City, one circumstance more than any other helped put him on the path that has led him to this moment in time.

It was a chance meeting with an elderly Italian cabinetmaker at a Brooklyn woodworking show. "I'm part Italian, and that's how we established a relationship," Madzio explains. "He was in the business all his life, and I mean all his life—as a kid, he straightened nails for his father! He was significantly older than I was and was a one-man shop. I soon figured out that this was because no one was good enough to work with him: he was so difficult, it was 'his way or the highway.' Because there were zero compromises, it was impossible for him to keep help."

Madzio was wise enough to know just how much he could learn from the curmudgeon, who was fond of telling the eager young man that he had no talent. Because he had never been employed in a woodworking shop at that point, Madzio does admit there was some truth to the elder's claims that he lacked skill, but the success he has achieved debunks the man's claims that talent was lacking. As Madzio soaked in these new opportunities to grow, his curiosity kicked into overdrive.

"I would sneak into the shop at night to learn the machines so that when he asked me, I could say, 'Of course I've worked on this one,'" he explains. "He would tell me I was doing it all wrong and so the lessons began." By the time his tutorial ended, he had learned a myriad of things from the master craftsman. Madzio still celebrates the year he had with the gentleman. Fast forward three-and-a-half decades, and most of the jobs Madzio takes on skew heavily toward custom millwork. "I want to concentrate on my core strength and I want to do pieces that I like, beautiful pieces," he notes. "My main goal is to go to work and do what I love to do. I have no problem getting up in the morning or dealing with normal work issues because I know I am going to be doing what I love."

This is so drilled into his DNA, it is the first piece of advice he would give to young artists or those who are new at trying to create artisanal brands. "You have to like what you do and do what you like: That's a must," he says. "Pay attention to things that inspire you in everyday life, such as seeing the beauty of nature. I'm a sailor and I love studying how the unique old boats are made: they are so wonderful and are super strong. Look into the past, and not just for inspiration, but for wisdom. Look at how beautiful and how well-made older pieces are. If you study a French bureau made with marquetry and fine veneers, it is amazing."

He advises anyone wanting to work with wood to attend exhibitions, and not just of contemporary woodwork but of a more historical nature like ones showing Renaissance pieces from Italy. "Looking for a longer-view perspective could also be a metaphor for anything else," he adds. "And do not compromise. If you think something doesn't look good: Do it again. Don't be lazy in your thinking. Put hard work into it; just redo it." He cites a wise man he once knew who was lamenting that young people didn't want to read or study to further their understanding of their craft. He had a right to his grievances because he was trying to teach the inexperienced apprentices woodworking skills.

Frustrated to no end, the man finally gave his students a book on Victorian millwork and said they had to learn how to make what they saw in its pages. This example taught Madzio how important it is for not only new hires to understand how to grow, but everyone on his team, including himself. "Look for challenges in everything you do," he explains. "I'm considering making furniture for yachts now. I'm going to travel to Fort Lauderdale in the near future to meet the interior designers and architects of a project. Do I need to do it? No! I can happily sleep in my own bed, but having the experience segues with my motto: keep your life interesting and you'll never want to retire!"





While creating the precursor to the layered piece of wall art that brightens a niche in the private elevator entrance, Kyle Bunting was caught in a crossfire. He wasn't at war with himself or anyone else; he was rocking out to an edgy song that inspired the name of the carpet he was creating at that time. "About a decade ago, David Sutherland launched a line of outdoor furniture with Phillippe Starck, and we were invited to produce some carpets to help merchandise the launch," he explains. "As I was designing one in our studio, it grew into a pattern of different geometric pieces with an irregular edge in an amoeba shape. Stevie Ray Vaughan's song "Crossfire" came on the radio and that clicked with me because it felt like the title of the song described the way the pattern looked."

He says the word also encapsulated the joint effort in which he was involved: "There was a crossfire of sorts to the collaboration, not in that we didn't get along, but it was something about working from Austin, Texas, with the Sutherlands in Dallas, and Starck in France that made the project feel very dynamic." This is the perfect word to describe how we feel about working with Bunting, as well. We've been tapping him for projects since 2006, enjoying the collaborations because he is such a charismatic and talented guy. The first time we worked with him, we chose his leather for a Christian Louboutin men's store we were designing in Paris because the sophisticated material with its elegant, gentlemanly feel was perfect for the boutique.

Bunting visited our offices, which had looked out on the twin towers before 9/11, in order to brainstorm with us. "I distinctly remember standing in the space overlooking the construction site of One World Trade," Bunting says. "It was very meaningful to be there, and getting to know the 212box team was exciting because of the innovation they bring to their projects. I was thrilled to be asked to create border inlays in the carpeting with Kyle Bunting hide for that Christian Louboutin boutique. They were thinking about us in such an innovative way, and it was gratifying to meld our experience with theirs because the result was something special."

Bunting says that this initial satisfaction has never wavered: "My first experience was so enlightening, and every opportunity since then has fulfilled that original excitement and idea. It has always been interesting to work with 212box, and never mundane." We feel the same about Bunting, whose draw to work in hide had its beginnings in his heritage. "I started the company twenty years ago, inspired by some work my dad had done when I was a kid," he explains. "Both sides of my family are from North Carolina: Dad was in textiles and ran operations; mom's family consisted of furniture makers, and she was a painter."

He says it's no surprise he would found a company dedicated to working with a supple material for the home décor

industry: "With all the cotton mills and textile factories, if you grew up in North Carolina, you'd end up in some type of business that revolved around these." Though his interest in interior elements was born in these early associations, he didn't think of building a career in the design arena until 2000 when he was buying and renovating real estate.

"Before that I was in television and media so I was always steeped in creative businesses," he explains. "I didn't understand the home furnishings industry but I did have a unique appreciation for it given my background. I believe interior design is one of the highest forms of artistic expressions in the arts. I was attracted to the business due to an appreciation for the artisanship, the psychology, and the attention to detail. I also learned that being an artist and creating within a non-distracted vacuum in order to be creative is really hard!"

This comment, which reflects his own prior experience as an artist, references a time in his life when he was painting, a period when he learned firsthand how challenging maintaining a creative flow can be. "In solitude, a writer with a blank sheet of paper or a painter with a blank canvas can maintain a smooth flow unless there are interruptions, like having kids pulling at your leg or having other aspects of life swirling around you," he explains. That said, he knew he wouldn't be happy if he didn't opt for a stimulating life so he decided it was imperative for him to establish a creatively focused business.

"My dad used to say, 'If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail,'" he says. This adage continues to spur him on in leading a broadly experiential and collaborative existence. His partners in this effort are the designers who keep the creativity flowing in. "It's fulfilling to see how inspired our clients are when they work with our products," he explains. "Our philosophy is not an 'it was invented here' mentality, and we feel gratitude that so many people take our hides and make magic with them." As one of the firms benefitting from the compelling business model he has created, which has allowed us to manipulate his materials in unique ways, we knew he would be a wonderful collaborator for the penthouse.

We chose him to create the hair-on-hide mural in white-on-white because it had a luxurious, tactile feel to it but it didn't compete with the massive geode sculpture in front of it. We also knew that placing it behind the big split-faced stone with its jeweled insides would soften the feel of the hard rock and serve as a light counterpoint to the heavy stone. We also appreciate that Bunting sources exemplary hides, as the materials from which his artful creations are made are overwhelmingly Italian in origin with the follicles remaining so that the leathers continue to breathe.

Bunting celebrates how the installation came together: "We are always inspired and amazed at what talented professionals do with our materials; and this project with the 212box team is a classic example of that because you found a way to use our product in a vertical niche as a backdrop to showcase a piece of art in a way that we wouldn't have imagined. Looking back, I knew we could create a material solution that didn't exist before, and we have." He says he enjoys this mindful aspect of what he does because each time his team makes a decorative hide carpet or wallcovering in collaboration with a designer, they are deeply involved in the partner's creative process.

It's apparent from the pleasure he derives in using his imagination that he has invented the right existence for his temperament. There is a symbol from his past that, looking back, might have foretold he would be doing what he's doing now. The serendipity exists in a wall-hanging of the map of Texas that was rendered in small pieces of cowhide by his father, Jim Bunting, many years ago. This piece represents the beginning of a legacy in the design industry that has made him a successful businessman.

We asked if he had any advice for someone wanting to create a business with as much heart and soul behind it as his has. "It sounds like a cliché, but I think people need to truly remember to trust their instincts," he answers. "How you feel about something creatively the first time you do it is usually the right path to pursue. Let's assume that it's a universal truth: my advice would be to follow that direction but with a wide-open mind so you can perceive what you want to do to create better outcomes. If you have enough humility to be mindful, you're better off listening to those who are in creative fields because you'll come up with something that will be more compelling to a broader audience and it will also be more fulfilling."

Bunting also believes that deferential design creates a more satisfying place to live. "What we as a creative company achieve can't be reflected in a catalog filled with black-and-white photographs of people staring off into the distance with dreamy looks in their eyes—it just doesn't work that way. Those of us running creative businesses may be fewer and farther between, but our reality is more genuine and honest. I would advise those who want to make a career in the home furnishings industry to embrace those around them in order to take advantage of what they have to offer; and to be more collaborative and holistic in their approach. This is especially true with young designers. The first reaction should be, 'What do we have here?' And then, 'Let's do something!' They'll have better ideas and innovation will follow."

It thrums like a heartbeat pulsing along the core of the penthouse, a rhythmic ribbon sliding forward in a tempo that buoys one along until it disappears beneath a peek-a-boo window separating the guest bedroom from the living room. We’ve already described why the choice of Foresso flooring was perfect for the penthouse; we’d now like to introduce you to aspects of the brand that make us proud collaborators with the dynamic duo behind it.

The forward-thinking manufacturer of surfacing materials, which is based in Birmingham, England, was founded by Jake Solomon and Conor Taylor. We first met Solomon when he owned a company called Solomon & Wu, which made incredible architectural materials with lacquered finishes we specified for a number of the Christian Louboutin boutiques. We also sourced his metal elements covered with resin for several yachts we designed. We had worked with him for many years by the time he founded Foresso with Taylor.

Their combined knowledge was a dynamic catalyst that resulted in an alchemical transformation of wood and resin into a durable terrazzo, which would normally be made of more fragile stone and concrete. The drive the duo had to realize avant-garde materials makes them a dream team for experimentations we want to undertake. We also felt energized to work with them because they are seriously

dedicated to sustainability and ethical manufacturing. One of their declarations is that they extend their ethics to every aspect of their business, and we’ve seen this firsthand. Their secret-sauce of materials includes offcut timber, wood waste, mineral powders, 0 percent VOC bio-resin, and FSC birch plywood. Their products are plastic-free, and less than 5 percent of their waste goes into landfill; the rest is recycled.

A partnership with the City of London enables them to sustainably source the volume of wood chips they require because they buy bags of the mulch made from trees that have fallen in or are harvested from the city’s parks. They are environmentally focused down to the packaging in which their sheets are shipped. These materials are not only recyclable, they are biodegradable as well. They will also accept discarded products they produced for reuse, as it can be ground up and poured into future batches.

We were so inspired by their commitment to ethics, we became ambassadors for the brand, and we feel fortunate we were able to champion them with this project because we had a client who was eager to support small businesses, and to be a patron to artists and artisans. The flooring for the penthouse was the first substantial order for Foresso, and we have enjoyed watching them grow and continue to thrive for several years since.





A person of deep curiosity, a brand with a dedication to refinement, a company that inspires accolades for its collaborative vivacity. These descriptions illuminate the reputation of a trio of entities: Rhett Butler, the man behind the curtain whose medium is metal; E.R. Butler, a name synonymous with precision and allure; and a retail gallery space that includes some of the world’s most astute designs. The mark of perfection that he and his team achieve can be seen at every turn in this penthouse.

Though many of the pieces of hardware and arrangements of shelving the E.R. Butler team developed for the residence have minimal profiles, the breadth of knowledge required to reach a place at which metal implements become functioning works of art includes a thorough knowledge of the history of hardware. Not only has Butler amassed a stockpile of artifacts that make up one of the world’s largest collections of fine architectural fittings, he has accumulated 40,000 catalogs produced by nearly every hardware manufacturer in the world.

Illustrating his respect for the fittings he produces, he says that hardware incorporates everything: “It’s art, architecture, history, design, technology, manufacturing.” He adds that it is in every building on the planet and there is simply no end to its importance. His think-tank is a voluminous factory along the Brooklyn waterfront with 130,000 square feet of space that holds a mix of machinery, storage, and workrooms. From here, he and his team not only craft superlative hardware, Butler explores avant-garde concepts.

He approached artist Christopher Kurtz (whose profile follows the presentation of the dining room) when he saw the needling wooden sculptures the artist created and asked if they could collaborate to produce them in metal. “To maintain the fidelity of my wood sculptures, Rhett digitized one and made a computer file,” Kurtz says. “He then figured out a way to construct one, which was technically challenging and incredibly impractical.” How impractical? There are only a handful of machines in the world that can achieve the delicacy and precision the sculpture would demand, and Butler located one. It was originally designed to make needles for endoscopic surgeons. Kurtz calls this project one of the most special collaborations he’s had to date.

The level of creative thinking was similar for us, as Butler was able to take a number of Eric’s ideas and create custom solutions, such as the complex shelving system in the Curiosity Cabinet, as you will have just read in the presentation of the private elevator entrance. We also found a number of decorative objets d’art in his boutique, such as the Ted Muehling candlesticks that enliven the dining room table with their slender profiles and Christopher Kurtz’s sculpture.

Butler’s path to manufacturing was not a given. He had doubts that he wanted to devote his life to the rigor he maintains, a hesitancy that continued well into his graduate studies in architecture at Rice University in Houston. When his father, who was in the hardware business for many years, retired, his clients were keen to have his son continue in his footsteps. Giving in to destiny, he left university and began E.R. Butler in a two-bedroom apartment on New York City’s Lower East Side. He then set about acquiring other storied manufacturing firms, such as Enoch Robinson and W.C. Vaughan, moving to larger digs each time he outgrew the square footage.

In the early 2000s, he opened a showroom in a landmark building on Prince Street in Manhattan and based his headquarters there. The boutique is a shopping destination that includes an art gallery and serves as a mecca for design and architecture professionals thirsty for high-quality hardware. He’s so popular with arbiters of taste because his designs are superb and the options in materials, shapes, and finishes are extensive—this is the case even before the subject of custom is broached. When window displays are changed, the neighborhood and visitors alike eagerly flock to see what’s new in the E.R. Butler universe.

His designs are included in the homes of a long list of cultural icons like Lenny Kravitz and Bill Gates; former presidents have tapped him for products for their homes, as have leading fashion designers, Nobel Prize Laureates, tech and financial giants, and Oscar-winning actors and directors. These visionaries with endless resources turn to him because he is fearless in his experimentation. “We can do just about anything,” he notes. This anything includes being a veritable 007 of hardware because he finds solutions for those who want to secure safe rooms on their properties. His virtuosity has developed through life experience; during his master’s degree in architecture, which he did go on to earn; and through the company he keeps, which includes architect-, artist-, and fashion designer–friends who keep him immersed in design philosophy.

Stimulation is important in his life because his level of curiosity is vigorous. “As a child, my younger brother and I were not allowed to watch television but were given books to read,” he explains. “These were not children’s books, mind you, but sets of encyclopedias and other weighty volumes. Our father was a dealer in antiques, so we went to many antiques auctions and markets. Sifting through the millions of remnants and artifacts for more than a decade, we learned a great deal about so many things. I spent quite a few summers with either my mother’s mother in a very small town in Germany, or my father’s parents in an equally small town in South Carolina.”

He describes a few of the experiences that he credits for the sensibilities he has developed: “During those summers with my grandmother in Germany, we would travel all over Europe; she had lived through the war and her house had been occupied twice, once by the Nazis and then by the American forces, so she was eager to be free, to see as much as she could, and to share it with us. We experienced everything: museums, castles, mountains, cities, farms, gardens; literally everything.” Illustrating the intensity of his grandmother’s experiences, he notes, “I once found a spoon in the basement crawl-space with a swastika insignia on it.”

When Butler stayed with his father’s parents, the experiences were quite different from those he had in Germany: “My grandfather taught me to drive a car, a tractor, and a truck by the time I was nine years old. It was in South Carolina where I received my first driver’s license. My job was to pick up the farm workers from town, which was three miles away. My grandfather is the one who is responsible for teaching me a great deal about how to treat others with respect.” Anecdotes from those summers bring to light the depth of his inquisitiveness and how long it has been embedded in his psyche. “Every day my grandparents would take a nap after lunch, and my brother and I would have the time to ourselves to do whatever we wanted,” he explains. “We could take a nap or we could explore, as long as it was outside of the house.”

As young boys are wont to do, it seemed an obvious choice to unleash their curiosity instead of giving in to unsuccessful attempts to take naps, which resulted in the painful frustration of hearing the seconds click by on the living room clock. After finding a book on making bombs, these outings would turn into explosive exploits: “I loved to blow things up! Creating hydrogen bombs was the most impressive—I guess I’d be in jail in today’s world, but growing up on a farm has its privileges! It didn’t help that my grandfather would specifically task me with burning huge mountains of trees after he cleared land for farming.”

We asked Butler what drives his passion for precision and he didn’t mince words: “I’m not really sure what drives the need for perfection. Could be that I got it from my German mother; could be that I can’t understand the endless amount of garbage we generate because we are so focused on everything being cheap. Then again, maybe it’s driven from a perspective of permanence. I need to feel as if what I spend my time making will outlive me.” As to his favorite thing about the life he has orchestrated for himself, he says, “Being happy and content. It took a long time to get to where I am. I don’t need anything and I’m happy with having little.” He so wisely adds, “There is peace that comes from not needing or wanting.”