

A VERY SERIOUS PLAYGROUND

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RHETT BUTLER; NEW YORK AND DESIGN WITH PERMANENCE

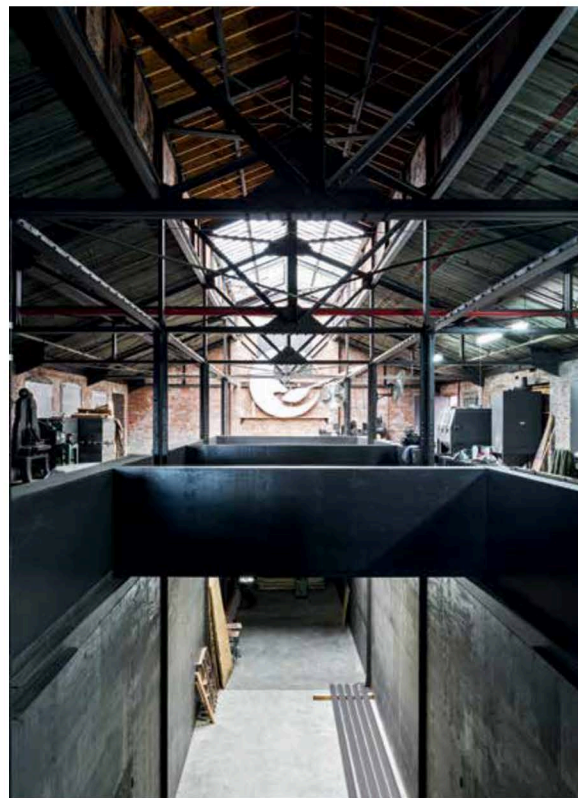


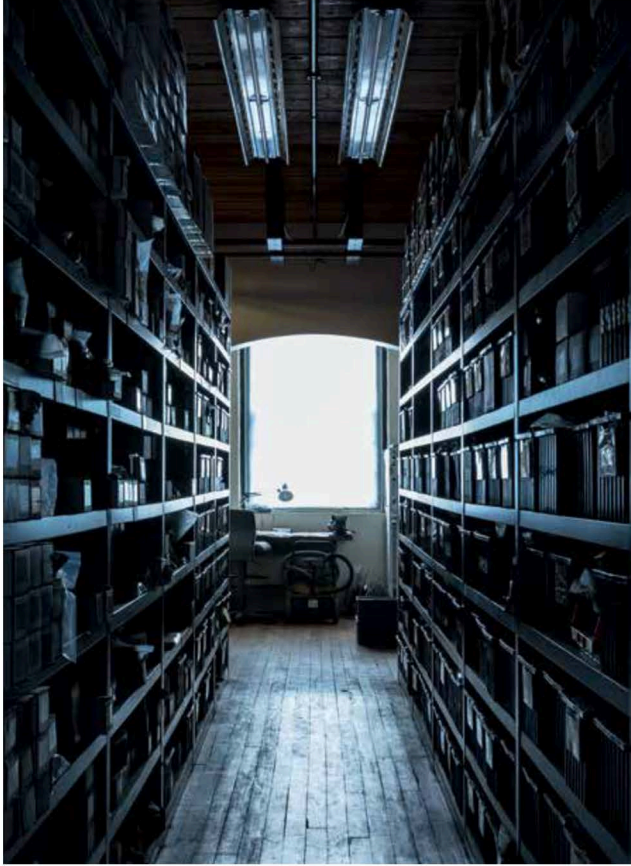
RHETT BUTLER

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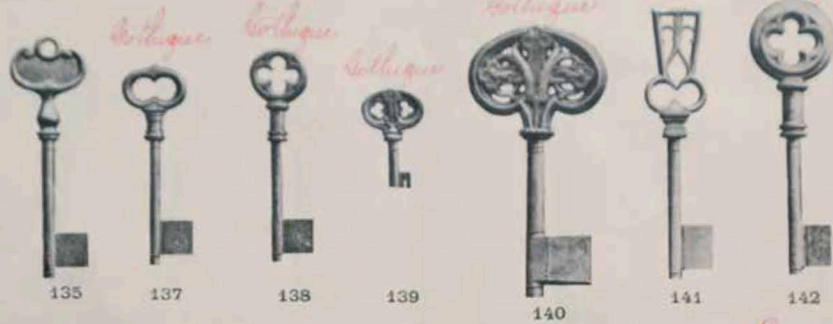








Anneaux de clefs



(C.C.) It would be an understatement to suggest that Rhett Butler has a significant foothold in New York City. Between the iconic Prince Street showroom, whose window displays have become a cultural event in themselves, showcasing the work of artists and designers from across the spectrum, to his veritable armory in Red Hook, a maze of industrial machinery and perhaps the greatest single archive of hardware... well, anywhere really, Rhett is very much part of the fabric of the city. A mysterious blend of unassuming and welcoming attitude but with that "thing," that noticeable potency and drive, that is usually reserved for movie stars or hall-of-famers. Lucky for him, since choosing to run a manufacturing business in the city is definitely not for the faint-hearted.

(R.B.) I love being here. It's an amazing city to be in. I cannot imagine living anywhere else. But don't get me wrong, running a manufacturing facility in New York has a lot of challenges, and I mean everything from the taxes we have to pay to be here, to the fire department coming in and telling us that we have to paint certain pipes red. But this is my home. I grew up here. This is what I know really well.

There is nothing accidental about Rhett, but his journey to being one of the most sought-after hardware designers, working for some of the most elite clients from the world of design and architecture, is anything but conventional. An architecture student with no immediate intention of focusing on such a specialized field, Rhett found himself gradually drawn into a family business that stretched back to the earliest industries in the U.S., notably with a lineage of blacksmiths that could even count original Colonial settlers of the 17th century in their family tree.

I thought I was like the third guy in a line of guys that were doing what I am doing, but I'm not! I'm like the tenth or fifteenth guy in a row, and so my sense of responsibility, to maintaining and continuing and preserving and protecting that lineage, has actually grown since starting this research into the industry's history.

After taking over the business, Rhett proceeded to amass not only an expertise in the manufacturing process, but also an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the "art." Spend a few minutes talking with Rhett, and one quickly learns to appreciate the true artistry that goes into the work, as well as its place in a very particular design heritage. Having Rhett show me around the walls, with corridor after corridor, shelf after shelf, of antique locks, doorknobs, and books, amounting to what appears to be the most singular and exhaustive collection of its kind, is enough to make me appreciate that, if this building collapsed, a whole civilization of knowledge might disappear with it. He seems to handle the weight of that responsibility with relative ease.

I always knew that we were working on historical products, but I never fully understood what the context was. It's exciting to understand what our history is, to understand where my place is, and what my role is. I'm totally OK with just being a part of a greater thing.

Rhett is anything but a bookish librarian. With an output of designs that seems to match the critical mass of historical artifacts in his archive, he seems to have created a synthesis of inquiry and productivity that is perhaps part of why he still hasn't decamped from New York, but feeds instead off that distinctive energy.





(R.B.) I think I take full advantage of the culture and spirit of the city. I am rarely at home. I don't think I've watched TV in maybe thirty years. I go out. A lot of my friends are architects and artists and fashion designers, so I am constantly talking about design philosophy, and I get a lot of energy from that. I have a lot of space right now, so I can afford to allow people to come and bring in an idea for their business and give them a chance to start or to begin something. For our windows on Prince Street, we do exhibits every six weeks and I try to get people in who are relatively unknown, or young, or just beginning. They just have to be good, of course.

(C.C.) This spirit of operating in multiple directions, reaching back to the past in an attempt to constantly learn and improve, while simultaneously attracting and fostering new collaborations and talent, seems very much at the heart of Rhett's dynamism—a synthesis of inspiration and productivity. What seems to be at the heart of that drive, constantly being refined through practice and study, is a notion of the permanence of what he is creating. It is perhaps no coincidence that this passion for creating things that will endure has taken its inspiration from the early jobs he did salvaging hardware from buildings being demolished or renovated.

I think what drives me the most is the idea of permanence and building something that endures. I like the idea that, even after the buildings fall apart, you could still salvage the parts that we make and reuse them on some other structures. And the thing I really like about using the metals that we choose is that you could also, simply, just melt it all back down and reuse it, so there is no real waste, in a lot of ways. It's exciting to find parts that are still being used that were made 150 years ago, and it's equally exciting to feel that the things we are making could likewise be working and being used 150 years from today. I am very much against this idea of disposable commodification.

These buildings that we are working on, they are also looking for permanence. Their creators are building something that they hope is going to be passed on from one generation to the next generation to the next. That is the attitude of the people I work with.

There is something of a timelessness to Rhett. Not an anachronism, but perhaps more in common with the time-traveler. He seems as comfortable talking about and handling an old mechanism in his "museum" as he is operating and extolling the virtues of his industrial machines. At the core, what seems to be his central aspect is that passion, that ambition to consume, create—to master.

It's all about education, about educating yourself. It's about constantly exploring, about being curious. You have to see everything. You have to go through and study the history, understand the technology. The more education, the more sophisticated your work becomes. When I'm sketching something, I can feel the knowledge of having looked at a million things, and I know for a fact that I didn't have that when I started. Being curious is basically like giving yourself a playground where you can explore and learn and invite other people to play. And then you get to the point where you find other people that have similar interests, and, the next thing you know, you are talking, or trading, or collaborating.

Leaving Rhett's playground, I cannot help but feel as though I have expanded my senses somehow. Every door handle I approach gives me pause to wonder who touched this first, how did those stairs get worn down, and for a brief moment I feel like I am part of some continuum. — C.C.