

## CURRENTS

## Q&amp;A

## How the Door to History Opens

Behind a fairly unassuming door on Prince Street sits a trove of hardware: about 25,000 pieces of meticulously crafted, often jewel-like hinges, locks, levers, escutcheons, pulls and the like, precisely arranged and presided over by Rhett Butler, hardware fanatic. (His first name is Edward, after his father, but he goes by his middle name, which was not inspired by "Gone With the Wind." His mother is German, and Rhett was her second choice, when his father wouldn't agree to Wolfgang.)

Mr. Butler, 47, started his company, E. R. Butler, 20 years ago, as an architecture student at Rice. Its focus then was on hardware restoration and sourcing; today it is on design, manufacturing and distribution (of its own products, as well as others, including hurricane lamps by Deborah Ehrlich and candlesticks by Commune Design), with showrooms in New York, Milan and Boston.

**Why hardware?**

It's an amazing field — it incorporates design, history, material sciences. It's a technical thing and a decorative thing at the same time, and it very well represents and rounds out my interests personally.

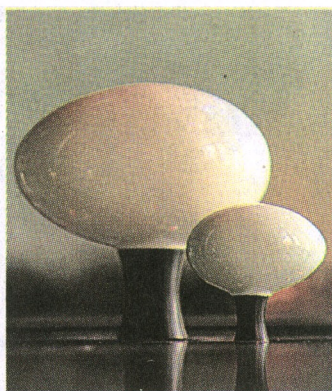
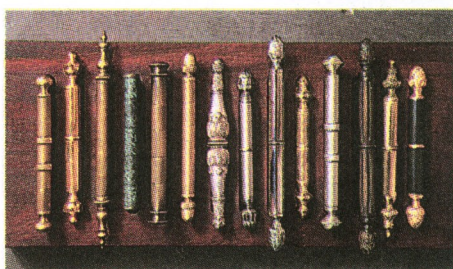
**How did you get into it?**

My father was an antiques dealer. He got involved in restoring interiors and began to specialize in the restoration of metalwork. By the time I was 12, I was helping him clean and restore pieces. Summers during high school my friends and I would work for him — we'd dismantle, restore, refurbish doors, hardware, everything. Once we got a job to tear the entire roof off a building on Park Avenue. They were going to add another story. My dad handed us sledgehammers and said, "Here, deal with it." So we did.

**You don't have the hands of a guy who works with his hands.**

That's because most of my life is now spent working on a computer. Once you have over 50 employees, it's like, forget it. You don't get to touch tools anymore.

**I can't believe you had time to**

**start a business while in school.**

My dad was shifting out of this work, and I started getting calls from architects. At first, I ran things either from school or my apartment in New York. I was flying back and forth every two weeks. The second summer I rented a place on Greene Street, and that was our first showroom. At the time, it was focused on hardware restoration and providing hardware for new projects.

**So you didn't design anything for a while?**

I didn't design a doorknob for 10 years. I spent that first decade doing nothing but standardizing mechanical systems — cleaning things up. You can pick up any design in this showroom and we can match it on every single product in your house. It all speaks the same language, and there's a shared design you



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

see throughout a home that didn't exist 10 or 20 years ago.

**Did you have to do this, or are you a masochist?**

Yes, and yes. It was the challenge of revolutionizing an industry.

**What was the first piece of hardware you designed?**

The hub of a lock.

**Do you have a favorite?**

A lever handle I recently worked on. It incorporates both very flat contemporary shapes as well as sensuous romantic curves. It feels very full in your hand as you're using it.

**Do you get upset if people don't notice those details?**

I care, but I don't take it personally. This is something you learn in architecture school when your project gets ripped to shreds by eight people — the idea of being criticized is something you wind up feeling pretty comfortable with.

**You have quite an archive.**

One of my major interests and focuses has been to restructure, classify and organize the history

of hardware and of American hardware. And, yeah, our archive is pretty insane. We have about 25,000 trade catalogs from the 1600s to today. Some are extremely rare. I consult it regularly, and other historians and scholars interested in all kinds of hardware visit the library on a fairly regular basis.

**And that little hardware collection?**

Several hundred thousand pieces. I have keys from the Roman Empire. I'm really into the 1820s, 30s, 40s and ending in the 1850s, for early American glass; 1860s for copper-clad lead; 1850s for wooden doorknobs; 1870s for what they called metallic compression casting. After the 1880s, my interests in American hardware somewhat wane.

**What's your best find?**

I can't tell you. I'm still looking for it. Somebody else would have too much control over me if they knew I needed it that bad.

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